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Practitioner Beliefs About Exercise For Children and Youth With Intellectual Developmental Disabilities

What is this research about?

Physical activity is an important part of many people's lives, but youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) do not exercise enough. As a result, they experience related health problems, such as obesity. There has been little research about interventions to improve this problem. Previous studies have found a host of benefits including enhanced social skills, health, self-esteem, inclusion, and happiness. This study fills a gap in research by focusing on the attitudes and beliefs of practitioners on increasing the physical activity of youth with IDD. The purpose of this study was to survey practitioners working with youth with IDD to document their attitudes and beliefs about exercise, athletics, and recreational activities.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers surveyed 75 practitioners (e.g., teachers, teaching assistants, nursing staff, case managers) who worked at a residential school for children and youth with IDD. Participants completed a questionnaire that aimed to (1) identify 10 physical activities available to students at the school, (2) select 7 benefits of exercise, (3) identify specific skills that they judged as necessary for students to engage in physical activities (e.g., physical movement, eye contact, communication), (4) rate the possible negative outcomes of physical activity, and (5) rate listed barriers to physical activity.

What you need to know:

Physical activity is important to overall health and wellbeing. Practitioners play an important role by helping youth with IDD engage in physical activity programs. The surveyed practitioners reported that physical activity programs are important for youth with IDD and outlined specific skills required for individuals with IDD to participate.

What did the researchers find?

Most participants said that physical education classes and gross motor activities were available to students at the school. Fewer mentioned other activities, such as dance or team sports for students with IDD. Participation in athletic and recreational activities consistently correlated with having high health, social, and learning benefits for the student. There were several skills that the participants believed the youth should have in order to participate, including the ability to respond to verbal/physical prompts and to follow simple commands. School practitioners were also concerned about injuries and safety risks for youth with IDs. Staff availability and lack of student interest were rated as the most common barriers to physical activity. The current study is limited by its small sample size.



How can you use this research?

Practitioners who work with youth with IDD play an important role in supporting youth with IDD participate in physical activities. Further efforts should be made to increase the variety of activities available to youth with IDD, in addition to raising staff awareness of these opportunities.

About the Researchers

The researchers are affiliated with the May Institute, a nonprofit organization that provides educational, rehabilitative, and behavioral healthcare services to individuals with ASD and other developmental disabilities.

Citation

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Keywords

Exercise, Athletic, Recreational Activities, Children, Youth, Intellectual Disability, Developmental Disability, Practitioner, Barriers

This research summary was written by Jordan Cleland for the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research. This research summary, along with other summaries, can be found on our [blog](#) and at asdmentalhealth.ca/research-summaries

About the Chair

The Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research is dedicated to studying ways to improve the mental health and well-being of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and their families in Canada.

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