



The contribution of organised sports to physical activity in Australia: Results and directions from the Active Healthy Kids Australia 2014 Report Card on physical activity for children and young people



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 November 2014
Received in revised form 8 April 2015
Accepted 24 April 2015
Available online 30 April 2015

Keywords:

Sports
Adolescent
Child
Physical activity

ABSTRACT

Youth participation in organised sport and physical activity is important for healthy development, growth and wellbeing. In 2014, Active Healthy Kids Australia released its inaugural Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Young People, which synthesised the best available national- and state-level data for children and young people (<18 years). This paper provides a more detailed examination of the evidence informing the grade for Organised Sport from the 2014 Report Card, compares Australia's Organised Sport grade with other countries, identifies future directions for research and surveillance, and explores possible beneficial strategies. The Report Card highlighted that between 64% and 85% of Australians aged 5–17 years participate in organised sports, a rate higher than alternate forms of physical activity such as active transportation, active play and school based physical activity. This finding reflects Australia's position as one of the global leaders for participating in organised sport. Future research and surveillance methodologies however, need to incorporate standardised metrics that aim to capture more detailed data regarding organised sport participation. Facilitating access for all children and preventing dropout from organised sports are important initiatives to improve current levels of sport participation. However, given that 80% of Australians aged 5–17 years are not sufficiently physically active to achieve the daily recommendation, participation in sport alone is not enough to ensure that children can accrue the health benefits associated with being physically active. As such, there is a pressing need to develop strategies that engage children in other forms of physical activity such as active transportation and active play.

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1. Introduction

Sport occupies a prominent place in the Australian national identity. The number one indicator of national pride in Australia is international sporting achievements,¹ which is reflected in the large number of Australians aged 5–17 years (64–85%) who participate in some form of organised sport.² Organised youth sports are adult-controlled and led programmes with children and young

people typically attending training and competitive fixtures under the formal guidance and supervision of an adult leader, most often the coach.³ While current figures show Australia is a leading nation in youth sports participation, compared to other developed and developing countries with reported participation rates of 20–59%,⁴ it is still concerning that about one third of young Australians do not participate in any form of organised sport or physical activity.² National data show that Australian children who participate in organised sports have better health-related quality of life and mental health than their non-participating peers.^{5,6} However, analyses of the overall physical activity levels of Australian children unequivocally demonstrate that sport is not enough as the sole

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outlet for physical activity with less than 20% of Australians aged 5–17 years meeting the recommended Australian physical activity guidelines.²

2. Physical activity and sport: Are they the same and why are both important?

Physical activity is “any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that results in energy expenditure”,⁷ however physical activity and sport are not synonymous. Physical activity can be divided into components, including: leisure-time; occupational (e.g., physical education participation at school); transport (e.g., walking to and/or from different destinations); and domestic (e.g., household chores) related activity, with sport a sub-set of leisure time physical activity.⁸ Therefore the health benefits associated with physical activity during childhood and adolescence, including benefits to blood pressure, metabolic syndrome, adiposity, skeletal and mental health,⁹ and reduced risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease and Type-2 diabetes¹⁰ are also indirectly associated with the physical activity young people engage in while participating in organised sports.

Organised sports participation during childhood and adolescence however, is also associated with important psychosocial benefits including increased self-esteem, wellbeing and social skills.¹¹ Sport has the potential to provide children with the opportunity to engage with their peers and learn teamwork and negotiation skills; to develop self-discipline; to learn how to work within the rules, regulations and etiquette of a social system; to develop decision-making skills; and to cumulatively acquire transferable movement skills that gives them a sense of movement competence and confidence.¹² It has been estimated that organised sports contribute between 23% and 60% of Australian children's (6–12 years) daily physical activity time¹³ and up to 60% of daily activity energy expenditure during adolescence (9–16 years)¹⁴. The Global Advocacy for Physical Activity has identified participation in sports as one of the seven worldwide “investments that work” for improving physical activity levels,¹⁵ and it has been suggested that if every child participated regularly in two distinct organised sports per year, the prevalence of obesity in childhood could be reduced by 26%.¹⁶ Further, research undertaken in a nationally-representative sample of Australian children showed that participation in organised sports for at least two years was associated with a clinically significant increase in health-related quality of life⁵ and a 10–20% reduction in risk of being diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder relative to children who do not participate.⁶

3. What is the Physical Activity Report Card and what is its purpose?

Active Healthy Kids Canada has released a Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth annually for the past 10 years.¹⁷ The Report Card is a translation of knowledge on surveillance, policy and research related to physical activity of children and youth, which aims to inform stakeholders of the epidemiology of children's physical activity, guide programmes, messages and policies to promote and support physical activity, and highlight where high quality national data are lacking for specific indicators. The Active Healthy Kids initiative has now expanded to 15 countries from five continents, including Australia, resulting in the development of country report cards. In 2014, Active Healthy Kids Australia (AHKA, www.activehealthykidsaustralia.com.au) produced the first evidence-informed Australian Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Young People.² The AHKA Report Card is a synthesis of the best available national and state-level evidence across 12 physical activity indicators, which were

interpreted by a national Research Working Group (RWG) comprising 24 physical activity and health experts from 10 Australian Universities and research institutes. The data (nationally representative datasets were primarily used) were evaluated by the RWG (purposeful discussions occurred before the expert panel reached a consensus) based on pre-determined weighting criteria in order to assign letter grades to each of the indicators using a quintile-based grading framework.²

The indicators include individual behaviours contributing to overall physical activity levels (Organised Sport and Physical Activity Participation, Physical Education and Physical Activity Participation in Schools, Active Play, Active Transportation, and Sedentary Behaviours), settings and sources of influence (Family and Peers, School, Community and the Built Environment), strategies and investments (Government Strategies and Investments), and traits (Aerobic Fitness, Movement Skills) (Fig. 1). A summary of the Report Card results and the specific survey characteristics for each of the primary national data sources used have been published elsewhere.^{2,18}

A prominent finding from the 2014 Report Card was that Overall Physical Activity Levels was graded ‘D minus (–)’, on the basis of national evidence indicating that only 19% of 5–17 year olds met the recommended Australian physical activity guideline of at least 60 min of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity every day.^{2,18} While similar grades were allocated to other behaviours (e.g. Active Transportation was graded ‘D’), Organised Sport Participation was graded ‘B–’, based on estimates that about two-thirds of young Australians engage in some form of organised sport each year. In comparison to international participation rates, this grade represents a national strength and highlights the potential of organised sports to facilitate healthy growth, development, and wellbeing of Australian children and young people. However, it is unclear why there is a substantial gap between organised sports and other indicators of physical activity in Australia. Organised sports are potentially an important aspect to be included within a national preventative health priority, focused on increasing overall physical activity levels, with over 2.5 million children participating in organised sports nationwide.¹⁹ The objectives of this paper were to: (1) provide a more detailed examination of the evidence informing the Organised Sport grade from the 2014 AHKA report card (2) explore other important national research and surveillance findings in the area of organised sports; (3) provide a comparison of Australian data to that of other countries; (4) provide suggestions for future research and surveillance; (5) suggest ways in which we can improve the grade for Organised Sport; (6) discuss ‘Is Sport Enough?’ in the context of overall physical activity levels; and, (7) describe the limitations of the Report Card methodologies and findings.

4. Summary of the evidence used to grade the participation levels of Australian children and young people in organised sports

The core metric used to assess participation in organised sport was ‘the proportion of Australian children and young people participating in organised sport at least once over the past 12 months [both in and outside of school]’ and the grade assigned was reflective of the synthesis of several large national data sets that report a range of participation rates, with variations potentially highlighting measurement inconsistencies. For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) estimated that 64% of Australians aged 5–17 years participated in organised sports over the past 7 days.²¹ Another nationally-representative sample of Australian secondary school students aged 12–17 years showed that 85% participated in organised sports across the past 12 months.²² Estimates for younger

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