

Article

Shields, N. & Synnot, A. (2016) Perceived barriers and facilitators to participation in physical activity for children with disability: a qualitative study. *BMC Pediatrics* (2016) 16:9.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12887-016-0544-7>.

Adaptive Sports/Recreation Topic Categories

- Physical activity performance

Research Question

- What are the specific barriers and facilitators to participation in physical activity from the perspectives of children with disability, their parents and sports and recreation industry personnel?

Methodology

- Descriptive study using qualitative methods
- Participants were children with a disability (10–18 years), the parent of a child with disability aged between 6–18 years, or a professional working in the sports and recreation sector with people with disability
- Three focus groups were held with parents and three with sports and recreation sector personnel.
- Four focus groups were conducted with children with disability; one group with children with disability (cerebral palsy), two groups with children with mild intellectual or developmental disabilities and one group with adolescents with vision impairment.
- An experienced external moderator conducted the focus groups with assistance from one of the researchers at specialist schools. Participants were sent a list of the topics to be discussed one week prior to the focus group, to allow time to reflect and to bring notes if they wished.
- Two researchers independently read the recorded focus group transcriptions and coded the data line-by-line to identify emerging concepts. NVivo software was used to assist coding. The list of themes was also sent to the participants for verification.
- Each focus group was initially analysed separately to consider the views of that particular focus group and then the two researchers consent and developed a list of themes taking into account if a theme or subtheme represented the views of all groups.

Results

- 23 children with disability (mean age 13.9 ± 1.8 years; 8 girls, 15 boys), 20 parents of children with disability (18 females, 2 males) and 20 professionals who worked in the sports and recreation industry with children with disability (11 females, 9 males) participated.
- Four themes emerged from the data analysed and these are as follows:
 - a. Similarities and differences
 - i. Participants described no interest in physical activity by the children with disability, limited transport, and lack of time as barriers to physical activity. Additionally, participants described that children with disability often are not as physically capable as their peers and social barriers such as societal attitudes. Parents in particular identified

that their child felt a sense of frustration or loss of confidence when they compared their skills with those of their peers with typical development.

- ii. Also, it gets harder for children with disability to participate in physical activity as they get older, as the skill gap widens and sports become more competitive. Cost was also a barrier to participation in physical activity, and flexible payment schemes, subsidised programs and access to modified equipment were suggested as ways to facilitate participation.
 - iii. Parents reported that children who were naturally active, loved sports and had a happy go lucky personality were more easily engaged in physical activity.
- b. People make the difference
- i. Experience of disability was considered to underpin attitudes as when people understood disability they were more likely to be welcoming and supportive of children with disability.
 - ii. The integral role of families in facilitating their child's participation in physical activity was highlighted by all participant groups. This included having experience in physical activity or providing financial support, transport, finding suitable activities and encouragement.
 - iii. Modification of activities was a facilitator. Also, peer involvement and acceptance were strong motivators for children with disability to participate. On the other hand, negative societal attitudes towards disability were described as a barrier to participation.
 - iv. Inclusive policies and support from sports governing bodies and all levels of government were considered to drive physical activity opportunities for people with disability and facilitate their inclusion.
- c. One size does not fit it all it's about choice
- i. This theme pointed out that the particular needs of every child with disability were different and the type of activities that they and their family wanted to participate in were different.
 - ii. Inclusive pathways with structured progression of participation were also identified by sport and recreation industry personnel as being particularly important for children with disability.
 - iii. A lack of opportunities for children with disability was cited as major barrier to their participation.
 - iv. Parents from regional and metropolitan areas reported marked variation in the availability of programs, and long waiting lists for segregated programs. Conversely, sport and recreation industry personnel discussed how programs were often not viable due to a lack of participants. Local activities, easily accessible by public transport, were cited as facilitators of participation.
- d. Communication and connections
- i. Participants described a disconnect between families of children with disability, and the groups that promoted engagement in physical activity including schools, disability groups and the sport and recreation sector.
 - ii. Partnerships between physical activity providers, local councils, schools, disability groups and the health sector were suggested to promote programs for children with disability, improve access to

available opportunities, highlight the importance of engagement in physical activity and help foster pathways between school and community sport.

Discussion

- This study adds to the available literature with the range and diversity of themes that emerged illustrating the complexity of the issue.
- Providing choice in physical activities children with disability can engage in was considered a key facilitator. Results suggest that competition was seen as a positive. Many children with disability wanted to be involved in activity at a competitive level.
- Other themes emerging were the need for inclusive pathways that encourage ongoing participation as children grow or as their skills develop and for the development of better partnerships between key stakeholders from the disability, sport, education and government sectors.
- Parents and families are crucial to whether a child with disability is physically active. Parents are a child's advocate and support their participation financially and practically.
- Participants indicated that social barriers to participation (such as the attitudes of parents, staff and peers) were more influential than other types of barriers.

Article Strengths

- This was an in-depth study of the barriers and facilitators to physical activity for children with disability and one of the first to include the perspective of sport and recreation personnel.
- Collating perspectives of sport and recreation personnel with those of parents and children with disability helped to triangulate the data and provide deeper understanding.

Article Weakness

- Participants were self-selected into the study; those who were more physically active may have been more inclined to be involved. However, if this was the case, these participants would have been potentially more able to provide insight into what facilitated children with disability to be active and resourceful in overcoming existing barriers to activity.

Take Home Messages

- The broader understanding of the barriers and facilitators to physical activity for children with disability is essential for the design and implementation of effective interventions, strategies and policies to promote their participation.
- Children with disabilities' need for the early attainment of motor and social skills, the integral role of families and their need for support, and societal attitudes influence children with disabilities' participation to physical activity.
- The need for inclusive pathways that encourage ongoing participation as children grow or as their skills develop and the development of better partnerships between key stakeholders from the disability, sport, education and government sectors are also important factors that influence children with disabilities' participation.