

Health and fitness amongst middle-class teenagers

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Aim

- Examine conceptualisations of health and healthy behaviours amongst BMI-defined obese/overweight and non-obese/overweight young teenagers (13-15 years) from middle-class families.

Methodology

- 5 schools based in areas of relative affluence in Edinburgh, East Lothian and Fife participated in study
- School visits included:
 - Screening questionnaire
 - Height and weight measurements
- In-depth interviews:
 - 36 young people

Interview sample

- Gender:
 - 18 boys
 - 18 girls
- BMI:
 - 18 'normal' weight
 - 18 overweight/obese
- Social Class:
 - Parental occupation/s NS-SEC 1 or 2 (Office of National Statistics, 2004)
 - Family Affluence – using Family Affluence Scale (Currie et al., 1997)
 - Level of deprivation - 2001 Carstairs scores for Scottish postcode sectors (McClone, 2004)

References

Currie, C., Elton, R., Todd, J. & Platt, S. (1997) Indicators of socioeconomic status for adolescents: The WHO health behaviour in school-aged children survey. *Health Education Research*, 12: 385-397.

McClone, P. (2004) *Carstairs Scores for Scottish Postcode Sectors from the 2001 Census* Glasgow, MRC Social and Public Health Sciences Unit.

Office of National Statistics (2004) *National Statistics Socio-economic Classification User Manual*, London, ONS.

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Findings

Health and fitness

- Many of the young people were involved in after-school sports of some kind and emphasised the importance of leading active lives in order to be 'healthy'. The amount of physical activity varied amongst these young people, and not all identified themselves as 'sporty', however even those young people who were not as involved in sports still related physical activity to health.
- Young people also discussed improving their health through becoming involved in and/or increasing physical activity.
- Some of the young people thought that if someone was overweight or ate 'junk food' that they would still be healthy as long as they exercised, and that the health of an individual could be judged by how well they performed at sports rather than their weight.
- Young people emphasised being neither too 'fat' nor too thin and exercise was seen as a means of maintaining weight.
- A 'fit' body was also perceived as desirable, particularly amongst boys who talked about building up muscle through exercise and wanting to be more muscular in order to perform well at sports such as rugby.
- Some of the young people thought that boys do exercise to become muscular whereas girls do exercise to lose weight and be slim.
- Although young people highlighted the importance of physical activity and health they also talked about the dangers of becoming obsessed with exercise, particularly in relation to losing weight.
- When asked what their families do to keep healthy, many of the young people discussed this in terms of the physical activity their parents and siblings engaged in, e.g. golf, going to the gym, walking the dog, going on family walks.
- Some young people discussed their parents 'encouraging' them to be involved in sports and exercise rather than undertaking sedentary activities.

Conclusion

Our findings show that physical activity contributes to these middle-class teenagers' notions of 'healthy' behaviour. A high value was placed on sports and exercise in relation to health. Performance at sports was also used amongst these young people as a means of identifying the health of an individual. Participation in after-school sports was taken-for-granted by these middle-class teenagers, with little discussion of cost or other barriers in attending sporting activities.

