

Research In Focus: A Weekly Digest of New Research from the NIDILRR Community

Youth and Parents Share Ideas for Supporting Healthy Lifestyles for Youth with Disabilities

Youth with disabilities are less likely to be physically active and likely to have higher rates of obesity than youth without disabilities, according to earlier research studies. Youth with disabilities may find it challenging to follow healthy lifestyle habits, such as regular exercise and healthy eating, due to social and environmental barriers. For example, some youth with disabilities may be excluded from physical education classes or sports teams, or they may not be aware of or be able to get to stores that offer healthy foods. In previous studies, researchers have found that youth with disabilities from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds may be at especially high risk for obesity and related health problems. These youth may live in communities where there are fewer opportunities for accessible physical activity and limited access to healthy food options. In a recent NIDILRR-funded study, researchers held focus groups to discuss these issues facing ethnic minority youth with disabilities. Researchers wanted to find out what challenges the youth and parents reported that made it difficult to engage in healthy lifestyles and participate actively in their communities. They also wanted to find out what strategies were suggested by the youth and parents to improve access to exercise and healthy food choices.

Researchers at the project on Obesity Research Project on Prevalence, Adaptations, and Knowledge Translation in Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities from Diverse Race/Ethnic Backgrounds held two focus groups. The first group included 4 youth ages 14-25 with intellectual, developmental, or physical disabilities. All 4 youth were from ethnic minority backgrounds (African American, Asian, or Latino). The second focus group included 12 parents (6 couples) whose youth were between the ages of 14 and 25 and had one or more disabilities. All but one of the parents identified as Latino.

The researchers asked the participants in both focus groups about challenges that the youth participants, as well as the parent participants or their youth, encountered when trying to engage in healthy habits in their communities and schools. The participants in both groups were also asked what suggestions they had to enhance opportunities for healthy lifestyles for youth with disabilities.

The researchers found that both the youth and the parents identified similar challenges when trying to engage in healthy lifestyles and participate actively in recreational activities. Recreational activities for these groups meant mostly being physically active during those activities. The challenges included:

- Negative attitudes among staff: The youth described times when they were discouraged from participating in sports, physical activities or recreational

activities because teachers or coaches were unwilling to include them. The parents described similar experiences, such as coaches or program leaders who were unwilling to provide accommodations, or who excluded the youth out of fear for the youth's safety.

- Lack of transportation: The youth stated that they often could not get to the gym because they did not have the skills to drive or use public transportation. This also made it difficult to get to grocery stores to buy fresh, healthy foods. The parents also described difficulties with needing to drive long distances to take their youth to participate in exercise, sports or recreational activities.
- Limited community resources: The youth and parents described a lack of affordable, accessible exercise and/or recreational venues or affordable healthy food options in their communities.

The researchers also found that the youth and parents had several ideas for strategies to improve access to recreational activities with other youth and access to healthy foods. The youth suggested starting a community sports team or a walking club that would be accessible to people with disabilities. The youth in this study also recommended offering programs to teach youth with disabilities to drive or use public transportation, organizing healthy cooking classes, and removing unhealthy snack vending machines from schools. The parents recommended establishing programs where parents and their children can exercise together, training for teachers and coaches on how to make their programs inclusive, partnering with staff who already include youth with disabilities in their programs, using community gardens to grow fresh fruit and vegetables, and providing family education on healthy diet choices and how foods can interact with medications the youth may be taking.

The authors noted that youth with disabilities, even if they would like to follow healthy lifestyle habits, may face a lack of available, accessible, and affordable options to participate in recreational physical activity and healthy eating. Based on the comments from study participants, some ethnic minority youth with disabilities may live in communities where they face disparities in access to healthy food options and affordable, inclusive health programs. There may be several ways in which youth with disabilities, their families, and community leaders can work together to help all members of the community, including people with disabilities, to follow healthy lifestyle habits such as exercising regularly, engaging in enjoyable recreational activities, and participate actively in their communities. Future research may be useful to develop and evaluate evidence-based culturally tailored programs to help youth with disabilities and their families engage in healthier lifestyles.

[To Learn More](#)

This project, under the direction of Dr. Jim Rimmer has developed six categories of obesity prevention and reduction Guidelines, Recommendations, and Adaptations Including Disability (GRAIDs). These include strategies to promote availability of healthy

foods, to support healthy food choices, and to encourage safe activity in the community. Browse the GRAIDs at <http://new.reduceobesity.org>.

The National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability has many resources for young people with disabilities and their families and the fitness professionals who support them:

- Parents Engagement in Physical Activity:
<https://www.nchpad.org/1643/6705/Parents~Engagement~in~Physical~Activity>
- Kids Korner articles on fitness and healthy eating:
<https://www.nchpad.org/Articles/Monthly~Columns/85/Kids~Korner>
- Inclusive Fitness Training:
<https://www.nchpad.org/1490/6434/Inclusive~Fitness~Training>

To Learn More About this Study

Suarez-Balcazar, Y., Orozco, A.A., Marte, M. & Garcia, C. (2018) [Unpacking barriers to healthy lifestyles from the perspective of youth with disabilities and their parents](#), Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community, 46(1), 61-72. This article is available from the NARIC collection.

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