

Parents' Perception of Their Children's Participation in Physical Activity

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This paper describes parents' survey and interview responses about their children's participation in physical activity which were collected for the second part of a three phase project funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services: Health Advancement Project through the auspices of ACHPER. In the first phase of the project, an extensive data base was compiled on children's participation in physical activity; the second phase investigated parents' and teachers' perceptions of their children's and students' participation in physical activity. The third phase, which is now underway, will use the first two phases to develop a set of resources with which to advocate for policy, programs and educational strategies to serve the needs of young people in Australia most effectively in relation to physical activity.

Introduction

The quality of children's participation in sport and physical activity has become an issue of major significance (e.g., the Australian Senate Inquiry Report, *Physical and Sport Education* [Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and the Arts, 1992]). There has been considerable documentation of the amount and kind of young people's participation in physical activity generated from large scale, quantitatively-based studies using purpose designed surveys (e.g., Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 1997; Booth et al., 1997; Measurement and Consulting, 1991). These studies have often been generated by a concern that the fitness levels, skill and participation of children and young people are declining. Many of these have focused primarily on organised forms of physical activity, usually competitive sport.

One of the largest surveys of young people is that commissioned by the



Jan Wright

Australian Sports Commission to provide it with information to support the introduction of the *Youth Sport Program*. (Measurement and Consulting Services, 1991). The study sought to understand the meaning of sport to Australians between the age of 13 and 18 years through surveying and interviewing a representative sample of this population and their parents. The researchers concluded that young people's experience of sport varies enormously. For a large number, it was very positive, "a chance to be exuberant, to feel warmth and companionship and to be pleased with themselves" (p.5). For others, it was about "waiting for a go, being rejected for the team they aspired to, being subjected to unfair coaching, being belittled when they made a mistake." A very large majority of parents in this study were very supportive of their children's involvement in sport and thought that "playing sport is a good thing for children" (p.10).

The influence of parents on their children's physical activity participation has been the subject of a number of empirical studies. Most of these have concluded that parents have a significant influence on their children's participation through their

encouragement and the provision of opportunities to participate (Biddle & Goudas, 1996; Brustad, 1996) and through the example of their own participation (Anderssen & Wold, 1992). In a study of teenage girls' participation in soccer, Clough, McCormack and Traill (1996) found that the availability of fathers and brothers to talk about the game and to practice skills with them was important in the girls' continuous involvement in soccer. Mothers were also important in so far as they transported the girls to the games and spent time watching their children participate.

A limitation of most of these studies is their lack of attention to the experiences of young people from low socioeconomic and ethnic minority backgrounds. As Kirk, Burke, Carlson, Davis and Glover (1996) have pointed out, parents made a substantial contribution to their child's participation in sport through time, money and emotional support. Of particular importance is Kirk et al.'s suggestion that, given the requirements of many of the most popular sports in Australian society, it is the structural characteristics of families rather than sporting background (although it is likely that the two are related) that promotes children's participation - in other words "club and representative sport is realistically available only to the children of parents who are in reasonably well paid employment" (p.44).

While most of the studies cited above specifically examine the relationships between parents' attitudes and behaviours and their children's participation, they have rarely talked to parents about their understandings, perceptions and wants in relation to their children's participation in physical activity. The study described in this paper was designed to do this through using a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. In addition, it sought to incorporate responses from specific groups whose voices are rarely heard in the participation research, and

included parents from remote area and isolated areas and Aboriginal parents.

The research aims of the larger study were to identify:

- i) the orientations which adults - teachers and parents - have to the participation of young people in physical activity;
- ii) teachers' and parents' understandings of the relationship between physical activity and health;
- iii) the ways in which parents and teachers see themselves influencing the participation patterns of children;
- iv) to identify how the above differ, if at all for the different groups of parents and different groups of children in the study; and from these,
- v) to identify the needs of parents, teachers and school communities with regard to advocacy related to physical activity, fitness and health.

This paper reports primarily on the views of parents related to their children's involvement in physical activity and their perceptions of its contribution to their children's lives. Other aspects of the study are dealt with in other forums and the full report is available from ACHPER.

The Study

Four groups of researchers from New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and Victoria collaborated on the research study. This provided the means to target a diverse population including Aboriginal communities, parents and teachers in rural and isolated communities, ethnically diverse schools, inner city schools, community schools and urban comprehensive schools. Individual and group focus interviews were carried out with teachers and parents in fifteen sites in all. A survey was designed on the basis of early interviews which all parents

Table 1
Case Study Schools

South Australia	
	2 State Primary 1 State Secondary 1 Independent Girls K-12
Victoria	
	2 State Primary 2 State Secondary
New South Wales	
	1 State Preschool 1 State Primary 1 Catholic Primary 1 Catholic Girls Secondary
Queensland	
	1 State Primary 1 State Secondary Remote Access Home Tutors Aboriginal Community School

and teachers at each school were invited to complete.

The parents' (or guardians') survey was sent home with every child present at school on the day the survey was administered. The return rate from the schools varied considerably, depending on the support given to the project by the school and the demographics of the school. Like many of the studies of this kind the highest return rates were from middle class parents whose first language was likely to be English. The returns from low socioeconomic status schools and those with considerable

ethnic diversity amongst students were generally poor. Some schools which had participated in the interviews chose not to participate in the survey for a variety of reasons to do with competing demands on their time. Parents in the Aboriginal community and in remote Queensland were also not surveyed in the first case because of their choice and the second because of the difficulties in reaching parents.

Of the 1106 parents who responded to the survey, the majority were the mothers of students in the case study schools (83% compared to 16% male

Table 2
Parent Demographics by Age, School and Type

Age	n	%	School	n	%	Type	n	%
<20	47	4						
21-30	32	3	High	662	60	State ¹	588	53
31-40	440	40	Primary	311	28	Catholic	394	36
41-50	532	49	Pre	9	1	Other	124	11
51-60	37	3	Other ²	124	11			
60+ ³	4	1						

¹ State includes the preschool surveyed as it is state-funded.

² Other in this table refers to the independent K-12 school.

³ Frequency missing=14. Total responses=1106.

parents). By asking each parent to respond for at least three of their children, we were able to cover a greater range of individual children, particularly in relation to variations in school class and differences between female and male children. For the 1106 parents who responded, the total number of children to whom those responses refer is 2276, with the majority in lower high school (48%) and the remainder spread across upper primary (24%), lower primary (16%), upper high school (9%) and preschool (3%) with a small group at TAFE, university, in special schools or too young to be at school.

The qualitative component of the study involved interviewing parents individually and in groups wherever and whenever they were available. Mostly interviews happened at the school, some were conducted in parents' homes. Fifty two female parents and 24 male parents were interviewed either individually or in group focus interviews. The interviews were summarised, with as much of the interview as possible transcribed verbatim. These transcripts were coded for themes using the qualitative software package NUD•IST.

What parents want and expect from their children's participation in physical activity

A majority of the parents in the study placed a high value on physical activity for themselves and their children. For instance, 82% of parents agreed with the statement that "participation in physical activity is important to our family." Health benefits featured prominently in the reasons they valued physical activity for themselves and their children. In addition, for their children, the social benefits associated with making friends was indicated both in the survey and in the interviews as an important outcome, particularly for their older children.

The evidence from the interviews showed that the value and the degree to which physical activity was enjoyed varied markedly with the age of the

child. For instance, the parents of young children in preschool and lower primary school saw physical activity as something that was indicative of the normal behaviour of healthy young children. For their older children, however, the social benefits were more important. Health benefits were generally talked about in the context of children who were not involved in organised sport or activity or in relation to the upper high children and older (these were often the same group).

There was a general consensus amongst the parents that some form of physical activity was an important part of children's lives. Parents were likely to express concern if their child was no longer in some form of physical activity, especially if the parents could not recognise other forms of physical activity as replacing it. The following quote sums up the typical position of parents:

I would hate to see my kids not have any sport at all. When he wanted to give up mixed netball, there was nothing else to replace it and I was really disappointed because he needed something to get him in the fresh air and away from the computer and to mix with other people.

Parents expected a great deal from organised sport and some other organised physical activities such as martial arts classes. They looked to these activities for outcomes that would imbue their children with social and personal characteristics which would make them better people and improve their quality of life. Sports were anticipated as assisting their children to become more organised, more social and where they would learn to win and lose and learn to be part of a team. Sport was particularly seen as a site where children more easily formed relationships, where they would meet other children beyond their neighbourhood or school groups.

For many of the parents in the study, particularly the parents of young children, organised physical activities were seen as important for their

potential to remediate any problems they perceived or anticipated their child as having. For instance, one primary parent hoped that organised physical activities would "stop (her daughter) being shy," another parent hoped they would provide the organisational skills that her child lacked. Many more parents hoped organised physical activities would provide their children with opportunities to meet friends.

For some parents living in remote areas, the lack of sporting possibilities was a problem because sport was seen as a way to provide their children with opportunities to address those inadequacies that they perceived to be an outcome of isolated living. Moreover, being good at sport was one way of helping their children to feel more comfortable when they went to boarding school. Conversely, not having some sporting proficiency meant that they would find fitting in even more difficult. A similar position was also taken by other parents of high school children who suggested that if children did not play sport early in their school lives then they would be out of their league by the their second year of high school.

The traditional discourses around team sports provided the means for parents to claim that participation would be "character building" and that it would instill "a sense of responsibility" and "teamship." It would also teach children to cooperate and provide a context in which children would have to demonstrate commitment and develop priorities, "I teach them that you have to sacrifice some things if they want to do well at their sport," and where they will "learn to win and lose." Again, these comments were mainly from the parents of the younger children. These parents seemed to feel responsible for "shaping" their children, for providing them with experiences which would lay the foundations for their future personality and social relationships. These parents seemed to want to believe that they could have an active influence on their child's social development. Through effort, discipline, close monitoring and the choice of appropriate activities they hoped to produce a more rounded, better, more socially adjusted child. The parents' responses seem to indicate is that while the parents of primary and preschool children want their children to enjoy their participation in physical activity (because they recognise that this is important for the child's continued participation), they also expect that club and school sport and physical activity should be organised and taught or coached in ways that produce desirable social outcomes.

Table 3
What Parents Valued Most About Their Children's Participation in Physical Activity

	n	%
The health benefit	1653	91
That they make friends	1273	70
That it keeps them off the street	279	15
The structure and the discipline	743	41
That it teaches them to win and lose	645	36
Helps them to be more competitive generally	242	13

Parents' perceptions of their children's participation in physical activity

Their children's interest in activity

Responses to the survey suggest that a very large majority of the parents saw their children as being fairly active and as being more than *moderately interested* in physical activity (63%) on a five point scale. Only 12% described their children as being less than moderately interested. There were, however, significant differences between the numbers of male and female children described as being *very interested* in physical activity (51% of male as compared to 35% for female children). The parents were more likely to place their female children around the moderately interested category (29% compared to 19%).

The first child was also more likely to be described as *not interested* than was the second or third. This seems to be linked more with age than with birth order. For instance, when coded for school level, there was a regular decline in interest in physical activity after a peak in upper primary. Whereas only 5% of parents' responses indicated that their upper primary children were less than moderately interested, 17% of children in upper high school fell into this category. This trend was also evident in the interviews, and some of the parents' comments, as described below, help to shed some light on these figures.

Their children's involvement in physical activity

Parents were also asked to list up to five activities that their child (children) had been typically involved in the past month. These results are presented in Table 4.

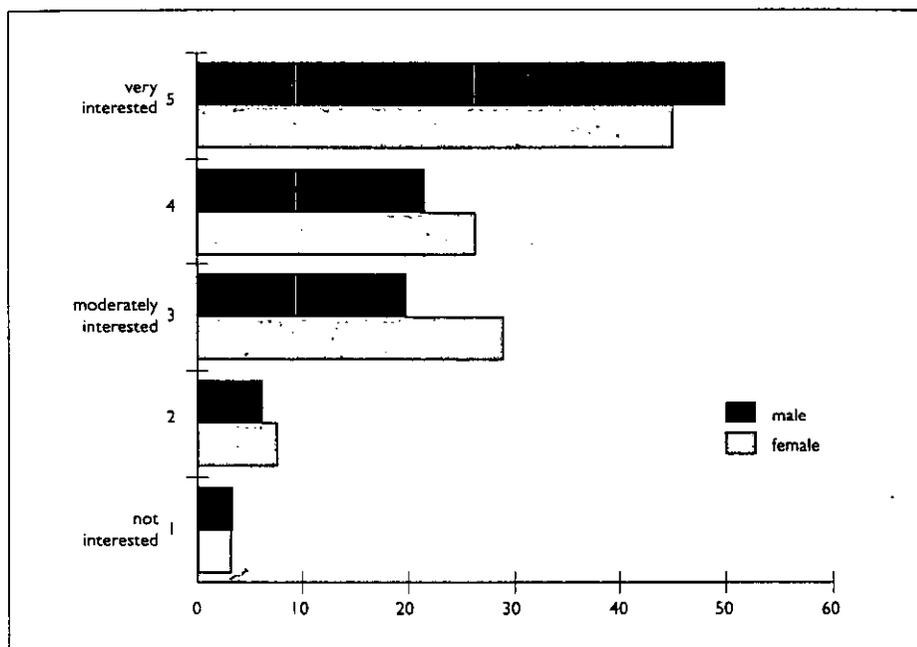


Figure 1. Parent perception of their children's attitude to physical activity by sex of child

The majority of parents saw their children as active in a range of informal activities. There are predictable gender differences in terms of organised sports but the differences are less marked in perceived preferences for informal forms of activity. Bike riding was most often chosen for preschool to upper primary children. Swimming also falls in the first four most likely activities for all levels. On the other hand, organised sports such as netball and basketball (ball court games) do not appear in the first four rankings until upper primary and peak in lower high school as the most often nominated category (to be displaced in upper high school by walking). The average number of activities nom-

inated by parents also differs over the age groups with the mean peaking at upper primary, with an average of 4 activities, declining to 3.2 activities for upper high through to 2.7 activities for older children not at school. The order of popularity differed for girls as compared to boys with ball court games (netball, basketball, volleyball), walking, swimming and bike riding being more likely to be nominated for female children and bike riding, walking, football type games (excluding soccer¹) and swimming nominated for boys.

Overall walking (12%) was the activity most often nominated. There were no cues to the question asking parents to list their children's act-

Table 4

Parents' Perceptions of Physical Activities Participated in During the Last Month Ranked in Order of Popularity by Gender and School Level

	1	2	3	4	5
Girls	ball court games ¹	walking	swimming	bike riding	dual court games ² dance, gymnastics,
Boys	bike riding	walking	football games	swimming	ball court games
Preschool	house activities	bike riding	swimming	walking	running
Lower primary	bike riding	swimming	house activities	walking	running
Upper primary	bike riding	ball court games	walking	swimming	dual court games
Lower high	ball court games	walking	swimming	bike riding	dual court games
Upper high	walking	ball court games	bike riding	swimming	aerobics and gym training
All	walking	ball court games	bike riding	swimming	dual court games

¹ Ball court games refer to basketball, netball and volleyball.

² Dual court games refer to tennis, squash, badminton and handball.

ivities, so that the parent choice of walking was unsolicited. In trying to understand what the parents would include under the category walking, we need to look to other parts of the data. It is clear that most of the parents who responded to the survey made a strong link between physical activity and health benefits. It would seem that the health promotion messages which link health benefits with moderate regular activity over shorter periods and therefore encourage activities such as walking have had some effect. It could be argued that they understood their children's walking, whether it be instrumental (walking to school, the shops etc.), for pleasure or for exercise, as being part of their physical activity profile. It could be also argued that parents are wanting to see their children as active in some way and for many children this is a likely category where more organised forms of physical activity are not.

It also needs to be acknowledged that we did not ask "how often" or for "how long" the children were involved in the physical activity, so cycling, walking and swimming may be in fact have occurred infrequently and irregularly in this time. On the other hand the students who responded to the *NSW Schools Physical Activity and Fitness Survey* also ranked walking for transport and for pleasure highly as activities they were likely to have been engaged in during a "normal week" (Booth, et al. 1997).

Differences activities for different ages

The argument that parents recognise their children's informal activities as "physical activity" worthy of noting is also supported by the inclusion of running as the fifth most often chosen activity for the very young children. This would seem to be a response to the idea that their younger children are always "on the move," "they are always running around," a response that came up regularly in the qualitative data from the parents of young children. According to the parents interviewed, the majority of their young children engage in play-like informal activity and games regularly - whenever they have the chance. Some need a bit more encouragement, but generally they run and jump, ride their bicycles, play with their friends and walk with their mums. The impression is that although some children have to be encouraged away from the television, they prefer to play if there are other children around. This is exemplified in the following quote from a group focus interview at primary school.

P1: Yeah, she'll go out and she'll kick the football with him (her brother), they play basketball, we've got a ring down in the shed and they play with that and they kick the ball around and yeah fairly normal.

I: Do your children participate in regular physical activity?

P2: No organised activities. They are too young.

I: Are there differences between what they do?

P2: Not between the two (children). The only difference would be that G (male, 7 years) skates and J (female, 4 years) doesn't. But they run, leap and all the rest of it together.

P3: I've got a five and three year-old so they're only very little and they [are] just on the go all the time

I: Yes

P3: I have no time at all, it's just sort of fact of mum come do this mum come do that ...so they're not into anything really as yet it's they're just too little.

This interview is typical of the comments of young parents about their children's participation in physical activity, although some parents were less likely to see seven as too young for participation in organised activities. Indeed, what was striking from the interviews with parents at the preschool and most of the primary schools was how early their children became involved in organised physical activity. At the NSW primary school and preschool, despite their being located in a low income area, the young mothers' interviews described a wide range of organised activities in which their children had participated from an early age, including team sports, martial arts and a surf club.

For preschool, primary and early high school children, physical space and other children to play with seem to be important requirements for their engagement in physical activity. Where these were locally available and the space was regarded by parents as safe, there were more descriptions of street play and informal games with friends and family. Where this was not possible, such as in highly urbanized areas and remote rural areas, parents needed to be able to take children or children needed to be able to travel to those locations where there was space and other people with whom to play. If these three factors were not available, children's play and informal activity such as riding bikes, playing backyard cricket, pickup basketball could be restricted from a very early age. For

some children the opportunity to play outside after school, to ride bikes in safe spaces and to run and walk freely on the streets and bike paths and in parks was taken for granted. For many other children, their parents' concerns about the safety of their environment seriously curtailed their ability to walk, ride and play in their local area. For these children school often provided their main opportunity for physical activity. As other data in the report demonstrates however, it was the schools, and particularly primary schools, in the poorer areas which were themselves restricted in the facilities and parental support required to maintain a strong physical activity program.

Older primary and early high children in the study were more likely to be described by their parents as being involved in organised forms of sport. This is confirmed by the results of our survey of parents and by the ABS figures (1998), with participation increasing from 49.2% of children 5-8 years to 68.3 % of children 12-14 (ABS 1998, p.23). For most parents this was seen as desirable - their assumption was that their children should be involved in some form of organised or regular physical activity. If they dropped out of one sport, it was often expected that they would take something else up. When children were inside they might be watching television or playing on the computer or Nintendo but that was perceived as less of a problem if they also had commitments to physical activity at other times. For the children of the parents in the independent private school system, their commitments seemed to be to homework and organised physical activity (together with playing an instrument, etc.). In other schools the equation seemed to be more a balance between activity and the electronic media - homework was less likely to be mentioned until their children were in the last years of schooling and studying for their final exams.

As children moved on through high school, parents talked about them and their participation differently. Whereas in the primary school and early high school, parents were more likely to talk about their children's activities as something they were directly involved in and had some control over. They were more likely to talk about their older children as proactive, because they were beginning to make choices, especially about non-participation. For some parents, this was a source of frustration and potential conflict but for most it was an inevitable part of

growing older. Often sport had to take second place to school work, and sometimes their older children's non-participation was attributed to peer culture or just an inevitable outcome as their children made their own decisions about choice of activities. Generally, for these children the move was away from organised sport to more recreational/informal activities.

Social and geographical factors

The range of physical activity described by the parents was large; however, as well as age, geographic location and social and cultural contexts played a major role in what forms of physical activity were engaged in and by whom. For instance, the following quotes exemplify these differences in experiences and opportunities.

P: We used to live out on the D. Nobody there played basketball yet that was all my two sons wanted to play. They would throw some baskets but couldn't play an organised game. It was restricted to school and playing/training in town. But town was 50 kms away. It used to cost \$100 a week in petrol to get him there for training and games. C (male) also did rugby. Then we moved to G - another small community. They had to play muck around basketball again - nothing organised. It was too cold to play outside in winter anyway (state high school).

P: L (male, 13) rides mountain bikes every weekend for several hours with friends. They usually go into hills and tracks. Also plays 27 holes golf a week and two one-hour practices a week. Tennis practice and games per week. He chooses to use own self-created golf green out the back for chipping and putting practice. Also has drama, clarinet and concert band. C (female, 10) has golf for an hour Sunday mornings, T ball twice week - one game one practice. Been heavily involved in football, cricket and hockey at school level. (Has moved to the independent girls school this year from a state school). C has always played two organised sports at a time, practice and a game. Played volleyball for a term last year. Any spare time after school she will call kids over back fence for game of cricket rather than sit in front of TV because this year TV is locked away. Rides her bike to friends house. Time at beach is spent swimming, snorkeling, body surfing. Skate board, roller blade and water ski occasionally. They love physical activity (independent girls school).

P: D (male, 9 yrs) plays soccer, Z (male, 9 yrs) plays cricket, E (female, 12 yrs) does bike riding. They all go hiking and rock climbing and are in the scouts. They do physical activity every day. Z and D probably do about four hours of physical activity every day. E probably does about an hour because she likes music best.

I: What is their attitude toward physical activity?

P: It's just natural. They just do it.

I: How would you describe a typical day at home?

P: The boys help round the cows every morning on their push bikes, they feed the dogs, they have to let the chooks out each morning and round them up each afternoon. E is lazier because she's a teenager. She might ride the push bike or the motor bike in the morning but generally she doesn't do anything. What they do depends on the jobs they've got. They do what they have to do.

I: Are weekends different?

P: That's when we go hiking or bike riding or play organised sport (Aboriginal community).

These quotes point to the very different opportunities and experiences which class and geographical location provide. The parents of the children in those schools which drew their students from working class or mixed working class and lower middle class areas were more likely to describe their children as being involved in traditional team sport or organised activities which have typical gender associations - that is, netball and dancing (including boot-scooting or line dancing) for the girls, and football (particularly in Victoria) for the boys. At the independent girls school rowing, tennis and individual competitive activities such as athletics were more likely to be nominated. The children living in coastal towns had more opportunities for swimming and surf club-related activities.

For children on remote properties, opportunities to participate in organised sports and activities were very limited. Some parents described their children as very active, often "more active than town children," but others were concerned that they were less active than they would be if they attended regular schools. With schooling being provided at home, the distinction between physical education and extracurricula physical activity was, by necessity, blurred. While most of the parents indicated a commitment to physical activity, they were not confident about teaching skills or offering a range of movement experiences. Parents went out of their way, however, to make provision for physical

activity by buying trampolines, totem tennis games and bicycles. Where time allowed, usually at weekends, fathers would be more involved with their children's activities. This often meant teaching games, such as rugby league or cricket, from memory.

The opportunities for organised physical activity were limited because of distance and because of the limited range of sports available. There were stories, for instance, of parents (again usually mothers) driving two hours each way for their children to be involved in some organised and structured form of physical activity such as ballet or cricket. The current, very constrained economic situation in rural Australia has also meant that where families might once have socialised around tennis, they were now too preoccupied with surviving "difficult times, company take-overs, individual phones, so the weekly get-togethers don't happen." Similarly, attempts at organising weekend camps and sporting associations often failed because "time is always a problem."

Conclusion

The results of the survey and the interviews in this study point to the importance of physical activity, particularly informal and recreational activity, in the lives of children as perceived by the parents. The key issues that arose from the qualitative component of the study were those around inequality and difference. Despite the bias in the study towards children from middle class families or families whose parents (mostly mothers) were often closely connected with the school and arguably the values of the school, the qualitative data in particular constructed a picture of different lives, different opportunities. While there were fewer discernible differences in the meanings parents and teachers associated with physical activity and health, the opportunities for their children to be active differed considerably depending particularly on available income and geographic location.

It seems then that it is not so much a matter of convincing parents that physical activity is valuable in young people's lives but rather to provide opportunities and programs that meet the needs of all children and understand that those needs are diverse and may vary for different groups of children and for different children within those groups. This includes planning communities where there are safe places for children to play and where there are a range of inexpensive organised and informal physical activities accessible to all who live there. It also places a greater importance on the school in

providing a range of physical activities in which students can be come involved and which suit their needs and interests as these change over their schooling.

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Footnote

¹Soccer was coded separately from other forms of football because it was more likely to be played by both girls and boys.

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INDEX OF ARTICLE ACHPER HEALTHY LIFESTYLES JOURNAL, 1998

Author/s	Title	Volume & Issue
Taylor, T. & Toohey, K.	Perspectives on Sport: Voices of Women from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds	45/1, (159) p.5
Penney, D.	Post NPDP - Professional Development Issues in Health and Physical Education	45/1, (159) p.10
Corbett, D. R.	Looking to the Future in Physical Education: Implications for the International Arena	45/1, (159) p.14
Napier, S.	Public Policy - The Profession and the Information Age	45/1, (159) p.20
Irwin, R.	Questions of Health Literacy and the National Literacy Policy for Schools	45/1, (159) p.24
Mulkearns, S., Naughton, G., Carlson, J. & Wark, J.	An Investigation into the Relationship between Physical Activity and Bone Health	45/1, (159) p.26
Stanton, B.	Our Professional Stewardship	45/2, (160) p.5
Lipscombe, N.	Trainee Skydiving: The Value of Research to Safety	45/2, (160) p.8
Patterson, I.	Leisure Services for Ageing Populations: A Comparison of the Roles of Diversional Therapists and Therapeutic Recreators within Two Health Care Delivery Systems	45/2, (160) p.14
Larkin, D. & Parker, H.	Teaching Children to Land Softly: Individual Differences In Learning Outcomes	45/2, (160) p.19
Pearse, L.	What's in a Name?	45/2, (160) p.25
Lee, C. & Brown, W.	Australian Migrant Women & Physical Activity: Attitudes, Barriers, Preferences & Participation	45/3, (161) p.5
Kirk, D.	The Case Against the Deterioration Argument: Lessons from History to Inform the Future of Physical Education	45/3, (161) p.11
Tinning, R.	Slipped Disc(ourses): Whatever Happened to Back Health and Physical Education Curriculum and Practice	45/3, (161) p.16
Brown, W., Ball, K. & Powers, J.	Is Life a Party for Young Women?	45/3, (161) p.21
Brown, P.	Representations of Place: Imaging Newcastle through Media Coverage of the 1997 Australia Rugby League Grand Final	45/4 (162) p.5
Hands, B. & Larkin, D.	Australian Tests of Motor Proficiency: What Do We Have and What We Need?	45/4 (162) p.10
Edwards, A. & Gilbert, K.	Screening Postmodernism	45/4 (162) p.16
Williams, M., Christie, A. & Ashfield, J.	Computer-based Technology: A Checklist for Evaluating School Health Education Resources	45/4 (162) p.21