

Unspoken Playground Rules Prompt Adolescents to Avoid Physical Activity: A Focus Group Study of Constructs in the Prototype Willingness Model

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Abstract : The health benefits of exercise are widely recognised, but numerous interventions have failed to halt a sharp decline in physical activity during early adolescence. Many such projects are underpinned by the Theory of Planned Behaviour, yet this model of rational decision-making leaves variance in behavior unexplained. This study investigated whether the Prototype Willingness Model, which proposes a second, reactive decision-making path to account for spontaneous responses to the social environment, has potential to improve understanding of adolescent exercise behaviour in school by exploring constructs in the model with young people. PE teachers in 4 Oxfordshire schools each nominated 6 pupils who were active in school, and 6 who were inactive, to participate in the study. Of these, 45 (22 male) aged 12-13 took part in 8 focus group discussions. These were transcribed and subjected to deductive thematic analysis to search for themes relating to the prototype willingness model. Participants appeared to make rational decisions about commuting to school or attending sports clubs, but spontaneous choices to be inactive during both break and PE. These reactive decisions seemed influenced by a social context described as more 'judgmental' than primary school, characterised by anxiety about physical competence, negative peer evaluation and inactive playground norms. Participants described their images of typical active and inactive adolescents: active images included negative social characteristics including 'show-off'. There was little concern about the long-term risks of inactivity, although participants seemed to recognise that physical activity is healthy. The Prototype Willingness Model might more fully explain young adolescents' physical activity in school than rational behavioural models, indicating potential for physical activity interventions that target social anxieties in response to the changing playground environment. Images of active types could be more complex than earlier research has suggested, and their negative characteristics might influence willingness to be active.

Keywords : adolescence, physical activity, prototype willingness model, school

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