JUDY ORME

Adolescent girls and exercise: too much of a struggle?

This article is based on an investigation of exercise participation by adolescent girls. It attempts to identify the influences and constraints which affect the physical activity levels of year 10 (14-15 year old) girls both in and out of school.

A combination of research methods has been used:
1. Quantitative data obtained from the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire developed by the Schools Health Education Unit. The results from 5789 year 10 girls questioned in 1988 identified areas for further investigation.
2. This was done using qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews with a small group of year 10 girls. The two methods were integrated, much of the content of the interviews was developed from the findings of the quantitative data.

More appropriate

The investigation concludes that there is scope for developing a more appropriate approach to encouraging physical activity in adolescent girls, and proposes recommendations to facilitate this process.

The literature indicates that there is an increasing problem with lowered levels of exercise participation through secondary school in both boys and girls. This seems to be a particular problem with teenage girls, according to Armstrong (1).

In-school levels of activity are fairly similar for both boys and girls. It is out-of-school activity where the participation levels drop for girls and increase for boys.

One has to be cautious when interpreting these trends because sports appeal to different sexes. A downward trend may be appropriate according to the activity, such as gymnastics for boys. Swimming, on the other hand, is likely to be equally popular with both sexes, but there is a steady decline throughout secondary school.

A measure of these changes for girls by years 7 and 11 of secondary school can be examined in Fig. 1. Generally, they become more interested in fitness exercises, squash, aerobics and weight training, as well as pool (not shown). Boys, incidentally, become more interested in fitness exercises, weight training, motorcycling, shooting, pool and snooker.

Table 1. A comparison between the 5789 year 10 girls in the 1988 sample who had or had not tried to lose weight.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Not Tried</th>
<th>Tried</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Swimming</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>-8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jogging</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dancing</td>
<td>57.7%</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
<td>-15.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Deciding in which activity the girls participate in is more within the data which shows that if they have tried losing weight they are more likely to have been swimming, jogging, dancing and walking regularly (Table 1).

The semi-structured interviews were carried out in two secondary schools in Avon involving 16-17 year-old girls. This age group was chosen as Scratchon has published evidence of a marked decline in girls' participation in exercise by the third year of secondary school (4). Areas for investigation were identified, and the interview schedules were developed using the findings of the qualitative analysis and evidence from the literature.

Boring

The traditional sports for the less active girls at school appear to have become boring. They have been doing them at school for too long. New sports were in general well received as a change from the familiar ones. Support was given for more involvement in boys' activities. A core of mixed sports is undertaken during year 7 in one school, and this seemed to be thoroughly enjoyed by them all.

Another factor in the enjoyment of physical activities seemed to be the individual competence with the sport in question. The degree of tiredness felt during or after PE concerned some of the interviewees. It may be their lack of fitness, or perhaps inappropriate nutrition (for example, skipping meals or eating junk food) acts as a contributory factor.

The emphasis on looking good, perhaps as part of their internalised concept of health, becomes very apparent at this age. Becoming self-conscious about one's body, face and hairstyle seems to be a prohibitive factor in the amount of involvement in physical activities. This was described by some interviewees as something which evolved over the first few years of secondary school and seemed to reach a peak at this age.

Fitness and image

In general, keeping fit did not seem to be the concept that was valued: it was more the sign of body shape and weight that was important. When the girls were asked about their idea of fitness, the slim athletic image was always chosen.

For this age group, having the choice of an activity seems to be important, and perhaps would help towards the feeling of wanting to be more independent and being treated as an adult. The importance of choice was reiterated by some of the interviewees. It seems that the girls need to have this choice of activity to accommodate their personal and changing relationships with boys at this time.

The interviews, the overriding influence is boyfriends and groups of friends, and the most popular activity is going into town, looking in the shops, meeting friends at a fast-food bar and perhaps going to the cinema. Friends do take on a confidential role at this age, in that some girls felt that they could talk about everything with friends and boyfriends, but not with their parents.

Fig. 1. Percentage changes in the number of girls participating in physical activities outside school from years 7 to 11 (1988 data, 16,453 pupils.)
Not welcome

Physical activities did not feature at all in the 'leisure' pursuits engaged in with friends of either sex. The interviewees seemed to interpret this area as 'social' pursuits, which do not appear to incorporate any sports.

Femininity is not something valued overtly in terms of fashion, but it is very important to these girls to look attractive in terms of hairstyle, make-up and earrings. Hence, to have any of these disturbed by participation in PE was not welcome. Present-day fashions are such that they disguise the female figure, with boys' baggy shirts, jeans, and heavy black shoes being almost uniform leisure clothing. Special clothes, such as dresses, appear only to be worn for special occasions.

The purchase of magazines featured heavily in the interviews, with all the girls indicating at least one magazine each week. A preliminary content analysis showed no direct reference to any form of physical activity other than sex. However, the issues of diet and sports-related fashions are common in this type of publication.

Fox (2) suggested that adolescents could be categorised in terms of psychological orientation to physical activity. These were the 'approachers' (those who perceive some kind of reward in sport), the 'avoiders' (who see sport as a negative experience), and the 'neutrals' (those who have no strong feelings about sport). From the findings of this study, a further category seems to exist which would include those girls who view certain sports as enjoyable but do not take the initiative to seek out playing opportunities in leisure time. They can be seen as 'reactive' rather than proactive when it comes to participating in exercise. A combination model is proposed which would incorporate this category into both the grouping above (2) and the approach by Lees (3) to develop a school map. An exercise map has been developed using the findings from this study (Fig. 3).

An 'exercise map'

By examining the map, one can see that there are three categories of girls where activity participation could possibly be increased if it was encouraged in combination with social and environmental provision. Social relationships are extremely important to 14-year-old girls — if not instinctively, then as a result of peer pressure. Unless physical activity provision is co-ordinated with their social needs, then progress in terms of increasing participation levels is likely to be limited.

Another of the categories described in the exercise map above includes those girls who do not make or take any opportunities to participate in sport, even though they say they enjoy it. These girls could possibly be persuaded to participate by delays in social and environmental factors were used as an incentive. By trying to combine sport and leisure facilities appropriate to this age group, it is possible that encouragement to participate would occur naturally.

Suffering

The girls who perceive exercise and participation as negative experiences need further investigation to elicit the many reasons behind this approach. Interviewees in this category considered that the benefits of taking part did not warrant suffering the inconvenience, discomfort, or feelings of failure or embarrassment that accompany it.

The findings of this study indicate that some of these negative perceptions were clearly associated with the PE environment rather than the physical activity itself. Many girls were totally discouraged by rules and arrangements related to showers, changing, mirrors and PE kit. This underlines the importance of considering the total PE environment, not just the activity itself, when reorienting our approach to the perception of the girls themselves.

The developing self and body awareness of adolescent girls, together with the image of school sports, are factors which do not encourage out-of-school and future involvement in physical activities.

Encouragement

These activities, where possible, need to be approached from a more individual angle — taking into account individual or group preferences and abilities and attitudes to a range of sports. If physical appearance is important to 14-year-old girls, then help should be given to preserve the elements they feel are important. These include:

- Shooret curtains
- More mirrors
- More time to change
- Reasonable sports clothing which is warm when necessary
- Some single-sex sports and other mixed sports

The majority of girls at this age are very aware of their body shape and size — most of them enjoy their food and do not want to diet — and if exercise were seen as enjoyable and also a proven method of improving body shape and size, opportunities might stand a chance of being created (Table 2).

General fitness is also a factor affecting the enjoyment of physical activities. Many girls found certain activities too tiring, too exhausting, wearing them out. Ways of achieving and preserving a level of fitness need to be investigated further, combining innovative health promotion strategies with provision of facilities. Future physical activity may then become much less of a struggle and may even encourage spontaneous attempts to establish the possible feeling of well-being created.

Guidance and ideas for leisure-time pursuits should be developed. Some incentives perhaps exist for mixed sports out of school also serving as a meeting-place. Developing a point made by Williams (5), activities should be related to community opportunities if they are to be relevant to the pupils in a specific school. Close liaison in the creation of leisure clubs, perhaps using the school fa-
The health-promoting school and the market place

SCHOOLS have never wanted 'bums-on-seats' so much as they do now. The head of every child is stamped with a price-tag, and every headteacher wants to encourage as many as possible into the school in order to maintain - and possibly even increase - the amount of money the LEAs are obliged to cede to schools (see box).

Schools are not after attracting children (usually via their parents) often in a much more aggressive marketing fashion than has previously been the case. Hence, we find an increasing number of glossy prospectuses advertising the merits of schools - many of which could compete with leisure or holiday brochures in terms of the thought and presentational skills that have been invested in them.

Market forces

Schools are chasing after a diminishing market: the demographic shift and the wider parental choice means that many (although by no means all, due to geography or reputation) are competing with each other in order to flourish, and even survive. Parents have never wanted - or been more often unwanted and misunderstood - of choosing schools for their children. For many, the local primary/middle school and the high school are the obvious choices to which they give little further thought.

But many others are interested in finding the right school for their particular child. They will be swayed by geography, reputation, the location of older children in the family and...