

On Social Support and Physical Activity

Social support in behavioral change is more important than most people realize. Social support is a key factor in increasing and maintaining physical activity among older adults. Social support from family/home, school, and the workplace (the three "environments" the majority of people spend time in) are also important in making behavioral changes particularly in adopting healthier lifestyle choices.

Silva, Lott, Mota and Welk (2014) made an excellent statement: "human health is a social matter, not just an individual one" (p. 86). Silva et al. (2014) noted the importance of social influence, particularly in youth physical activity (PA), and introduced the Youth Physical Activity Promotion (YPAP) model which incorporates the individual, social, and environment dimensions into one social ecological profile. Silva et al. (2014) studied the influence of parental and peer support on youth PA using the social support scale adapted from Sallis and colleagues (as cited in Silva et al., 2014, p. 87), the "Am I Able" construct /self-efficacy scale, and the "Is it Worth it" (enjoyment) scale.

Silva et al. (2014) found that although both peer and parental support influenced youth self-efficacy (regarding PA), peer support had more impact as compared to parental support. It is possible that if parental support is lacking, enough peer support might compensate for the parental role (Silva et al., 2014). This can be a good or bad thing depending on the desired goal/outcome.

Sallis et al. (as cited in Silva et al., 2014, p. 92) noted that peer support was the most important form of support directly influencing levels of youth PA and motivation for PA from individuals in school grades 1 to 12.

Having supportive peers in the school environment can be a great advantage as long as the "support" is for the right things like increasing physical activity and not for more sedentary activities or forms of entertainment (e.g. watching television, snacking on unhealthy foods, etc.). With peers who enjoy physical activity, sports, or outdoors, the individual is more likely to be persuaded and influenced to be active or at least try new things to see if that is something he/she likes to do.

References

Silva, P., Lott, R., Mota, J., & Welk, G. (2014). Direct and indirect effects of social support on youth physical activity behavior. *Pediatric Exercise Science*, 26(1), 86-94.