

## Adolescent Girls' Perception of Health within a Leisure Context

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### Abstract

The study examined middle school females' perceptions of physical activity, eating, and physical health within a leisure context. A qualitative approach was used to gain a deeper understanding of the significance girls place on health behaviors and factors that go into their decisions about leisure time activity and eating. Four focus groups were conducted with 28 girls in 6th through 8th grades. Four themes emerged from the analyses: perceptions of health, family, and food, social norms, and enjoyment. Results are summarized regarding how healthy diets and physical activity participation in adolescent girls can be associated with promoting enjoyable leisure. Theoretical implications of these data relate to the importance of enjoyment and leisure as prerequisites for healthy behaviors and how social cognitive theory helps explain these relationships.

*KEYWORDS: Adolescent girls, eating, health, physical activity, focus groups*

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## Introduction

Adolescent obesity and overweight are critical societal problems. The 2003-2004 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) reported that the prevalence of overweight in the United States more than doubled over the past 30 years (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007). At that time, over 17% of 12- to 19-year-olds were overweight, and 34% were at risk for being overweight (Ogden, Carroll, Curtin, McDowell, Taback, & Flegal, 2006). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2008a) reported similar numbers among high school students. Thirteen percent of high school students were obese and almost 16% overweight.

An imbalance of energy, which generally happens when someone consumes more energy (calories) than he or she expends during daily activity and exercise, is a main contributor to obesity. Consequently, nutrition and physical activity (PA) both play a vital role in maintaining a healthy weight. The current recommendation from the CDC is that children get at least 60 minutes of PA, defined as any activity that makes them breathe hard and increases their heart rate, per day on five or more days a week (CDC, 2008b). Overall, 65% of high school students are not meeting these guidelines, and only 26% of high school females are getting sufficient PA (CDC, 2008a). Moreover, 32% of these young women did not report achieving 60 minutes of PA on any day of the week. Findings from these reports are in line with previous research that has consistently demonstrated the decrease of PA during the teen years particularly among adolescent girls (e.g., Fairclough & Stratton, 2005; Sallis, Prochaska, & Taylor, 2000; Trost, Pate, Sallis, Freedson, Taylor, Dowda et al., 2002).

Therefore, the purpose of this research was to explore adolescent girls' attitudes toward leisure-time physical activity (LTPA), eating, physical health, and the perceived influences on health behaviors within a leisure context. Leisure-time physical activity is the typical term used to describe exercise, sports, or physically active hobbies done during one's free or leisure time. Specifically, we investigated perceived influences on health behaviors (PA and diet) and perceptions of PA and eating within a leisure context. This research was conducted from a social-psychological perspective with an emphasis on middle school girls' motivations and social influences. Exploring health and leisure required a holistic approach to issues of well-being. Therefore, to provide a context for the data collection and analysis, literature was examined regarding girls' physical activity choices, nutrition, and health behaviors.

### Physical Activity Choices

Researchers have consistently found that most girls have higher levels of physical inactivity than boys (e.g., Nader et al., 2008; Pugliese & Tinsley, 2007; Sallis et al., 2000). Jago, Anderson, Baranowski, and Watson (2005) examined adolescent patterns of PA regarding day of the week, time of day, and gender. They determined that girls spent more time in personal care while boys spent more time watching TV, participating in other electronic-based activities, and playing sports. Nader et al. reported that 9- to 15-year-old boys spent 18 more minutes per

weekday in MVPA and 13 more minutes on weekend days than girls. They also found that the estimated age at which girls crossed below the recommended minutes of MVPA per weekday was approximately 13.1 years, compared with boys at 14.7 years. Females also reported less enjoyment from PA and lower physical self-confidence than males (Morgan, McKenzie, Sallis, Broyles, Zive, & Nader, 2003). Morgan et al. ascertained that boys reported more opportunities for outdoor play and joining sport teams than girls. A study of 5- to 13-year-old boys and girls uncovered that boys also spent more time in leisure activities, and the majority of that time was spent playing sports, watching television, and playing computer games (Cherney & London, 2006). Girls, on the other hand, spent most of their leisure time watching television.

Biological and psychological changes that happen during adolescence are one explanation for why girls are less active than boys and why girls' activity decreases. On average, girls reach puberty at a younger age than boys, and their levels of activity decline at an earlier age (Nader et al., 2008). Davison, Werder, Trost, Baker, and Birch (2007) investigated the relationship of early maturity on female's PA and found that "more advanced pubertal development at age 11 was associated with lower psychological well-being at age 13, which predicted lower enjoyment of physical activity at age 13 and in turn lower MVPA" (p. 2391). The results for girls were lower psychological well-being including "depression, weight-related maturity fears, and low self-worth" (p. 2400).

These factors, along with increased weight gain (Nicholls & Viner, 2005) and self-consciousness (Davison et al., 2007), seemed to play a role in females' leisure activity choices (i.e., girls not wanting to call extraordinary attention to their bodies). For example, James (2000) found that girls may not feel comfortable displaying their newly developed bodies in swimwear or athletic clothing in front of their peers, particularly in physically active public spaces such as swimming pools. Additionally, girls who reach puberty earlier also develop an earlier concern for how peers perceive them. They may become more interested in appearance-related activities (e.g., hair styling and make up) and romantic relationships rather than engaging in LTPA.

Several researchers have observed that girls tend to prefer non-competitive or individual sports over leisure activities that have an emphasis on competition (Brooks & Magnusson, 2007; Couturier, Chepko, & Coughlin, 2007; Hill & Clevlen, 2005). However, this preference for downplayed competition also was true for boys' sport participation. Booth, Wilkenfeld, Pagnini, Booth, and King (2008) also discovered that both male and female teenage students felt too much emphasis was placed on competition in school sports, which outweighed enjoyment. Females believed too much attention was given to boys' sports.

## **Nutrition**

Percentages of youth meeting dietary intake recommendations are smaller than those meeting recommendations for PA (Sanchez, Norman, Sallis, Calfas, Cella, & Patrick, 2007; Zapata, Bryant, McDermott, & Hefelfinger, 2008). Although 26% of female high school students met recommended levels of PA, only 20% met recommendations for fruit and vegetable intake (CDC, 2008a). High fat and soda

intake and low milk, fruit, and vegetable intake were particularly problematic and typical examples of poor nutritional habits (Sanchez et al.; Zapata et al.).

People can rationalize eating unhealthy foods. Many people do not like the taste of nutritious foods, and fast food is cheap and easily accessible (O'Dea, 2003; Popkin, Duffey, & Gordon-Larsen, 2005). Teenagers have cited their parents' lack of time as a reason for eating fast food (Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Perry, & Casey, 1999), and their own lives are often busy. Cost of food is also critical to both adults and adolescents, with both groups ranking it as the second most influential factor in food selection after taste (Popkin et al.). Neumark-Sztainer and colleagues also reported that frequency of dining out appeared to increase with grade level in adolescents, which they attributed to increased independence, increased mobility, and busier schedules. Fast food and prepackaged foods often save time but compromise nutrition. Popkin et al. discussed that fast food meals frequently have unnecessarily large portion sizes and high energy densities. Researchers also have found an association between eating away from home (i.e., at restaurants or fast food establishments) and a decrease in macro- and micro-nutrient intake and diet quality, as well as increases in energy density and total energy intake (French, Story, Neumark-Sztainer, Fulkerson, & Hannan, 2001; Popkin et al.). Further, the enjoyment of eating food and the socialization associated with snacks and meal-times are also connected to leisure experiences.

### **Emerging Constraints to Healthy Behavior**

The choices that young women make in their lives relating to nutrition and PA seem to change dramatically during adolescence. For example, 60% of high school females reported that they were trying to lose weight (CDC, 2008a). These issues often developed in late elementary or middle school as children begin puberty and their bodies change. Females gain approximately 31 pounds during adolescence (Nicholls & Viner, 2005), which can be awkward and troubling. This weight gain often coincides with other unhealthy behaviors, including a decrease in PA, which is often attributed to shifting priorities that come with increased independence, school work, and social pressure.

Adolescence, therefore, is usually a time of physical, social, and cognitive changes and developments (Muuss, 1996) and declining PA (Fairclough & Stratton, 2005; Nader, Bradley, Houts, McRitchie, & O'Brien, 2008; Trost et al., 2002). Declining general and health-related life satisfaction (Goldbeck, Schmitz, Beiser, Herschbach, & Henrich, 2007) also occurs. Goldbeck et al. noted that "girls' satisfaction with leisure time/hobbies decreased between the ages of 11 and 16" (p. 976). They also reported that satisfaction with friends was consistently high even though satisfaction with family relations decreased, which seems logical given that adolescents become increasingly autonomous from their parents and more reliant on their peers who also may be less likely to display healthy eating and activity behaviors (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007).

### **Study Rationale**

Research conducted with adolescent girls has shown that priorities placed on healthy eating and being physically active were rated significantly lower compared

with quality of life health indicators (e.g., relationships with peers; Detmar et al., 2006; Evans, Gilpin, Farkas, Shenassa, & Pierce, 1995). Because girls seem to have low levels of physical activity and healthy eating, more information about the context of their behaviors is needed. Quantitative studies have established the significance of the problem, but relatively few qualitative studies have addressed the reasons. Further, analyses of parallels between LTPA and eating behaviors seem to be missing. Focus group studies have been conducted on children's and adolescents' attitudes toward food choice and healthy eating (e.g., Croll, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2001; Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Perry, & Casey, 1999) and other qualitative studies have examined adolescents' perceptions of PA (e.g., Brooks & Magnusson, 2007; Ries et al., 2008; Thompson, Rehman, & Humbert, 2005; Whitehead & Biddle, 2008). However, few researchers have considered both these health behaviors with the same group with the exception, for example, of O'Dea (2003) and Protudjer, Marchessault, Kozyrskyj, & Becker (2010).

### **Guiding Theory**

This study was exploratory and examined how middle-school girls interpreted physical activity, nutrition, and health, and how this interpretation can lead to healthy behaviors within a leisure context. This approach reflected assumptions regarding Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Henderson, 2006). The meanings of the data were examined using a grounded theory approach that examined the descriptions girls attached to behaviors like PA, nutrition, and healthy living. The results were somewhat congruent with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), which emphasized principles of social learning and the interactions among people, their behavior, and the environment (Muuss, 1996). Based on these guiding frameworks, new theorizing was proposed related to how physical activity, nutrition, and physical health were reflected in leisure behaviors.

### **Methods**

To explore adolescent girls' attitudes toward leisure-time physical activity (LTPA), eating, physical health, and the perceived influences on health behaviors within a leisure context, four focus groups were conducted in the fall of 2008 in two middle schools. The sample was comprised of 6th, 7th, and 8th grade girls in the southeastern part of the U.S.

A qualitative research approach was chosen to gain a deeper understanding of adolescent girls' perceptions about PA and health. This approach allowed participants to give rich descriptions about their attitudes and experiences. Barriball and White (1994) indicated that semi-structured interviews "are well suited for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sometimes sensitive issues and enable probing for more information and clarification of answers" (p. 330). Additionally, Krueger (1988) noted that a major advantage of focus groups is their social nature. Adolescent girls are socially oriented so this structure appealed to them.

This focus group structure also allows researchers to observe interactions and nonverbal cues within the group (Veal, 2006). Engaging in conversation with peers seemed to be more comfortable than talking about potentially sensitive issues alone with a stranger. Participants were able to support each other when talking, which had the potential to invoke deeper conversation (Overlien, Aronsson, & Hydén, 2005). Additionally, if a participant did not wish to comment on certain topic, she was under no pressure. Other advantages of focus groups included low cost and the ability to involve several people in a relatively short period of time.

### **Participants**

Students in the four focus groups came from two schools and were selected and contacted by a school official (e.g., the guidance counselor or vice principal). We requested that the officials avoid girls who may be at risk for eating disorders or otherwise might have issues discussing their eating or exercise habits. Priority was placed on girls who were not involved in sports because we wanted to explore why girls were not engaging in LTPA.

A total of 28 middle-school girls participated in the focus groups. Fifteen were in 6th grade, four in 7th grade, and nine in 8th grade. Having separate focus groups for 6th grade students at the two schools was decided in consultation with school personnel. An 8th grade-only group was conducted at the first school, while 7th and 8th grade students were combined for the final focus group at the second school. The girls were not necessarily friends, though some may have been classmates or acquaintances. The participants were almost equally represented by minority and majority racial/ethnic status with 11 Caucasian, 14 African-American, and three Latina girls. Because of the nature of the exploratory study and the difficulty in making comparisons based on race or grade, the participants were generally described as a collective group of young women.

### **Data Collection**

The primary researcher, a Caucasian female, served as the moderator for the four focus groups. A female African-American assistant was also present at three sessions to take notes and help the moderator with meeting logistics. Healthy snacks (e.g., fruit, fruit juice, raw vegetables, crackers) were served at every focus group. Focus groups lasted between 75 and 90 minutes and each was recorded with a digital recorder.

An interview guide was used. Examples of the questions asked included: "Tell me about what girls your age like to do in their free time. What does health mean to you? What are your opinions about physical activity, like playing sports or exercising? What role does eating play in your social activities?" The moderator transcribed each session verbatim shortly after it was conducted and added notes about individual participant characteristics and the group as a whole. All participants' names were changed to pseudonyms.

### **Data Analysis**

After transcription, data were entered into ATLAS.ti 5.2 and open coded to identify concepts. Next, axial coding was done to organize the concepts into cat-

egories. Many of the open codes overlapped several categories. Documents were created that included all the quotes associated with a particular category. Constant comparison was used to compare these documents to the focus group transcripts to assess the prevalence of a theme across groups. A list of topics was derived, and these themes were then collapsed into four broader themes. Meetings were held with all authors throughout the process to discuss coding and development and organization of themes.

## **Findings**

Four themes emerged from the data analysis: a) perceptions of health, b) family and food, c) social norms, and d) enjoyment. The girls' preferences for and attitudes toward PA and nutrition in their free time were interwoven throughout these themes.

### **Perceptions of Health**

Girls described health primarily in a physical sense related to PA and diet, which could have been a result of the types of questions discussed. The girls said health was something they might think about from time to time, but it was not a priority for the majority of the girls. Other participants added that health meant staying in shape, getting enough sleep, having sweets in moderation, and personal hygiene. They felt that some girls were more concerned with health than others, especially girls preoccupied with being skinny. Older girls generally felt that health was becoming more significant as they became increasingly self-conscious and independent.

Health also seemed related to having choices as well as the support and time necessary to live a healthy lifestyle. Most of the discussions about health were extrinsic in nature. Some girls were primarily concerned with health to avoid getting fat and being teased. Trista noted that girls are concerned with health "so they won't get picked on... girls think that if they're fat, they'll get picked on a lot more." Bianca agreed and stated, "Cause I have overweight friends and they tell me they get picked on at school for no reason, just 'cause they're overweight." Similarly, Mercedes' immediate reaction was that fat is not healthy and can lead to future medical problems, "It means a lot 'cause you don't want to grow up fat! [laughter] Thick is good but ...overweight is...you might have health problems and stuff." Aisha felt that exercise was important, but not necessarily for disease prevention. While some girls thought of relatives who were affected by poor dietary habits, Aisha did not see the same effects on her peers.

Participants agreed that some girls were more concerned with health than others. However, for the most part, health was defined in relation to body size. They explained that some girls think that skinny equals healthy and they may be willing to sacrifice feeling well to look good. Discussion on this topic mostly revolved around stories about peers who skipped meals or starved themselves relative to suspicions of eating disorders. Other girls, however, simply did not care about health regardless of their size. Jacklyn felt that most girls thought health was annoying because they would prefer to eat junk food. Others, however, disagreed.

Some of the older girls said they became more concerned with health as they matured and became more self-conscious. For example, Diandra explained:

I did not care in 6th grade...fresh out of elementary... you get in 8th grade, you start thinking more about high school, college... 'cause even in high school it'll be like, you get a job, and you get a car. You gotta stay healthy, especially in college 'cause you're more independent 'cause you don't have Mom and Dad there so you gotta know what to do. So you go to college, you're kinda on your own. So it kinda helps you, being younger and understanding....

The girls could articulate the relationship regarding balanced food intake and exercise as illustrated in this dialogue:

PORSCHE: Well, my cousin, I'm not picking on her or anything, but she is so fat. She can't even breathe when she walks up steps. She just like [makes heavy breathing sounds] trying to breathe. And I be like, girl... why? [laughter]

PORSCHE: But it's not funny, ... there's certain people that's fat and there's certain people that's not fat. My uncle and aunt, they let her [cousin] just eat anything she wants. Anytime of the night she can get up like 3 o'clock in the morning and just fix herself something to eat. No, you don't do that. You don't go back to sleep once you eat. You're supposed to go do something. [sounds of agreement] ...'cause I learned that when you eat and go do something, go run or something, 'cause if you go back to sleep, all that is building up and it's goin' be...

BIANCA: It's gonna be fat.

PORSCHE: Yes. So, she just be eatin.' I be like, girrrl...

Alexis further reinforced another aspect of caloric imbalance:

Well, you need it to get energy so you can go out and do a sport or physical activities. If you don't eat, you'll pass out or something, so you need to eat and you need to eat healthy food because the unhealthy food will just, like, backfire.

In sum, although some girls changed their diets or PA behaviors with the intent of improving their health, it seemed the majority of girls did so to lose weight or stay in shape. This perception in combination with generally negative attitudes toward obesity, underlined a common fear of being fat. The girls perceived health to be important in preventing future disease, though this concern was not necessarily immediate or reflected in their leisure choices. Diet seemed to be a stronger contributor to disease and obesity rather than a lack of LTPA. However, overall, leisure preferences were not associated with health concerns, but rather motivated by personal preference and social influence.



### **Family and Food**

The younger girls spoke more often of their families, but peer relationships were more evident among the older girls. Girls' families played roles in facilitating or discouraging PA and healthy diets. Girls felt that parents should be responsible for their children's health and gave examples of how their parents (i.e., primarily mothers) tried to incorporate healthy foods into their diet or encouraged them to participate in sports. Unfortunately, unhealthy or indulgent foods were often central to family activities and gatherings. These activities were usually intentional leisure-type activities such as family night or vacations. Girls also shared stories about foods they enjoyed as part of family traditions. Overall, family influence was secondary to peers but seemed to provide the foundation for healthy (or unhealthy) habits, which was influential throughout the middle school years.

Frequently, family activities were intentional and preplanned such as vacations, weekend trips, or designated family nights to get everyone together. Gatherings often revolved around food such as cookouts or holiday celebrations. Family night often meant pizza for dinner. The group of 8th graders discussed examples of family activities:

ELIZABETH: Maybe going out to do something like going to the park or to watch a movie or something, but...

TRISTA: On my mom's side of the family, we have a lot of cookouts.

BIANCA: Mine, too.

PORSCHE: It ain't even gotta be a special occasion. A Saturday, or a Friday. Grandma says, "We want a cookout. Whatch'all want to eat?" I'm like, "I want some hamburger on the grill." [laughter] ...

We have family reunions.

BIANCA: Every cookout is like a family reunion 'cause once someone calls someone else, someone has to call someone else to tell them that my grandma's having a cookout.

Families seemed to play a role in ensuring that healthy foods were available at home. Two girls specifically mentioned that they would eat fruit whenever they had it at home. Mothers were referenced as trying to incorporate healthy foods into their daughters' diets or dictating which foods they should eat. Fathers were occasionally mentioned but generally not related to trying to promote healthy diets. Lindsay noted, "If I have a sleepover with one of my friends, we order pizza and my mom, she sometimes makes a salad to go with it." Jacklyn confirmed, "Usually my mom, every time we have dinner or something, she usually gives us salad and milk or chocolate milk or something, and some vitamins."

Some girls said their families tried to make healthy food more tolerable by disguising it in something else or presenting it in a creative manner. The girls were suspicious but sometimes pleasantly surprised:

DANA: So, [my aunt] made this really, really good spinach pie or something, I can't remember. But I thought it was just broccoli, with cheese inside. But it's actually spinach with cheese inside and once I actually knew that I was like, ew, in my head but really good outside.

TONYA: My mom made Italian food with beans... for some reason the beans didn't even seem in there. It was spaghetti... with Italian but it tasted really good. We ate it for three days straight ... so that's what she does. She makes us try different foods from different places.

Girls enjoyed talking about food and sharing family stories. Girls of all ages expressed that spending time with family was harder than in the past due to more schoolwork and an apparent growing interest in spending time with friends. Their leisure activities typically revolved around friends or doing things alone, even though girls liked family leisure including walking dogs, traveling, and celebrating holidays and special occasions.

### **Social Norms**

Social norms and perceived expectations were implied in all focus groups including conceptualizations of femininity, acceptable eating behaviors, and common leisure activities. These norms seemed to dictate many aspects of middle school girls' lives. Norms prescribed the correct way to look (i.e., skinny), the appropriate forms of communication (e.g., cell phone, text, and MySpace), and the right things to eat (e.g., pizza at sleepovers). Girls seemed to struggle with pressure to fulfill these expectations at the same time their bodies and identities were evolving. They described pressure to be perfect and how peers could be judgmental and mean. Family expectations were sometimes in conflict with peer norms. Girls' interest in boys was growing, and some discussed the disparities in sports opportunities for boys compared to girls. The girls also implied social norms related to the appropriate leisure activities they chose.

In addition to a growing interest in boys, drawing, reading, watching television or movies, traveling and playing with pets were popular among the girls. Other activities mentioned were singing, hunting, crocheting, knitting, and sewing. Several girls talked about summer camp, and birthday parties and sleepovers were also quite important. Trista noted that on her birthday, "IT'S ALL ABOUT ME..." Pizza and popcorn were the foods of choice at parties and sleepovers.

A few of the girls talked about some of the ways their lives had changed within the past couple years because of some social expectations. They discussed increasing pressure from school and thinking about their future. Some participants had to give up sports to concentrate on school. Alexis explained:

Well, you have school and you have to care about your grades and so you don't have all the free time... like I don't have to study and do homework and all that... I want to get good grades but... I mean, it would be nice if I could do both. But... I still do soccer though, so... I get at least some exercise in there.

The girls seemed to indicate pressure to aspire toward a feminine ideal. Participants expressed that girls they knew wanted to be skinny, which seemed to be the major way they talked about health as noted previously. They mentioned TV

models as a source of this desire, although sometimes the girls also commented that models were not a realistic or healthy weight.

They also felt that despite this desire to be thin, most girls prioritized other things such as their social activities higher than healthy activities. Gwenyth explained, "There's not that many girls playing sports 'cause they think it's not that important. They think it's more important, the other stuff, not exercising or eating right."

Girls indicated how the norm of a perfect body was a constraint to health. Savannah noted, "I think when some girls think of exercise, the first image that pops into their head is like, the perfect sports girl who's skinny and muscular and goes to the gym every day.... They're just like, I'll never be like that..." Dana described the constraint of differing from this expected norm:

And sometimes, at my old school, these [overweight] girls got picked on a lot. One girl wouldn't eat anything, and people called her bad names and different names and stuff so she wouldn't eat for a really long time.

Kristin described the changing pressures to conform:

Yeah, in 6th grade we just came from elementary school and ... we really don't care what people think ... like even adults and people that weren't in middle school and high school say you shouldn't care about what people think. But when you're actually in this position, you really care what people think, so you really take it seriously.

A handful of girls complained about leisure activities they missed out on by feeling they had to conform to female norms. The predominant issue seemed to be a lack of sport options for girls compared to boys. Elizabeth was particularly concerned with masculinity and femininity regarding strength and athletic performance. She wanted to prove that girls were equally competent athletes but complained about many more "boy sports" than "girl sports."

ELIZABETH: Lots of girls hate how they're being discriminated against... they're... lots of people think that boys are stronger... Well, lots of boys think that boys are stronger and that boys are faster, and so I think a lot of girls really care about being healthy so they can prove them wrong.... Well, it's kind of hard to find a good sport for a girl 'cause most sports are considered guy sports. So it makes it harder for girls to get into those sports. If girls like football that makes it a lot harder 'cause it's a really guy sport. They only have tennis and gymnastics for girls, and maybe soccer... and softball. Not that much for girls. Way more for guys.

Chanique also discussed boy sports and girl sports, "... me and my family sometimes go to have a picnic and just play all types of sports. All my uncles and my dad, they all go play football. And me, my mom, and my other little cousin, we go play tennis somewhere."

Norms also seemed to be associated with eating. Fast food seemed to be a routine part of life. Girls mentioned it casually yet acknowledged that it was “bad” for you. Consensus was evident about “good” and “bad” foods. Fruits, vegetables, and salads were the most frequently cited examples of good or healthy foods, while it was less clear what constituted a bad food. Less healthy foods were commonly used as a treat, which could lead to a habitual tendency to resort to these foods for comfort or pleasure. The indulgent rewarding nature of unhealthy foods or the freedom to eat as much as wanted appeared, consequently, connected to having fun. Unhealthy food almost became a necessary criterion for an activity to be considered fun or enjoyable. In addition, as peer influence became more significant, girls were more concerned with appealing to the norms of their peers and adjusted their diets and behavior accordingly. At the same time, they seemed to be growing more self-conscious and described pressure to be skinny and appeal to a feminine ideal. These social norms dictated nearly all aspects of life. Conversely, however, food consumed with friends or family was a contradictory norm that was enjoyable, indulgent, and gratifying.

### **Enjoyment**

Enjoyment was a critical factor in dictating both PA and eating behaviors related to health and unhealthy behaviors. Overall, appearance (i.e., being skinny) and enjoyment of the immediate benefits of activity or eating healthy foods were more important than long term health benefits from these behaviors. The girls explained that if they did not like something, whether it was running or broccoli, they avoided it. Fun was critical to the enjoyment of both food and PA. Friends and socialization were essential for PA to be fun. Food had to taste good to be enjoyed but creativity and innovation were also helpful elements, especially when trying to make healthy foods more appealing. Fun aspects such as preparation style, appearance, texture, and smell could make or break the decision to eat a certain food item. Variety was enjoyed both in PA and food.

For some girls, participating in organized sports was too much commitment and pressure to perform at a certain standard. Most of the girls who did participate in school sports were enthusiastic about doing so. Sixth grade girls at both schools looked forward to school sports despite some of their reservations about competition.

Some girls disliked competition or too much emphasis on performance or ability, which detracted from the fun of the experience. Chanique described her sport experience: “I played once but then I didn’t want to, because they started yelling at me. They thought I wasn’t good enough. So I quit.” Trista explained, “It depends what kind of sports it is. ‘Cause at school we have step, and last year we had cheerleading and dance. And we have soccer. Like soccer, I can play it, but I don’t know if I wanna play it on the team.” Elizabeth stated, “Some sports are just totally intense and it gets crazy and scary.” Several younger girls added how they enjoyed casual unstructured PA like just walking around with friends.

Despite some girls’ preference for cooperative activities, an element of competition seemed to make PA more worthwhile and exciting for some. Dance, gymnastics, or cheerleading were examples of a high level of energy expenditure and

competition, yet participants did not directly face off against or come into contact with other teams. These types of activities provided opportunities to socialize with group members, work together as a team, and showcase abilities to compete for a title or award. The pressure was to perform well, but different from competing against someone on your own or in a contact sport.

Girls in all of the focus groups were able to identify some general benefits of PA, such as fun, fitness, staying healthy, and living longer. The girls involved with sports articulated a wide range of benefits of sport participation:

MEGHAN: It's fun, like at volleyball practices and stuff.

KRISTIN: Yeah, once you get involved with it, you learn to like it more and especially after you get used to playing and you get better at it, you enjoy it more....And it builds self-confidence.

ALEXIS: And you like it, and it's good because you get exercise and you get to stay healthy also.

DIANDRA: And with your friends, too. I know at cheerleading you probably have a lot of your friends there.

What girls disliked about PA was specific and varied from girl to girl. Several girls mentioned sweating or smelling bad detracted from their enjoyment. Some girls felt that boys were likely to cheat during games and they were often allowed to get away with it. Running for long distances or highly competitive games, particularly in physical education classes, were generally unpopular. Several participants had an aversion to bugs and consequently did not enjoy outside activity.

The girls were probed to suggest how to make PA more enjoyable, particularly for inactive girls. Although girls recommended that PA should be fun, they sometimes struggled at identifying actual elements that made an activity enjoyable. Friends were generally important. Variety was also good so girls would not get bored. Some felt that skill development instruction would be valuable, especially for girls who were trying a new sport. One 8th grader mentioned that girls her age felt they were too old to start a new sport and that if they did, they would be grouped with little kids. Kristin explained:

I think a lot of girls our age think exercise is all serious, like going to the gym and stuff. If you get involved with sports and you find something that you enjoy doing it's not... you take it seriously, but you don't think about it as much and it's not that much of a big deal. 'Cause once you're doing something that you actually enjoy, once you're doing it, you don't think hey, I'm exercising, 'cause you're having fun.

The girls' food preferences related to enjoyment were about as diverse as their likes and dislikes of PA. Vegetables had mixed results; certain ones were considered adequate if prepared in certain ways. Specific foods were associated with special occasions, such as going to the fair or the mall. These foods were usually more indulgent and reinforced the idea having fun and enjoying food went together. Additionally, some girls noted that when they were rewarded at school for good

behavior, they had treats like ice cream and candy. Pizza, however, was the more commonly mentioned foods by all groups. Girls enjoyed eating pizza on virtually any occasion including sleepovers, family night, on vacation, and at school.

Enjoyment was, therefore, an imperative factor in girls' decisions on whether or not to eat healthy foods or participate in PA. Although some girls enjoyed cooperative activities (e.g., dance, cheerleading) and others preferred competitive sports (e.g., volleyball, soccer), one dominant commonality was that they appreciated opportunities to be active with friends, which made PA more fun. Girls recommended less structured PA as well such as going on walking trips, bowling, and skating. These activities provided a venue for socializing. Food had to be enjoyable as well, because taste, texture, appearance, and smell were all important qualities. Less appealing foods such as vegetables could sometimes be disguised or hidden in other foods to make them more pleasant. Since social activities were such a key component of the girls' lives, enjoyable foods contributed to the fun with their friends and family.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore adolescent girls' attitudes toward leisure-time physical activity (LTPA), eating, physical health, and the perceived influences on health behaviors within a leisure context. Four themes emerged from focus group discussions: perceptions of health, family and food, social norms, and enjoyment. Leisure perspectives related to health behaviors were intertwined in all themes.

Two summative conclusions are offered as a means for theorizing about these data. First, short-term enjoyment of PA or eating activities through social interactions and intrinsic outcomes defined the healthy behaviors of these young adolescents. Enjoyment was observed in both unhealthy and healthy behaviors. However, the results seemed to indicate that healthy behaviors had to be associated in some way with leisure as personal or social enjoyment. Both PA and foods could be associated with fun, excitement, choice, social interaction, and acceptability. Enjoyment and leisure-like activities related to PA and nutrition were associated with disguising activities as something fun rather than something prescriptive. Although certainly not new, the intrinsic reasons trumped the extrinsic reasons, except in the case of body image for most girls.

Second, Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) was useful in understanding the results of this study concerning how decisions were made regarding behavior and health. This determinism model illustrates how an individual, behavior, and the environment are interrelated and interdependent. Adolescents are strongly influenced by their peers and their social environments. The girls in our study were generally fearful of becoming fat, felt pressured to live up to a feminine ideal, and were primarily concerned with their social activities and relations. Health was important relative to losing or maintaining weight, but behaviors were often guided by social and intrinsic expectations. The girls seemed to learn about health through negative and positive reinforcements they received personally as well as those they observed in others. They learned about social norms and gender expect-

tations through primarily leisure interactions with their peers and to some extent with their family.

The girls' definitions of health were generally associated with PA and healthy eating, which dominated the discussions in the focus groups. The middle school girls were still in the process of learning about the facets of health. The girls in our study drew upon topics they learned through health class, personal experiences, and information they had encountered from peers, family, and media outlets. Despite the idea of leisure choices impacting their long-term health (either positively or negatively) leisure preferences and choices were primarily influenced by whether they perceived immediate health benefits or enjoyment. For example, students were told that they needed to be active and eat balanced diets. However, they did not seem to observe any immediate benefits from these behaviors. On the other hand, these girls saw their peers being inactive and eating unhealthy foods without negative consequences. Therefore, they saw no reason not to imitate these behaviors. SCT would suggest that any advantages of participating in a healthy leisure activity (e.g., engaging in physical activity, eating healthy foods) would be more negatively than positively reinforced if the activity was not perceived as enjoyable.

SCT has also been used specifically to guide physical activity and nutrition based interventions among girls and women. For example, Sharma (2008) reviewed PA interventions among Hispanic girls and women and found that programs guided by theory were more successful in achieving their outcomes. Second, SCT was the most popular guiding theory operationalized by these interventions related to health.

Health was important to focus group participants mainly as a way to avoid unenjoyable and uncomfortable repercussions. Other researchers have also found that size and weight are more important to girls than actual health (Booth, Wilkenfeld, Pagnini, Booth, & King, 2008) and that weight control is considered a higher priority for adolescents than other health prevention behaviors such as healthful eating and avoiding drugs and alcohol (Evans, Gilpin, Farkas, Shenassa, & Pierce, 1995). Girls often perceive that being healthy is a constant, miserable struggle of restricting calories and putting in hours at the gym, which were perceived as unenjoyable. A push/pull exists between wanting to avoid negative outcomes and also wanting to reap positive intrinsic as well as extrinsic benefits. Teenagers often witness overweight peers getting teased or perhaps personally have been made fun of for athletic incompetence. Therefore, avoiding this negative reinforcement was perceived as more immediate and socially damaging than the intangible status of being unhealthy or the potential of acquiring a future disease. On the contrary, adolescents generally enjoyed eating unhealthy foods and did not always experience negative repercussions. The positive reinforcement from friends who also enjoyed the same foods and the gratification of consuming energy-dense food appeared greater than the prospect of gaining weight some time later in life.

Despite the decline in PA during early adolescence, girls reported enjoying PA in the right leisure-type settings, similar to the findings of Flintoff and Scraton (2001). Therefore, this decline may not be due to a dislike for PA but instead to shifting attitudes and a reprioritization of activities that no longer left sufficient

room to be active in acceptable ways (e.g., with friends). The female adolescent norms of spending more time on personal appearance and with friends had direct consequences for PA.

This shift in priorities with a new emphasis on socializing and personal care activities has also been examined by other researchers (e.g., de Bruyn & Cillessen, 2008; Jago, Anderson, Baranowski, & Watson, 2005; Whitehead & Biddle, 2008). The concept of reciprocal determinism in SCT explains that a girl's environment impacts her behavior as well as her own priorities and motivations. Girls may elect to participate in sports because their friends are on their team. However, if girls see their friends spending more time on their appearance and socializing, they often do not want to be left out. They may quit sports to devote more time to these pursuits, or other activities such as studying. Additionally, by this age girls who are not already active in sports may feel they have missed out on learning necessary skills and perceive that they cannot catch up (Thompson et al., 2003). When more value is placed on performance and ability, girls may drop out of sports they played casually because they are not particularly talented. They also may be less likely to start new sports.

Gender issues also emerged in conversations about opportunities to participate in sports or PA during leisure. These girls were particularly influenced by peer norms and perceptions of acceptable gendered behavior. As many teenagers become interested in dating, conveying femininity or masculinity is important. In addition, the focus group participants perceived that they had fewer opportunities to engage in PA than boys, which reflected that perhaps, too much attention has been given to boys' sports (Booth, Wilkenfeld, Pagnini, Booth, & King, 2008; Morgan et al., 2003; Thompson et al., 2003), and co-educational activities are often dominated by boys (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001).

Disguising both PA and healthy foods seemed to make them more enjoyable for the girls in this study. Girls liked PA if it was seen as an opportunity to be social with friends, perhaps because they primarily enjoyed socializing, and secondarily enjoyed the activity itself. Whitehead and Biddle (2008) similarly found that friends were an imperative component of enjoyment: "The thought of being active without friends or peers however, was extremely threatening to these girls and many simply would not entertain the idea of being active in such as environment" (p. 253). Likewise, Trinh, Rhodes, and Ryan (2008) reported that "approval from friends was the key correlate of PA for girls" (p. 83).

As the girls in our study also explained, families can be important in adolescence to facilitate healthy lifestyles and to set examples (Davison & Jago, 2009). For example, a recent study examining adolescents' time use found that girls were more likely to exercise with family members than boys (Dunton, Berrigan, Ballard-Barbash, Perna, Graubard, & Atienza, 2010). However, the opportunities for this physical activity to occur may be different for some girls. A longitudinal study found that Black adolescent girls reported less LTPA and lower likelihood of playing sports with a parent than Black boys (Robinson, Stevens, Kaufman, & Gordon-Larsen, 2010). Therefore, parents can help their children identify opportunities for PA and healthy foods that they enjoy.



Furthermore, the significance of enjoyable leisure activities given the time constraints perceived by adolescent girls has also been a salient theme in prior studies (Robbins et al., 2003; Taylor et al., 1999). The importance of peers and the lack of importance placed on long-term consequences of behavior on health also support prior research (Booth et al., 2008; O'Dea, 2003). The insights from our study can be used to restructure girls' current environments so that they are more developmentally supportive of healthy leisure choices. These changes may include a wider array of alternatives to be physically active, including opportunities to explore gender-desired activities where girls feel more comfortable. Further, similar to the findings of Robbins, Pender, and Kazanis (2003), girls should have an opportunity to have input into the design of programs particularly as time constraints are perceived as a key barrier. Adolescence is a critical developmental period for cultivating healthy behavior that transcends across the lifespan underscoring the importance of encouraging opportunities for girls to engage in healthy leisure choices.

Despite the study's contribution, this research had several limitations. First, this study was exploratory and only included girls from two schools in one school district. Second, although focus groups have many advantages as described earlier, they also have some limitations that we tried to address in collecting the data. Nevertheless, focus groups can be dominated by a few participants, and minority opinions may be repressed. Particularly with adolescent participants, a girl whose opinion was not in line with the majority may have been hesitant to speak up for fear of violating perceived social norms. Sensitive topics such as body image and eating disorders may have been uncomfortable for some girls to discuss. Despite these possible limitations, however, this method seemed appropriate and a great deal of useful data was generated.

## **Conclusion**

The trend of adolescent girls' physical inactivity (Koezuka et al., 2006; Trost et al., 2002) and unhealthy nutritional patterns (Francis, Lee, & Birch, 2003) during their leisure time reinforces the need to understand the connection with perceived enjoyable activity and health.

Quantitative studies have uncovered important information such as how much activity and nutrients teenagers are getting, how important they perceive PA and healthy eating to be, and some of the barriers to engaging in PA and eating healthfully. However, our qualitative research helped further explain the context of these attitudes and behaviors.

Further research could provide insight on how girls' attitudes change throughout middle school. Since teenagers eventually become less influenced by their peers in late adolescence, repeating this study with high school and college students would be interesting. Conducting focus groups with boys to better understand how they perceive health, PA, and nutrition could also be informative. Additionally, investigating how girls actually learn about health and the value they place on information from different sources (e.g., school, peers, parents, magazines, and the internet) would be advantageous. This information would help communicate

factual information and dispel myths. Other research could consider intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation for PA and healthy eating as well as adolescents' understanding of the connections between physical and mental health.

Our research, however, has demonstrated that connections exist among perceptions toward PA, healthy eating, and health in general. Peers and social norms, family, and definitions of enjoyment seemed to relate to all aspects of girls' lives. Young teens face many pressures (e.g., being thin versus indulging in unhealthy foods, being feminine versus being athletic) and health related to PA and nutrition are clearly connected.

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