

Strengths-Based Exploration of the Physical Activity and Physical Education Experiences of Autistic Adolescents: Preliminary Findings

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- Physical activity (PA) and physical education (PE) offer physical, mental, and social benefits for all adolescents (Bailey, 2006)
- Autistic adolescents had lower PA and PE participation levels than their non-autistic peers (Ratcliff et al., 2018)
- Autistic adolescents experienced a sharper decline in PA during adolescence, especially girls, compared to their non-autistic peers (Dahlgren et al., 2021; Farooq et al., 2020)
- Barriers to PA and PE included poor sports skills, social challenges, negative experiences, and sensory discomfort in PA and PE contexts (Arnell et al., 2020; McNamara et al., 2022)
- Existing research has focused heavily on deficits and barriers, often excluding autistic adolescents' own perspectives (Michaud & Harvey, in press; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2024)
- A strengths-based approach emphasizes capacities, interests, and positive experiences which may offer a more inclusive lens (Urbanowicz et al., 2019)
- Autistic adolescents are rarely included in PA research as active contributors which may have limited our understanding of their lived PA and PE experiences (Boucher et al., 2022)
- The purpose of this study** was to explore the past and present lived PA and PE experiences of autistic adolescents

Method

- Philosophical foundation:** Constructivism and strengths-based approach
- Design:** Case study design
- Participants:**
 - Eight autistic adolescents (ages 13–16 years; five boys, three girls)
 - Heterogeneous sample with diverse co-occurring conditions
- Data collection:**
 - Demographic questionnaire*
 - Artifact-elicitation interviews*
 - Semi-structured interview on PA habits
 - Artifact collection (e.g., photos, videos, memorabilia)
 - Follow-up discussion about the artifacts
- Data analysis:** Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020)
 - Themes were identified through inductive analysis of interview data and interpreted using the *Basic Psychological Needs Theory* (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

Preliminary Results – Thematic Analysis

Overarching influence

- (1) type of activities
- (2) enjoyment of PA
- (3) safety considerations
- (4) school and PE culture

Autonomy

- (1) independence
- (2) accessibility of PA
- (3) routines and schedules
- (4) positive outlook on PA

Competence

- (1) specialized training
- (2) competition
- (3) success

Relatedness

- (1) social interactions
- (2) PA partners
- (3) family involvement
- (4) group dynamics

Behaviours

- (1) PA participation

Based on the *Basic Psychological Needs Theory* (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

Preliminary Results

Perceived changes in PA from childhood to adolescence:

- Four adolescents perceived being **more active** now than in childhood
- Two adolescents perceived being **equally active** now as they were in childhood
- Two adolescents perceived being **less active** now than in childhood

Five themes were developed:

- Autonomy:** Autistic adolescents' sense of control over their actions and decisions related to PA and PE
- Competence:** Autistic adolescents' feelings of effectiveness and ability to meet PA and PE challenges
- Relatedness:** Autistic adolescents' perceived importance of social connections and support in PA and PE settings
- Overarching influence:** The broad interplay of factors that affected the three basic psychological needs of autistic adolescents and, in return, their active behaviours
- Behaviours:** The nature and extent of adolescents' participation in active behaviours

Fulfilment of Basic Psychological Needs in PA and PE

Autonomy

- Autistic adolescents valued *making their own choice* about their PA and PE participation
- Autonomy depended on contextual factors like access, seasons, and family routines which required *flexible environments* and *responsive adults*

Competence

- Competence was about *feeling capable* and *improving* rather than outperforming others
- Competitions for neurodiverse adolescents and adapted PA and PE instruction that built *confidence* and *pride* supported competence

Relatedness

- Social connection was often expressed through *shared, fair, and respectful interactions with peers and family*
- Parents played a key role in fostering belonging through *encouragement* and *participation* in PA with their child

Overarching influence

- Enjoyment, safety, and school culture* interacted to shape motivation
- Physical, emotional, and social *safety* served as a prerequisite for meaningful participation

Behaviours

- PA levels *fluctuated a lot over time* and evolved with maturity, interests, and life events

Contextual Implications

- Specialized settings* (e.g., special education schools, Special Olympics) supported psychological needs better than mainstream environments
- Community programs need *better access, coach training, and age-appropriate options* for autistic adolescents

Strengths-Based Approach in PA and PE Research and Practice

- Shifted focus *from barriers to facilitators* of PA and PE participation
- Adolescents were empowered through artifact-elicitation interviews to *share meaningful experiences*
- Supported *neurodiversity-affirming practices* and *participatory research* in adapted PA
- Promoted *agency, inclusion, and recognition* of autistic adolescents' strengths

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