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Promoting Middle School Students' Physically Active Lifestyles: A Social Ecological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Guided by the youth physical activity promotion model, the main purpose of this study was to investigate the predictive strength of individual (perceived self-efficacy in physical activity, enjoyment of physical activity), school social environmental (friends' support, and teachers' support), and school physical environmental factors (equipment accessibility) toward physical activity behaviors within and beyond physical education classes among middle school students. A secondary purpose was to examine gender and grade differences in the study variables (i.e., physical activity behaviors). We investigated the relationships between students' perceptions of self-efficacy, enjoyment, school social and physical environmental factors, self-reported levels of physical activity, and students' percentage of time engaged in moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) in three physical education classes measured by Actical accelerometers (Mini-Mitter Co., Inc., Bend, OR). Middle school students who reported higher levels of self-efficacy, enjoyment, and social environmental factors had higher levels of self-reported physical activity and engagement in MVPA during their physical education classes. Students' self-reported physical activity was positively related to engagement of MVPA in physical education classes measured by Actical accelerometers. Boys demonstrated a higher percentage of time in MVPA in physical education classes than girls. Sixth graders had less time in MVPA in physical education classes than 7th and 8th graders. From a practical perspective, the findings of this study have significant implications for physical education teachers, health promoters, and practitioners. Positive self-efficacy in physical activity and higher levels of physical activity enjoyment may increase the likelihood that middle school students actively engage in physical activity within and beyond physical education classes. Creating a supportive school physical activity environment can be a successful strategy for promoting students' engagement in physical activity. Researchers and practitioners need to consider individual factors and social environmental factors as they design effective interventions to promote physical activity among middle school students. When they implement intervention programs designed to promote students' physical activity participation, they also need to consider the gender and age differences. Based on the youth physical activity promotion model, enhancing school physical activity environment by implementing integrative approaches to physical activity promotion is an essential element needed in the future endeavors.

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