

Social capital and children's experiences of physical activity: Influence of Family and Peers

Introduction:

There is a plethora of rhetoric in the UK surrounding concerns with children's health and levels of obesity. Nearly one third of children aged 2 to 15 are overweight and children are becoming obese at an earlier and earlier age (Gov. 2016).

To support children in establishing and maintaining a physically active lifestyle, it is necessary to understand what they value in being physically active and who influences them in this.

'Me and Lucy and Kai all play together and we take it in turns to decide what to do'
(Esme, aged 10)

Peer influence and reciprocated relationships

Man hunt (running game) is kind of what we play as a whole class –everyone does it at lunch' (Matlida, aged 7)

Socially inclusive relationships in physical activity

Aims:

Previous research has indicated that social capital potentially plays a role in children's physical activity but that the nature of social capital and the way it facilitates such engagement is under researched (Everley and Macfadyen, 2015). Developing investigations into the nature of this phenomenon, this study had three key purposes:

- Identify key individuals who influence children's engagement in Physical Activity
- Explore the nature of the social contexts in which Physical Activity occurs
- Establish the degree of awareness that children have of social networks, relationships and the way that these may affect their Physical Activity

Method:

The purpose of this study was to investigate the nature of children's engagement in physical activity and the role that others might have in influencing young children's orientation towards it.

112 children aged 5-10 years, from three primary schools drew themselves being physically active and were interviewed about their pictures. The interviews centred on:

- Social networks and interactions
- Fields (locations both physical and temporal) in which Physical Activity occurred
- Cultural significance of Physical Activity as affecting social relations and sustainability

'The only kind of trouble is I want to play with the others at break but I'm a bit rubbish (at football) so it's tricky – I can't really play'
(Jacob, aged 10)

The 'dark side' of social capital and exclusion from being active in informal settings



'This is me, my Mummy and my sister at the beach – we play together and Mummy watches us'
(Helena aged 5)

Key influence of family

Results:

Findings indicate cultural and social capital significantly affect the way that children engage in physical activity (PA) and conversely, Outcomes of the study demonstrate that:

- Key influencers of children's PA shifted from family to peers between school years 1 and 2 (children aged 5/6yrs and 6/7yrs).
- Children have a desire to accumulate social capital through engagement in culturally acceptable forms of Physical Activity
- Social capital features significantly in children's potential to participate in physical activity (both positively and negatively)
- Social capital affects the hierarchical organisation of PA in free play within school contexts

Conclusion:

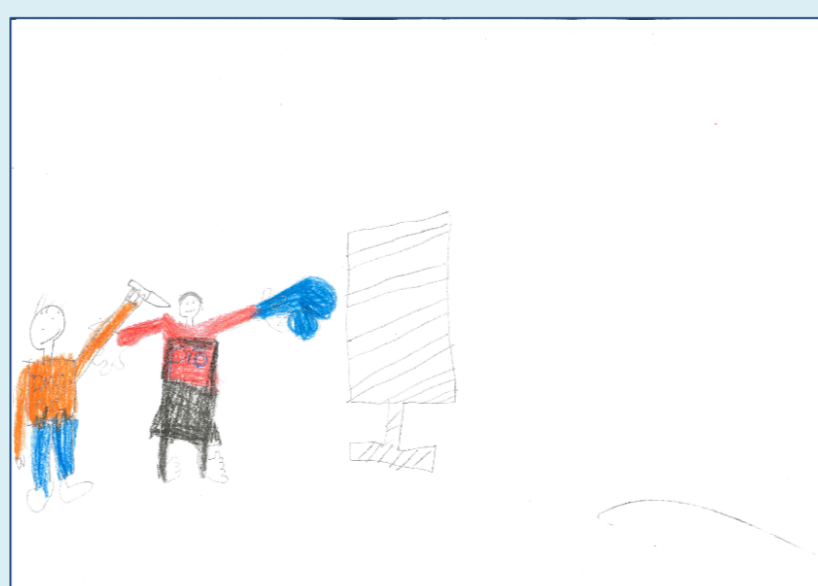
There is a clear relationship between social capital and children's participation in PA. Establishing patterns of positive health behaviours with respect to activity requires stability of environment and networks. Schools provide a natural conduit through which to implement policy targeting PA health behaviours, linking directly to families.

However, caution needs to be exercised with respect to this as where children find engaging in social networks problematic, the 'dark side' of social capital may actually lead to the exclusion of individuals and groups from PA opportunities. Therefore, further investigations need to be made into the nature of social capital and the way in which it functions in health behaviours.



'This is us playing football – Tyler is the organiser but we always all play together' (Jude aged 7)

'This is me doing Martial Arts – I do karate too – my Dad started a karate club so I've done it since like for a year' (Max, aged 5)



Culturally desirable activities

Negotiated inclusion, and reciprocated relationships in culturally desirable activities