

Physical activity: a family affair



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Introduction

For most athletes the journey to attaining expertise in sport frequently begins with an active childhood and taking an interest in sport from an early age. So what makes us sporty or active? Think back to your own early experiences of physical activity. Who played your first game of catch with you or taught you to ride your bike? The answer to these questions will most likely be a member of your family. There are many factors, psychological, social and biological, that shape who we are and what we do, and the family we are born into and grow up in is certainly one of these factors. This course aims to explore the effects that the family has on the amount and nature of physical activity a child participates in. The beliefs and behaviours of the family environment are the key psychosocial factors we investigate here.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [*E313 Exploring psychological aspects of athletic development*](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- summarise the main research evidence of family influence on a child's level of physical activity participation
- relate expectancy-value theory (Eccles, 1993; Eccles et al., 1983) to parental involvement in children's sporting experience
- understand how gender and parental gender stereotypes may affect parents' support of children's participation in sport.

1 What is the modern-day family unit?

There have been many changes in the way that families function in recent years, in particular to living arrangements in the developed world. The family unit now takes many different forms to the 20th century Western society construct of two parents and two children living in the family home.

Celia Brackenridge (2006) acknowledges these changes in her definition of the term 'parent':

Conventionally, the term 'parent' has been applied to the birth mother or father but it has become socially and politically diversified in recent years. Changes in demographic structures and patterns of family life mean that 'parent' is now applied to a wealth of living arrangements and adult responsibilities *vis-à-vis* children. For the purposes of this review 'parent' will be used as a generic term for any adult with de facto responsibility for the ongoing domestic care and welfare of the child but not to those 'in loco parentis' who take only a temporary or intermittent caring role.

(p. 1)

This is the definition of the parent we will use for this free course along with the term 'sibling', which can be applied to any children living in the family home whether or not they have the same biological parents.

2 Socialisation into sport and physical activity

In an academic review of developing participation, Sports Coach UK states that ‘with the family identified as the first point of socialisation into sport (and ultimately into society) it is clear this is a key and underpinning aspect to the entire sport experience of young people’ (Bailey et al., 2010, p. 79).

There are many factors that contribute to when, if, and how a family socialises children into sport and physical activity, such as the amount of family time available to spend together, socio-economic status, parental interest in sport and physical activity, and the family structure. We will discuss some of these factors in more detail later in the course, however the overarching principle indicated by the Sports Coach UK Review is that ‘those who have family members involved in sport are more likely to be involved themselves’ (Bailey et al., 2010, p. 79).

Activity 1 Pinsent talks family

Allow about 20 minutes

Watch the video clip of Matthew Pinsent discussing his family. What role did Matthew’s family play in his introduction to sport and exercise? How do your experiences compare to Matthew’s? For example, consider the amount of time spent together as a family, socio-economic status, parental interest in their own and the children’s sporting activities. You may also consider the family structure or your own position in the family.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Matthew Pinsent on family influences](#)



Discussion

Matthew Pinsent describes neither of his parents as being sporty, other than his dad playing ‘the occasional game of squash’. However, he does describe them as always being physically active and encouraging an active lifestyle. The support described by Matthew is both material (parents drive him round, pay for kit) and attitudinal (they

support his decisions and encourage him to be active). Matthew also felt that being the youngest of three siblings impacted on his physical condition (early development). The combination of all these factors contributed to his positive disposition to sport. You may have related some of these to your own situation.

3 Are children becoming less active?

In an age of games consoles and internet chat rooms, the media has widely reported that modern-day children are becoming less active. Box 1 refers to a survey published by British Triathlon and Tata Steel (2011) that illustrates these concerns.

Box 1 2011 Survey on children and physical activity

In a 2011 survey conducted by British Triathlon and Tata Steel of 1,500 children aged six to fifteen, results found 10% cannot ride a bike, 15% cannot swim and 22% had never run a distance of 400m. One of the most interesting aspects was that a third of the children questioned said they did not own a bike, while three quarters (77%) had a games console. In the week before the poll was conducted in March 2011, just 46% had ridden their bikes and 34% had swum the length of a pool, but 73% had played a video game. 15% of the children said they had never played sport with their parents.

(BBC, 2011)

The statistics in Box 1 imply that in many families physical activity may not be considered a priority. However, should we accept these statistics as being accurate or should we look more deeply into this survey to question the information we are presented with? The next activity will help you begin to formulate a critical approach to evaluating research.

Activity 2 Statistics: the bigger picture

Allow about 30 minutes

Read the online article '[Bad news: are kids turning their backs on sports?](#)' (Merseyside Skeptics Society, 2011). What point is the author trying to make about statistics?

Discussion

The main point of this article is to stress that when faced with statistics, particularly those published by the media, it is important to question the source of such evidence, and the reliability and validity of data collection. Without having the full results available and viewing the precise data collection method, analysis proves difficult. Even when we are not in possession of the exact data, it is generally advisable to do some common-sense thinking about vested interests and alternative explanations, and the author does point out some 'potential biases'.

4 Theoretical perspectives of participation

The majority of young children's time is spent with family members, especially parents, and this is why the family is a vital social facilitator influencing the way a child thinks and behaves, and in particular the opportunities they are presented with. There are many groups and classes that young children can be introduced to but this is not a choice they are able to make themselves. It is the parents who decide whether they take their child to music classes, arts and crafts sessions or swimming lessons. It is the parents who decide whether the child is to stay indoors and watch television or be taken to the park for a more physical activity.

These decisions are informed by the parents' own attitudes and beliefs, and it is these psychological factors that interest us most. Admittedly, social factors such as cost, local provision and proximity to amenities are also relevant; however, research in this area does indicate that the psychological climate created by parents influences a child's participation in sport and physical activity, their experience of the activity and subsequently their continued participation (Partridge et al., 2008).

Activity 3 introduces you to the work of Jacquelynne Eccles. Eccles' expectancy-value theory (Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles, 1993), which you will encounter in a moment, looks at parental influence on children's motivation in achievement settings. Eccles' theory is widely used in academic settings and has been applied to the sporting context to explain parental involvement.

Activity 3 Eccles' expectancy-value theory

Allow about 60 minutes

Read the article '[Theoretical perspectives: Eccles' expectancy-value theory](#)' (Partridge et al., 2008). Then answer the following questions.

1. According to the expectancy-value theory, what are the different ways in which parents can influence their children's participation in sport and physical activity?
2. In particular, what is the relevance of gender to this discussion? Note that the latest gender research presented in the chapter dates from 2005. Do you feel that this research is still applicable today?

Discussion

1. If a parent values sport as an important achievement domain then they will provide more frequent opportunities for their child to participate in sporting activities. Similarly, parents who believe that their child is likely to do well and achieve success in sport or who perceive their child to be competent at sport are more likely to provide support opportunities in that activity or domain. Children within the same family can be provided with different opportunities as parents can often form different beliefs about siblings.
2. Research does indicate a 'parental gender stereotype', as parents are more likely to partake in sport and physical activity with their sons than their daughters, and are more likely to take their sons to sporting events. This can also be linked to parental beliefs of perceived competence, as often parents will view their sons as possessing a higher ability in sport. In addition, parents often attribute a higher value to participating in sport and physical activity for their sons than their

daughters. As the latest research on gender cited by this article is dated 2005, it could be argued that with the progress of activities such as girls' rugby and football, and with the Olympic medals won by female British athletes at the 2012 Olympic Games, that many of these stereotypical beliefs are starting to be re-shaped and that more recent research is needed.

Eccles' theory explores the role of parents in providing opportunities for their children. In addition to Eccles' work, Hellstedt (1987, 1995) looked at parental involvement in children's sport participation, conceptualising involvement on a continuum from under-involved to over-involved. Hellstedt concluded that moderate parental involvement was in children's best interest, emphasising fun and skills development. It is worth noting that neither theory considers the role that school sport may play in athletic development, and in some cases, even with minimal parental involvement or support, the school sport system may provide opportunities and support for athletic development.

5 How important is the family environment?

Activity 3 illustrates the potential influence that parents have over their child's recreational activities, and we must therefore consider what factors contribute to parental beliefs and motivations as regards physical activity. To help answer this question we can look at research into family characteristics. Bailey and Morley (2006, p. 20) reviewed a range of literature in this area and found that particular family characteristics strongly support participation in youth sport. These are:

- Parents achieved high standards within sport;
- Parents are of relatively high socio-economic status;
- Parents possess the ability and willingness to support the child financially;
- Parents are willing to dedicate large amounts of their own time to support the child's participation in an activity;
- The parents own a car;
- The family size is relatively small;
- There are two parents;
- The child attends an independent school.

This research suggests that although the parents' willingness to invest time in their child's activities is a contributor, there are other factors that may be beyond the parents' control, such as owning a car or being able to offer financial support. In addition, Porter (2000) found that parents are more supportive of activities that are easy to access, a safe play environment, good 'drop-off' arrangements and where activities are available to other members of the family, therefore convenience may also play a part. The point regarding family size is interesting; consider how this impacts on parents' time and money if they have five children all wanting to participate in different activities, as opposed to those parents who can invest all their time and money in one child. Studies in developed nations generally indicate that elite athletes are more likely to come from middle- or upper-class families (Fraser-Thomas and Côté, 2006).

Activity 4 uses a case study to which we can apply Bailey and Morley's findings. In the video we meet two boys who go on to compete at the Irish Dancing World Championships. We will return to this video and the story of the two boys throughout this study topic.

Activity 4 The Great Irish Dance Off

Allow about 30 minutes

Watch the video clip 'The Great Irish Dance Off', which follows two Irish dancers on their journey to the World Championships, then answer the following questions.

1. Compare the family characteristics of the two dancers to the eight characteristics listed above. Do they support Bailey and Morley's findings?
2. Do you feel that some of the eight criteria are more important than others? Go to the tutor group forum and rank the criteria you feel are the three most important, stating reasons for your answer.

Video content is not available in this format.

[The Great Irish Dance Off](#)



Discussion

1. John's circumstances meet some but not all of the criteria. John has achieved high standards, although his coach states that, 'If John was in his class four or five times a week like the rest of his competitors probably are then he would be unbeatable, unfortunately he is one of five, they're all playing football and going in different directions, and Irish dancing is expensive'. Joe's family appear to fit more of the criteria. They are from a higher socio-economic background, as his dad used to own a successful medical practice. He is an only child and the sole focus of his parent's time and money; they even moved country to boost his chances of success. These differences in family circumstances are influential as John's larger family means that he is given less chance to participate than Joe. It will be interesting to see what effect, if any, this has in terms of their success later on.
2. Although John's family do not meet as many of the criteria as Joe's family, the boys are equally successful. This would suggest that perhaps some factors are more predictive of participation than others. Through contributing to the tutor group forum and responding to other postings you should engage in an extended discussion around this topic.

Certain sports appear to attract certain family characteristics. More than a third (37%) of British medal winners at the London 2012 Olympic Games were privately educated, with athletes from private schools dominating in rowing and equestrian events (Vasagar, 2012). However, Activity 4 illustrates that research can only tell part of a story and that there will always be exceptions to statistics such as these. Many athletes come from backgrounds in which family resources are limited. This suggests that although environmental factors can be influential, there are other contributing factors that are sometimes more important, such as attitudes and beliefs. It is to these psychological factors that we now turn.

6 Gender differences

Interestingly, John and Joe do not have any sisters but if they did would the girls receive the same level of family support? In a review article Gustafson and Rhodes (2006) reviewed 34 studies. Twenty-seven of these studies examined gender differences related to parental influence on a child's physical activity levels. Activity 5 will help you to gain a fuller appreciation of the research in this area.

Activity 5 Parental support and gender

Allow about 30 minutes

Read the abstract and Section 6 'Sex Relations' of the article '[Parental correlates of physical activity in children and early adolescents](#)' (Gustafson and Rhodes, 2006) and answer the following questions.

1. What are the authors trying to do in writing this article?
2. What were the key findings from reviewing the existing research in this section of the article?
3. What do you notice about the proportions of different research designs that feature in this review?

Discussion

1. The aim of this article is to collate the existing research on parental influences on children's physical activity behaviours in order to establish any gaps in the research and to identify the direction for future research. The overall aim of the research is to improve current child physical activity intervention programmes.
2. The majority of studies found a strong sex difference in physical activity levels, with boys tending to be more active and receiving more parental support. There is some evidence for a correlation between mother–daughter physical activity but mother–son correlations were not as consistent. There is a strong correlation between father and child physical activity, particularly between father and son, with only one of the studies not finding a relationship.
3. Twenty-two studies were cross-sectional and five longitudinal. Longitudinal research is valuable as it allows the researcher to view any changes to the population that occur over a period of time, however they are expensive. In addition, such studies are also exposed to subjects dropping out or withdrawing from the research. Interestingly, none of the studies reviewed used experimental designs.

7 Do active parents have active children?

Reinforcing the suggestion that active parents have active children, in an online interview Olympic triathlete Alistair Brownlee describes his childhood as extremely active. Both his mother and father were very sporty and involved both him and his brother (also an Olympic triathlete) in their active lifestyle, introducing them to running, swimming and cycling:

Your parents control everything really. They control whether they take you swimming, or running, or take you out on your bike or whatever.

(The Open University, 2011)

In a longitudinal study by Moore et al. (1991) and which used an accelerometer (electronic device which measures the amount and intensity of movement) to assess physical activity levels in 100 4- to 7-year-olds and their parents, it was found that children of active mothers were twice as likely to be active as children of inactive mothers. Similarly, children of active fathers were 3.5 more times as likely to be active as those with inactive fathers. When both parents were active, the children were 5.8 times as likely to be active as children of two inactive parents. The study revealed that possible mechanisms for the relationship between parents' and child's activity levels included:

- the parents' serving as role models
- sharing of activities by family members
- enhancement and support by active parents of their child's participation in physical activity
- genetically determined factors that predispose the child to increased levels of physical activity.

The final point is an interesting one: research conducted by Wolfarth et al. (2005) identified potential genes for physical activity behaviours and characteristics. If we look at Alistair Brownlee, his parents appear to have implemented the first three mechanisms identified by Moore et al. (1991), although it is difficult to comment on the last point. Referring back to the data on gender, some studies have also indicated that parental participation is particularly important for daughters (Fredericks and Eccles, 2004).

Activity 6 An evening with the Murrays

Allow about 25 minutes

Listen to the following radio programme in which Andy Murray, his mother Judy and brother Jamie discuss family life and sport, then answer the following questions.

1. How can Eccles' expectancy-value theory (discussed in Activity 3) be applied to Judy's role in Andy and Jamie's participation in tennis?
2. In what way did Judy act as a role model for Andy and Jamie?

Audio content is not available in this format.



An evening with the Murrays

Discussion

1. Expectancy-value theory states that if a parent values sport as an important achievement domain then they will provide more frequent opportunities for their child to participate in sport activities. Judy came from a sporting family herself and grew up playing sport, therefore she valued sport as a domain and wanted her children to value and enjoy it too, and so provided lots of opportunities for them. This didn't always involve organised sport and could be simply playing games with them in the house and garden to get them active.
2. Judy Murray modelled a sporting environment for the boys, encouraging them to experience a range of activities. The Murrays lived close to a tennis club and Judy was a volunteer coach there so the boys got used to being around tennis. This could be seen as role modelling. We could take this a step further and look at sibling relationships with Jamie also acting as a role model for Andy.

8 Putting the pieces together

So far in this course we have examined a broad range of factors that contribute to the family's socialisation of children into physical activity. Inevitably we are unable to analyse every study and paper relating to this topic as there are simply so many. However, the next activity guides you to consider a key journal article in this area. It is a cross-sectional study comprising a range of questionnaires designed to ascertain the influence of parental socialisation and children's psychological characteristics upon their attraction to physical activity. It also refers back to Eccles' expectancy-value theory introduced in Activity 3.

Activity 7 Parental influences on physical activity

Allow about 60 minutes

Read the article by Brustad (1993) entitled ‘

[Who will go out and play? Parental and psychological influences on children's attraction to physical activity](#)’.

Then answer the following questions.

1. What limitations do you notice from the sample used?
2. Through what procedures was the parent data gathered? Do you think the research instruments used have any limitations?
3. To what extent did the results support the proposed model of relationships among parental influences and children's attraction to physical activity?

Discussion

1. You may have questioned why approximately 95% of the children in the study were Caucasian and from an upper middle-class background. Therefore, can we apply the results of this study to the general population?
2. The parental data was gathered using questionnaires. These were sent home to parents in a letter. Only one of each set of parents was asked to complete the questionnaire and so this does not necessarily reflect the other parents' attitudes. The majority of questionnaires were completed by mothers. For measures of physical fitness the researchers were reliant upon the parents' own assessment rather than a physical test. One PE teacher lost a sample of the parental questionnaires and so out of 231 children only 81 parental questionnaires were obtained, reducing the sample size considerably.
3. The paper concluded that parental influences, children's gender and children's self-perception characteristics are all important in shaping a child's attraction to physical activity.

9 Beliefs and values

As we have learned, parents influence their child's sporting experience in a variety of ways. Figure 1 below provides an illustration of the key features of Eccles' expectancy-value theory and how parents' values and beliefs influence behaviour towards their child, which in turn shapes the child's own values and beliefs, and ultimately their performance and behaviour.

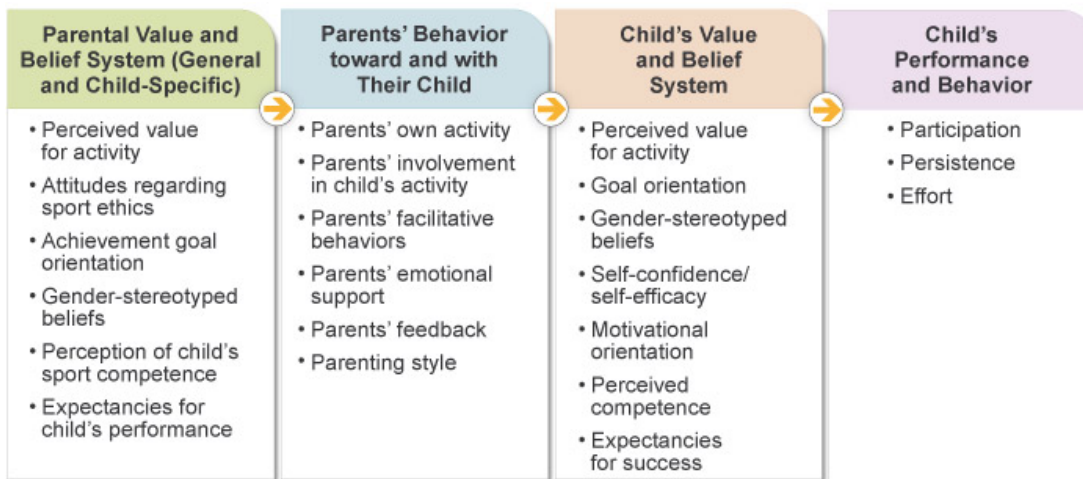


Figure 1

Source: Horn, T. and Horn, J. (2007)

Conclusion

This free course has built on your own experience of socialisation into sport and explored the role of the family in this process. A number of social and psychological factors have been considered and it is important to acknowledge these do not exist in isolation but all work together to influence athletic development.

The main learning points of this course include the following:

- Families influence athletic development through providing opportunities for their children.
- More active parents are likely to have more active children. A study showed children of two active parents were 5.8 times as likely to be active as children of two inactive parents (Moore et al., 1991).
- Expectancy-value theory (Eccles, 1993; Eccles et al., 1983) states that if parents perceive sport to be an important achievement domain they will provide more frequent opportunities for their child to participate in sporting activities.
- Some studies indicate a 'parental gender stereotype' among parents as they are more likely to partake in sport and physical activity with their sons than their daughters and are more likely to take their sons to sporting events, although attitudes may have changed in more recent years.
- Certain family characteristics strongly support participation in youth sport. These include parents who achieved high standards within sport, are of relatively high socioeconomic status, support the child financially and dedicate time, and own a car, as well as there being two parents, a small family size, and children attending independent school.

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Further reading

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Activity 3, adapted from: Partridge, J.A., Brustad, R.J. and Stellino, M.B. (2008) 'Social influence in sport' in Horn, T.S. (ed) *Advances in Sport Psychology*, 3rd edn, Champaign, Human Kinetics, pp. 269–292. © 2008 Human Kinetics Publishers Inc.

Activity 5 'Parental correlates of physical activity in children and early adolescents' Sabrina L. Gustafson and Ryan E. Rhodes, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. *Sports Med* (2006), vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 79–97. © 2006 Adis DataInformation BV.

Activity 7 Brustad, R.J., 'Who will go out and play? Parental and psychological influences on children's attraction to physical activity' in *Pediatric Exercise Science* (1993) Human Kinetics Vol 5 pp 210-223 © 1993 Human Kinetics Publishers Inc.

Images

Figure 1: Horn, T. and Horn, J. (2007) 'Chapter 31: Attachment and well-being: The mediating effects of psychological needs satisfaction within the coach-athlete and parent-athlete relational contexts' in Tenenbaum, G. and Eklund, R. (eds) *Handbook of Sport Psychology*, 3rd edn, Canada, Wiley & Sons.

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