

YOUTH AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES: PROMOTIONS AND BENEFITS

Adesina, Modupe Olutayo, PhD

Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University, Lapai, Niger State

Abstract

The fitness industry has exploded over the last few years as youths have more leisure time at their disposal, more so looking at the various benefits of being fit. If you look at the pages of the newspapers, they entice you with advertisement to ‘slim down in two weeks’, ‘reduce your weight in one week’, etc. When you see people visit such places, it is an attempt to improve their level of fitness for one reason or the other. Modern technology has greatly affected the youths in taking part in active physical activities, e.g. television, automobile, motor bikes, gas cookers, iron, video games, etc. This paper focuses on youth and physical activities, how their physical activities have been influenced by a myriad of interacting biological, psychological, social and environmental factors, and the benefits that could be derived from active participation in regular physical activities. There is therefore, a conclusion that parents should encourage their offspring to engage in physical activities from youth as this will sustain them in adulthood.

Keywords: Youth, physical activities, psychological factor, social factor, environmental factor

Introduction

Activity is a natural part of life, whether the individual is doing it for reward or pleasure. The opportunity to take part in activities of choice should be basic human rights of any individual. The fact that every individual irrespective of his age, sex, ability or disability engages in one form of physical activity or the other is indisputable. This fact is further buttressed by Edington and Edgerton (1976) which stressed that any type of activity that requires the body to move from the resting state is physical activity. Even while the body is

at rest, an amount of energy is expected to enhance the continuity of life process such as respiration, circulation and digestion.

Physical activity, exercise and physical fitness are separate terms which are not synonymous, but people get confused about them and often use them interchangeably. Armstrong and Welshman (1997) gave a distinct explanation of the terms. They see physical activity as a complex set of behaviours which encompasses any bodily movement produce by skeletal muscles that result in energy expenditure above the resting level.

Exercise is equally seen by them as a sub-category of physical activity that is planned, structured, repetitive and often results in the improvement or maintenance of one or more of the components of physical fitness. Exercise training is the systematic use of exercise of specific intensities, duration and frequencies to attain a desired effect.

Physical fitness is a concept which refers to a set of attributes that relates to the ability to perform physical activity. Fitness is a phenomenon that is fast becoming a thing of much interest to the people of Nigeria especially at this time when the country is plagued with increased tension and stress which has led to increase inactivity especially among youths. Clarke (1967) is of the view that fitness is that state which characterizes the degree to which a person is able to function efficiently. The greater the physical fitness the longer the person may keep going.

In adult life, the effect of regular physical activity in promoting wellness is extensively documented, but there is a growing conviction that adults' health and wellbeing has its origin in behaviours established during childhood. There is also a general agreement that the youth should be encouraged to adopt active life styles which can be sustained into adult life.

Age And Physical Activity

The tremendous influence of age on physical activity and sports cannot be overlooked. This is due to the fact that the very nature of physical activity and sport competition involves a great deal of physical and mental coordination and its optimum performance is usually more associated with youths. Honeybourne, Hill and Moors (1996) in support of the above stated fact states that age is a very important factor in how much sport you play and that the age group with the greatest participation in sport was the 16 – 24 year olds which constitutes 61% of the population. After this age, the rate drops dramatically with only 16% of people aged 60 or more take part in any exercise.

Igbanugo (1986) believed that sports as the domain of the youth with ages between 22 and 25 are noted for ability to persist in physical exercise for an extended period of time without an undue fatigue. She went further to explain that at these ages, the individual's ability to take in, process and deliver maximum oxygen to the working muscles as well as generating maximum forces per unit of time is at its peak. This explains clearly the physiological basis why youths are usually more identified with varied physical activities like sports and do excel.

Indeed, one would agree that sport is the domain of the youth, no doubt, excellent performance in sports goes with the age of participants and athletes in the prime of their youth are sure to respond promptly to sport training and display exciting physical performance.

Physical Activities And Body Fatness Of Youth

Fat is an essential component of the human body necessary for normal physiological functioning. Its easiest source is through the consumption of foods rich in fat contents. Fat is stored in the bone marrow, in vital organs including the heart, lungs, liver and kidneys and in the lipid-rich tissues of the nervous system. However, the majority of the body fat is deposited as storage fat in adipose tissue. Primarily in subcutaneous sites which covers virtually the entire body as a layer but the thickness of the layers differ markedly in different anatomical regions and secondarily around the organs. However, despite the statutory effect of fat in the body and its role in protecting the vital organs from trauma, its over-accumulation (obesity) is undesirable (Behnke and Wilmore, 1974).

When the caloric intake exceeds energy expenditure, there is deposition of fat leading to weight gain, which could be simple overweight or obesity. Obesity is the excess accumulation of body fat relative to the amount of non-fat tissues of the body. Obesity is associated with increased morbidity and mortality from causes such as non-insulin dependent diabetes mellitus (NIDDM) stroke, Coronary Heart Disease (CHD) and arthritis (Must, Jacques, Dallal, Bajema and Dietz, 1992).

According to Brownell (1988), obesity is a dangerous medical condition and that it increases the risk of Coronary Heart Disease (CHD) through its blood pressure. Lipids and lipoproteins as well as for diabetes. However, among the highly educated Nigerians especially among the youths, obesity is fast becoming a health concern.

Olaitan (2001) reported that the incidence of elevated blood pressure clearly confirms that underlying risk factors of hypertension increases with age and that it can begin very early

in life. Webber, Baugh, Cresanta and Berenson (1993), are equally of the opinion that though clinical manifestation of Coronary Heart Disease risk factors appear later in life, recent epidemiological surveys have indicated that the underlying causes start early in life and increases as the age advances.

The growing problem of adult obesity is reflected by an increase in youths overweight and obesity. Studies indicated that percentage prevalence of obesity in youth ranges from 9-40%. More recent evidence has associated adolescent obesity with both immediate health consequences and adverse metabolic complications in adulthood. Adolescent obesity is associated with elevated blood pressure, lipid disorders and left ventricular hypertrophy (Gutin and Manos, 1993).

A school based study by a group of researchers, Moody, Wilmore, Girandola and Royce, (1972) involved 28 obese youths and 12 normal youths in a 15 week programme of daily walking, jogging and running. Although the actual body mass loss was 1.0kg and 0.54kg in obese and normal groups respectively. Skinfold thickness decreased markedly in the obese group. These positive effects were enhanced when the programme was extended to 29 weeks.

These data clearly support the inclusion of physical activity in programmes designed to produce favourable changes in body composition in obese youths. The changes in body composition reported by Parizkova were reversed once subject returned home.

Factors That Influence The Promotion Of Physical Activities In Youths

There are quite a number of factors that influence the promotion of physical activities in youths. Although the myriad of interacting factors which may influence young people's physical activities is not fully understood but the consensus view is that no single correlate explains physical activity behavior. We want to examine the promotion of youth's physical activity in terms of biological, psychological, social and environmental issues.

Biological Factor

The biological factor which may influence physical activity is the gender differences. Both boys and girls reduce their level of physical activity as they progress through adolescence into adult life. Boys are generally more active than girls from an early age but between the ages of 6 and 17 years the gender differences become more pronounced as the rate of decline in physical activity is about 2.5 times greater in girls than in boys.

The structural and functional changes with growth which leave males with greater stature, more body mass, larger muscle to mass ratio, longer limbs and wider shoulder than females provide boys with marked advantage in many organized physical activities.

Psychological Factor

Psychological factor is referring to the attitudes of individuals about physical activity and personality characteristics. The health belief model proposes that the likelihood of engaging in health-related behavior is dependent upon perceived benefits of behavior, perceived barrier to that behaviour and threat posed by not engaging in the behavior.

Psychological factor gave a clear indication that importance of youth gradually building a repertoire of motor skills and participating in activities appropriate to their development. This approach will increase the chances of children experiencing success in physical activities and promoting enjoyment.

Social Factor

Physical activity behaviour is influenced by a variety of social variables. Family influences on physical activity during adolescence are well documented but vary with age and gender (Gottlieb and Chen, 1985). Adults such as teachers, physicians and other health care providers may be influential in promoting young people's physical activity. As children get older, adult influence declines and same sex peers and opposite sex peers impact upon behaviour.

Family

The home stands to be the first contact for any child, therefore, parental encouragement and discouragement have immediate effect on youth's activity levels. Primary school children's physical activity has been significantly correlated with their parents' activity levels in most studies and parents' inactivity may exert more influential modeling behavior on the youth than physical activity. Anderson and Wold (1992) supported a correlation between parental and offspring activity and that boys appear to receive more parental support and encouragement to be physically active than girls. Boys are allowed more freedom to engage in more vigorous activities, whereas girls are encouraged to be more dependent and less exploratory in their behavior. Where girls do adopt active lifestyles and or engage in sporting activities, they tend to receive the support they need. Parental influence is therefore a contributory factor in promoting physical activities in youth.

Peers

Peers influence on physical activity of youth is less well researched than family influence, but studies had it that peers play a pivotal role in determining adolescents' level of physical activity and that it was found to be more important for boys than girls of the same age, (Stucky-RoppamDilorenzo, 1993). The promotion of cooperative, group physical activities (cycling, walking) as well as organized activities and sports may positively influence peer pressure on physical activity.

Environmental Factor

A variety of environmental factors tends to influence adolescents' physical activity behavior. Time spent outdoors is strongly correlated with physical activity in youth. Youth clubs, sports clubs and a variety of community organizations have provided recognition for physical activity and sports in community setting. To promote physical activities in youth, young people should be consulted and involved in drawing up appropriate plans for the club, and youths should be encouraged to sustain club membership mechanism by facilitating progress through youth sections into adult sections.

Physical Education

The value of promoting enjoyable early life experiences of physical activity cannot be overestimated. Physical education is therefore, a potentially important vehicle for fostering an appreciation of physical activity. In physical education, there appear to be no significant gender differences in physical activity. In Physical education, there appear to be no significant gender differences in physical activity during structured lesson content, but girls have been observed to be less active than boys during free play within lessons, (Mckenzie, Feldman, Woods, Romero, Dahlstrom and Stone, 1995).

Provision of high-activity content should be an important component of physical education lessons, but it is more important to build a foundation of motor skills and to make youth's early activity experiences enjoyable in order to foster future participation.

Benefits of Physical Activities in Youths

There is a growing conviction that adults' health and wellbeing has its origin in behavior established during childhood and there is a general agreement that youths should be encouraged to adopt active lifestyles which can be sustained into adult life.

Physical activity programme of appropriate frequency, intensity and duration will enhance the aerobic fitness of youths' provided its continued, because as with all training programmes, once training ceases, aerobic fitness will gradually return to pre-training level. Muscular strength increases with growth and maturation but a well designed physical activity programme will induce further increases in the muscular strength of the youth.

Physical activities appear to be effective in reducing both Diastolic Blood Pressure (DBP) and Systolic Blood Pressure (SBP) of hypertensive youth. Increased physical activities promote significant reductions in youth's body fat when risk to life is considered. These include improvements in blood lipid profile, glucose metabolism and overall coronary risk profile. With increased physical activity, promotion in fat utilization during exercise is enhanced.

Psychologically, physical activities have been associated with improvements in self-esteem and reduction in anxiety, stress and depression. Appropriate physical activity may also promote academic achievement, because active youths are more alert and possess quick reaction time. Nwankwo (1984) is of the view that participation in physical activity results in satisfaction of basic psychological needs of an individual, e.g. self-actualization, achievement needs, need for recognition and excellence.

Occupationally, when youths engage in physical activities, they are more productive and with physical education certificates, they could be gainfully employed in places like sport councils, schools, sports clubs of banks and industries, etc. as coaches, instructors or trainers.

Therapeutically, physical activities are used for rehabilitating youth and adult recuperating from illnesses like stroke, injuries, diabetes, because the recognized blood glucose lowering properties of physical activities has led to its incorporation into diabetes treatment strategies.

The use of physical activities to promote mental health is not a new concept and Hippocrates is known to have prescribed exercise for patients suffering from mental illness. Physical activity induces chemical changes known to improve mood.

Physiologically, as one exercise, the heart beat faster, and this frequent beating of the heart makes its muscle strong. The heart can now pump out more blood into the body and more oxygen and nutrients will get to the various organs, tissues and cells. Oxygen intake by way of respiration increases and elimination of carbon dioxide and other waste product becomes more efficient. Increased breathing is important to the lungs in filling the air spaces. When there is increased demand for oxygen in the tissues, the formation of red corpuscles is stimulated which leads to increased haemoglobin, the muscular system are build up for work

without excessive fatigue. There is valuable neuromuscular coordination and facilitating relaxation and sleep.

Summary

Youths are very important variables in the society, they are the main thrust of the nation and through growth and maturation they get to the helm of affairs of the nation. In view of this, they should be physically fit to be able to accomplish the task ahead of them. Youth's physical activity is influenced by a myriad of interacting biological, psychological, social and environmental factors which have been extensively discussed in this paper. In this context, it may therefore be more important to engender positive attitudes to physical activity and to encourage young people to adopt more active lifestyles.

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