

A Survey of Inner City Youth and Their Parents about Participation in Sports

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ABSTRACT

Background: Several studies have explored motivating factors for sports participation for youth, but limited data is available regarding factors motivating inner-city children to participate in sports.

Methods: A consecutive sample of parents (n=100 parents) and children (n=138 children) attending a health fair in an inner-city community were surveyed regarding motivating factors for enrolling in a team sport (or enrolling their child in a team sport). Parents and children indicated the importance of 10 factors (1=not very important to 4=very important) on separate but similar written surveys.

Results: "Developing healthy habits" and "Becoming physically fit and healthy" received the highest mean rankings from both parents and children. "Helping my child gain or lose weight" received one of the lowest rankings from parents.

Conclusions: To encourage sports participation by inner-city children, health care professionals and others should emphasize identified motivational factors for children and their parents.

INTRODUCTION

The level of physical activity in US youth is declining, despite the well-known benefits of establishing and maintaining good physical activity habits early in life.¹ Opportunities for children to pursue physical fitness are often limited, particularly in the inner city.

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School-based physical education classes are an important component, but the time spent in physical education classes decreases as children progress through school.¹ Decreased school funding for physical education currently threatens these opportunities in some communities, while proposed federal budget cuts may further compromise these programs in the near future.² Community-sponsored activities, including team sports, remain an important option through which children in the inner cities can pursue physical fitness.

Multiple studies have investigated factors associated with youth participation in physical activities and sports programs.³⁻⁶ In a US study of team sports, younger children (ages 6-10 years) cited factors such as "learning to do my best," "learn and improve skills," and "have a coach to look up to" as their most important motivators for playing on a team.⁵ In a large study published in 1983, Gill et al reported on 1138 US school children (ages 8-18 years) who identified "improving skills," "fun," "learn new skills," "challenge," and "be physically fit" as the most motivating factors for their participation in sports.⁶ International findings are similar: in 1987, Australian youth (8-18 years) ranked (1) "improve skills," (2) "be physically fit," (3) "compete," (4) "learn new skills," and (5) "to be challenged" as their most important reasons for participation in sports, with only slight differences between the boys and the girls.⁷ In 1995, a modified version of the questionnaire designed by Gill et al was administered to young Italian athletes (n=2598, ages 9-18 years) whose motivational factors for playing sports were found to be similar to those of young athletes in other parts of the world.⁸

Race and socioeconomic factors are rarely reported in these studies of motivational factors for sports participation and physical activity in children.^{9,10} Most of the currently available studies that do report these distinctions include primarily Caucasian subjects of high socioeconomic status. Overall, a limited amount of data is available regarding factors motivating inner city children to pursue physical activity or participation in

sports. This study was designed to identify motivating factors of inner-city youth for participation in sports by specifically identifying factors that (1) motivate inner-city children (age 10 years and older) to participate in sports programs and (2) motivate parents (of children age 6 years or older) in the inner city to enroll their children in sports programs.

METHODS

This survey study was designed for and implemented at an annual inner city health fair sponsored by a community organization (the Milwaukee Urban League) and held at a community center in Milwaukee, Wis. The center was located in a predominantly (93%) African-American neighborhood with median household income of \$16,250.¹¹ The community center housed both an elementary school and a Boys & Girls Club of America. Parents residing in the surrounding neighborhood had the opportunity to enroll their children in team sports sponsored by the Boys & Girls Club starting at 6 years of age. Parents who had a child who was at least 6 years old were invited to participate in the survey. Their children who were at least 10 years old were also invited to participate in the survey. The age of 10 years for children to participate was chosen based on a pilot study of the survey tool performed with children attending the community center and their ability to understand the survey questions.

Separate but similar written surveys were designed for parents and children. Several of the survey items were adapted from tools used for previous similar analyses.⁶⁻⁸ A few more unique items were added, including questions regarding health-related benefits of sports participation. The surveys contained no unique identifying data, and no attempt was made to identify parent-child dyads. The study was approved by the Children's Hospital of Wisconsin Human Research Review Board.

During the 1-day health fair, a consecutive sample of parents and children who approached an exhibit with information about activity and fitness were invited to complete a survey. Parents and youth who agreed to participate and met the eligibility requirements were given the self-administered written surveys. Surveys were completed and collected on site. Participants received a sticker or pencil eraser as a reward for their participation; a variety of information regarding physical fitness and activities was available for all attendees.

The surveys consisted of demographic information (parent/child, age, race, gender) and a list of 10 factors they would consider when enrolling in a team sport. The

same motivating factors were listed on both the parent and child surveys; the wording was altered slightly to reflect the respondent's viewpoint. (E.g., "Helping my child develop healthy habits" on the parent survey was analogous to "Developing healthy habits" on the child survey.) Participants used a 4-point Likert scale (1=not very important to 4=very important) to rate the importance of each factor.

Although having or being a child currently or previously participating on a sports team was not required to take part in the survey study, an additional question on both the child and parent surveys asked whether or not they or their child had ever played on a sports team. The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score of the child survey questions was 4.9; the Flesch Reading Ease Score was 78. Corresponding values for the parent survey questions were 6.2 and 77.4. (The Flesch Reading Ease Score is a formula that takes the number of total words per total sentences and the total syllables per total words to calculate a score of readability. It is the US government standard for measuring readability of government documents. The Flesch Kincaid Grade Level Score is a modification used by educators that uses the same data to calculate readability in standard US grade level.)

Multivariate analysis of variance was performed to identify differences between parent and child responses overall and to determine whether child responses differed according to child age. Response differences according to whether a child had ever participated in a team sport were also determined for both parent and child responses. Data analysis was performed using the SPSS Inc., Chicago, Ill, version 12. Significance was set at $P \leq 0.05$.

RESULTS

Surveys were completed by 100 parents and 138 children. Most respondents (96%) were African-American; 92% of the parents responding were mothers, whereas children were fairly equally divided by sex (Table 1). Of the child respondents, 78% had participated in a team sport; 60% of the parents had a child who had participated in a team sport.

Parent and child survey responses are listed in Tables 2 and 3 respectively. "Developing healthy habits" and "Becoming physically fit and healthy" were the highest rated motivating factors for both parents and children. "Helping my child [me] lose or gain weight" was the second lowest-rated item for both parents and children. "Becoming a professional athlete" was the lowest rated item by parents, and "Having fun and making friends" was the lowest rated factor by children.

Motivating factors for children were not ranked differently according to age, gender, or whether they had ever previously participated in sports. Factors rated higher by parents than children are indicated in Table 2. Parents who had ever had a child enrolled in team sports were more likely to think the following factors were more important when considering enrolling a child in a team sport than parents who had never had a child enrolled in a team sport: “Keeping them busy” ($P<0.05$) and “Learning and improving skills at sports” ($P<0.05$).

DISCUSSION

In multiple previous studies of motivating factors affecting their participation in sports, youth from different parts of the world have consistently identified developing skills and physical fitness as important factors impacting their decision to participate in sports.^{6-8,12} Our results showed that a population of inner city youth also identified these factors as strong motivators for their participation in sports. The finding that their primary motivator was becoming physically fit and healthy is encouraging in this population that is at higher risk for overweight and its consequences than their peers of higher socioeconomic status.^{13,14}

Five of the motivating factors were rated significantly higher by the parent than by the child group (Table 3). However, the order of the individual motivating factors remained similar between the 2 groups. These findings imply that similar motivators can be used for both groups when encouraging sports participation. The concurrence of parents and children in identifying such factors as “Developing healthy habits” and “Becoming physically fit and healthy” as strong motivating factors for team sport enrollment suggests an important point of shared motivation and understanding of the potential benefits of involvement in sports.

“Helping my child gain or lose weight” received relatively low rankings, despite the calorie-burning potential of playing sports. Of note, another study was being conducted at the same site on the same day on essentially the same population as the current study; several families participated in both studies. This concurrent study identified 37% of child participants as at-risk-of-overweight (85–<95 percentile body mass index for age) or overweight (≤ 95 percentile body mass index) based on measured (not self-reported) heights and weights.¹⁵ This was a population clearly at risk for obesity and its associated complications, yet weight management was not a major motivator.

“Becoming a professional athlete” was considered

Table 1. Demographics of 100 Parents and 138 Children Completing Surveys

Characteristic	Respondent	N*
Parent Respondents		
Parent	Mothers	92
	Fathers	8
Race	African-American	93
	Caucasian	2
	Other	5
Child Respondents		
Gender	Boys	65
	Girls	73
Race	African-American	135
	Caucasian	1
	Other	2
	Other	2
Age	10 years	23
	11 years	28
	12 years	26
	13 years	25
	14 years	16
	15 years	9
	16 years	4
	17 years	4
18 years	2	

*Data are given as number of respondents

Table 2. Parental Motivators Ranked by Importance

Motivator	Mean Rating
Developing healthy habits*	3.82
Becoming physically fit and healthy	3.77
Keep child busy*	3.76
Learning teamwork and cooperation*	3.70
Having fun and making friends *	3.65
Being part of a team*	3.45
Learning and improving skills	3.30
Becoming more competitive	3.03
Helping my child lose or gain weight	2.95
Becoming a professional athlete	2.82

Average ranking based on Likert scale with 4= Very Important to 1 = Not Very Important.

*Factors rated as significantly more important by parents than children, $P\leq 0.05$

important or very important by both parents (60%) and children (70%). This response was not unprecedented; a study of inner city males published in 1999 reported that this group aspired to play a professional level of sports. (Interestingly, this group reported enhancement of money and status as more important than the simple desire to play the game.¹²) So this was not an unexpected response from the child group, but it was a bit surprising to hear it from parents. Although the likelihood of

Table 3. Child Motivators Ranked by Importance

Motivator	Mean
Becoming physically fit and healthy	3.70
Developing healthy habits	3.50
Something to do when not in school	3.40
Learning teamwork and cooperation	3.30
Becoming more competitive	3.20
Learning and improving skills	3.10
Being part of a team	3.10
Becoming a professional athlete	3.10
Helping me lose or gain weight	3.00
Having fun and making friends	2.96

a given child actually achieving a career in professional sports is very small, providers can certainly encourage elite aspirations along with the parents but should continue to remind our young athletes of the health benefits of sports and fitness as life-long pursuits.

Limitations of the study include the consideration that individuals who attend a health fair may have a greater inherent interest in healthy living styles than those who choose not to attend such events. Likewise, those who approached the display at the health fair and volunteered to complete the surveys may be biased toward sports participation or other healthy lifestyle choices. Because of the nature of the setting, we did not attempt to verify respondent age. The busy setting also precluded any means of documenting the number of health fair attendees who refused the opportunity to participate, so calculation of an actual participation rate could not be performed. The survey tool was not tested for reliability or consistency, and the choice of a 4-point rather than a 5-point Likert scale eliminated the respondent's option to provide a neutral response. Also, because the composition of our study population was primarily African-American, the findings may not apply to inner-city populations of other cultural composition. This study population resides in a large Midwestern city that has a long winter; results may not apply to populations living in warmer climates, which may be conducive to more year-round fitness activities and sporting opportunities.

Programs that focus on factors that youth cite as important reasons for their participation have increased participation in youth sports programs, increased self-esteem of participants, and decreased overall attrition and reports of negative reasons for dropping out of sports.¹⁶ Community and recreational youth programs can emphasize factors identified here as important to recruit and retain youth for participation in sports pro-

grams. Health care professionals, educators, coaches, and program developers can motivate both children and parents by emphasizing the development of healthy habits, fitness and health benefits, the option of having something positive to do when not in school, and the opportunity to develop and hone teamwork skills. Despite the value that health care professionals attribute to weight control, weight management was not considered a very important motivator by our study population.

Physical activity is a vital component of a healthy life, and education and guidance concerning physical fitness should begin early. Participation in team sports is one opportunity for achieving this goal. Health care professionals and others who work with inner city youth should emphasize the identified motivational factors for the children and their parents to encourage sports participation by inner-city children.

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