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Health Profiles of Children with Down Syndrome

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ABSTRACT

Quantitative research enables measurement of motor skills and fitness levels for individuals with Down syndrome (Pitetti & Fernhall, 2004; Rimmer, et al, 2004; Tsimaras & Fotiadou, 2004). Qualitative research, which explores attitudes and lifestyles choices, has limited availability regarding individuals affected by Down syndrome (Jobling, 2001). More specifically, there is a lack of qualitative data from parents regarding the physical activity patterns and needs of their children with Down syndrome. Attaining this information could guide development of physical education and community-based physical activity programs.

A focus group research design (Morgan, 1997) was employed with 24 participants divided into four groups as follows; transcripts were analyzed for related themes within each focus group, and thematic comparisons were made (Denzin, 1989; Stringer, 2004).

- A. Mothers of preschoolers saw their children as naturally active, and were determined to keep their children physically active in order to prevent obesity.
- B. Mothers of lower elementary-aged children saw their children's interests in physical activity wane as the gap between the child's skills and the skills of non-disabled peers widened. They also noticed that the number of appropriate community-based programs decreased as the child aged.
- C. Mothers of teenagers described a lack of opportunity for inclusive physical activity that is competitive yet appropriate for mental and physical age. Those parents regretted not focusing on the development of health-enhancing motor skills earlier in their children's lives.
- D. Mothers/fathers of children ages 3-15 years saw a need for parent education regarding physical activities that could be implemented within the family.

Across all groups, parents supported their child's involvement in physical activities for immediate and long-term health benefits as well as social interaction. Social interaction through physical activity was a particular emphasis for mothers of elementary-aged children and mothers of teenagers. Mothers of teenagers and mothers/fathers of children ages 3-15 years observed a need for the child to develop skills in individual sports. The information gained from this study could be used to guide the development of activity programs for children with Down syndrome, especially when used in the initial planning stages (for the purpose of determining participants' needs). Emphasis on the need for social interaction and the need for participation in individual sports have widespread implications for physical education programs and participation in organized sports; therefore, further investigation of the topic is needed.

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