

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT IN CHILDREN'S PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

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All of us who work with children are aware of the benefits of participating in regular physical activity. These benefits are shown in a number of areas, including physical health, academic performance, mental health and emotional wellbeing. However, the percentage of children and young people who meet the recommendation of 60 minutes of daily physical activity is still low. According to the Active Lives and Children and Young People Survey published by Sport England, 32.9 per cent (2.3 million) of children and young people do less than an average of 30 minutes a day.

There are now concerted efforts across the health, education and sporting sectors to increase physical activity in children and young people. These efforts include such initiatives The Daily Mile, the Change4 Life programme and the School Games. However, these efforts are focused on providing more opportunities to be physically active. In addition to providing such opportunities, it is also necessary to ensure that children have adequate support, to complement those opportunities and ensure children can make the most of them. This area – known in the sector as social support – is increasingly recognised as being as important but is still relatively unknown.

WHAT IS SOCIAL SUPPORT?

Social support is described as “the social resources that persons perceive to be available, or that are actually provided to them, by non-professionals, in the context of both formal support groups and informal helping relationships” (Cohen *et al*, 2000).

In essence, social support consists of the interactions between children and the people in their life to help them participate in and/or provide opportunities for physical activity. It is an umbrella term used to summarise the various ways in which significant others, including parents, siblings, friends, teachers and school, can influence the activity behaviours of children.

The role of social support in other sectors has long been recognised. In health, it has been linked to maintaining good health and psychological wellbeing. In mental health, social support has been associated with lower rates of depressive symptoms and has been linked to protecting individuals from the harmful effects of stress. In education, higher levels of support have been related to better academic achievement.

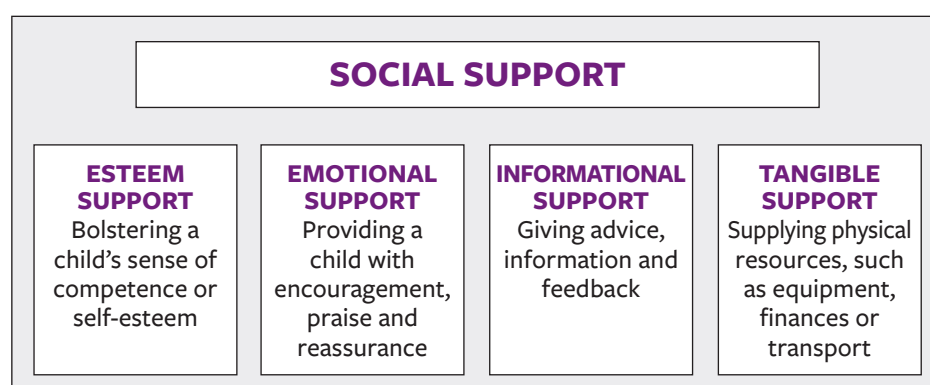
As yet, the role of social support in encouraging and sustaining physical activity in children is still being explored. But studies are increasingly showing that good social support can have an impact on participation. Research has shown that children who receive social support are more

likely to participate in physical activity than those who do not. Findings from a number of studies emphasised that social support from coaches, parents and friends plays a significant role in shaping youth sport experiences from a positive perspective in areas such as athlete motivation levels and elite sport participation.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

Social support can be provided in different ways. These ways can be broadly summarised as shown below.

All four of these can provide valuable encouragement and motivation to help children engage with physical activity. For example, esteem support plays a key role in bolstering a child's competence and self-esteem. This can have a significant positive impact on the child, helping to build their self-confidence and encouraging them to continue, especially if they did not have a good time during the activity. This can be easily done by helping them to identify areas





of authentic strength and competency and providing positive feedback on those areas.

Emotional support can play a huge role in motivating children to both start and continue in physical activity. For example, encouragement is an influential form of supportive behaviour. It acts as a precursor to activity involvement, helping children feel confident and comfortable to begin activity. When it occurs during the activity, it acts as a reinforcer of the behaviour. In addition, increase in encouragement potentially influences children's perceived competence of their own abilities, which helps them to continue. Praise is another form of emotional support, generally provided after an activity. Research has shown praise can have a significant impact on helping the child to continue.

Informational support and tangible support are more functional forms of support, giving children the information and practical resources they need to be active. Informational support provides children with advice and guidance on physical activity, such as instructions on how to play a game and feedback on what they are doing. Tangible support comprises the physical and financial resources that children require to be active. This can include several types, including the provision of equipment and financial support (such as payment of leisure centre fees, coaching costs or purchase of kit). One of the most significant forms of tangible support is transportation – simply helping children to get to places where they can be active. This is because one of the major barriers for children to participate in physical activity is the ability to access places where they can be active (such as parks, playgrounds, leisure centres, sport

practices). Research shows transportation is a key component to children and young people accessing these places and is linked to greater levels of activity.

PROVISION OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

All of these forms of support can have a significant impact on encouraging children to start and continue participating in physical activity. They will often be provided to the children from different people in their lives. For example, at primary school, it is likely that teachers and schools will be more involved with providing informational support and certain kinds of tangible support, such as teaching them the rules of football or providing them with a netball court. Meanwhile, parents, particularly those with limited resources, are likely to provide children with more emotional support, such as encouragement and reassurance to help children begin an activity, and praise for taking part. Social support is also highly context specific. For example, in a competition or specific event, the role of teachers and coaches may be limited to more functional support, whilst parents, if also present, might be required for more emotional encouragement (particularly if things do not go as well as expected!).

The provision of these types of support will also vary as the children age. When children are very young (aged 5-12), parents make up their main support network. This is also the time that coincides with the formulation of many health-related behaviours, so their support is crucial. However, as children move into adolescence, the influence of parents on activity levels may be replaced with peer involvement, suggesting this form of support may be more influential.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

The multi-faceted nature of social support means that it is not up to one set of individuals, or one person, to provide all the support a child needs. This would be both impossible and, at times, inappropriate. For example, a child might want his parents to take him to football matches but would not expect (or want) them to provide coaching input on his performance. Equally it would be appropriate for a teacher to provide feedback on a specific performance, but not to offer financial support. However, the different types of social support and its dependence on context is also its advantage: it means that different people in a child's life can contribute to that support. These different types of social support from different directions complement each other, enhancing the support provided by others. This creates a network of individuals, encompassing home, school and social life, from which a child can obtain the support they need, at the time they need it. As we consider practical ways of enabling children to be more active, we need to make sure we explore the social support they need to start and stay active – within and beyond school. ■

REFERENCES

Cohen, S., Underwood, L.G. and Gottlieb, B.H. Social support measurement and intervention: A guide for health and social scientists. Oxford University Press, 2000.

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