



Physical activity and sport participation: A systematic review of the impact of fatherhood

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ABSTRACT

Moderate to Vigorous Physical Activity (MVPA), including sport participation, is an important component of a healthy lifestyle. Scholars have devoted considerable attention to understanding the impact of parenthood on MVPA, albeit only for women. As the impact of fatherhood on men's lives is drawing more and more scholarly and societal attention, the aim of the current article is to provide an systematic overview of studies examining the impact of fatherhood on MVPA.

A systematic review was conducted in Google Scholar, Web of Science and Web of Knowledge, using (combinations of) the search terms: father(hood), parent(hood), exercise, physical activity, sport and leisure time. This resulted in 54 papers reporting differences in MVPA and/or sport between fathers and childless men or within men that became father, of which 13 were included.

Our overview of findings suggested that fathers spent less time on MVPA compared with childless men, but that fathers did not differ from their childless counterparts on the subarea of sport participation. Differences in time spent on MVPA were strongest between childless men and fathers with young children (<6 yrs).

Our systematic review revealed that fathers spent less time on MVPA compared to childless men, especially when they had young children. Interestingly, linkages between parental status and the subarea of sport participation were not found, which suggests that fathers cut back on other areas of MVPA. Given the impact of MVPA on a healthy lifestyle, future research in this field is warranted.

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1. Introduction

Physical activity, including sport participation, is an important component of a healthy lifestyle (Bauman, 2004; Janssen and LeBlanc, 2010; WHO, 2010). Beyond physical health, regular physical activity and sport participation were also argued to affect a wide range of social and psychological outcomes (e.g., Rimer et al., 2012; Skinner et al., 2008; Spaaij, 2009). It is therefore not surprising that policy makers aim at increasing the physical activity levels of people, and scholars are urged to obtain a better understanding of the determinants of physical activity (European Commission, 2007; Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2008; WHO, 2010).

1.1. MVPA and sport throughout the life course

Although the terms Moderate to Vigorous Physical Activity (MVPA) and sports are often used interchangeably, they are not synonyms. Moderate to vigorous physical activity can be defined as movements that result in moderate to high energy expenditure, such as brisk walking or cycling (Caspersen et al., 1985). In addition, MVPA can include sports (Caspersen et al., 1985) which can be defined as games with rules that require motor actions and that can be played organised or unorganised, such as football or tennis (van Bottenburg, 2001; Tamboer, 1992). Sports can thus be seen as a specific form of MVPA.

MVPA rates, including sport participation, change over the course of people's lives. From early ages on MVPA and sport participation start to decline. Especially in the twenties and early thirties, there is a sharp drop in sport club membership and regular MVPA (Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2014; Tiessen-Raaphorst, 2015). For instance the Eurobarometer (2014) showed the declining sport participation rates in the European Union. Among 15–24 year-old men 74% sports at least with some regularity, whereas this dropped to 51% for the age group of 25–39 (Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2014). For women, there was a drop from 55% for the 15–24 years-olds to 41% for the 25–39 year-olds. In addition, the time spent on vigorous physical activity dropped significantly during these transitions from adolescence to young adulthood (Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2014).

1.2. The importance of parenthood

It has been suggested that such drops in MVPA and sport can at least in part be explained by life events, such as changing schools, first-time employment and becoming a parent (Allender et al., 2008). The transition to parenthood has been marked as an important life event entailing large time constraints that appear to have a strong impact on MVPA and the drop-out from sport, especially for women (Allender et al., 2008; Bellows-Riecken and Rhodes, 2008; Mailey et al., 2014). Despite the fact that there is consensus in the literature that parenthood may negatively impact women's MVPA and sport participation, we are still in the dark regarding linkages between the transition to fatherhood and men's MVPA, including sport participation (for a review, see Bellows-Riecken and Rhodes, 2008).

1.3. Overlooking the impact of fatherhood

In general, the consequences of fatherhood have been largely neglected in scholarly literature (Eggebeen and Knoester, 2001). For many decades, scholars started from the assumption that for men, employment status would be a much stronger predictor of their identity and well-being than their parental status. However, against the backdrop of an increasing number of mothers who have remained in the work force after childbirth, and more egalitarian gender roles, the impact of fatherhood on men's lives has been drawing more and more scholarly attention (e.g., Eggebeen, 2002; Marsiglio et al., 2000; Pleck, 2004).

Although scholars have called for more research on the impact of fatherhood on engagement in sport and exercise (Allender et al., 2008; Bellows-Riecken and Rhodes, 2008; Garfield et al., 2006; Kay, 2006), there are only a few studies which explicitly scrutinize the impact of fatherhood on men's physical well-being (e.g., Dykstra and Keizer, 2009; Eggebeen and Knoester, 2001; Keizer et al., 2010; Keizer et al., 2011; Knoester and Eggebeen, 2006). In general, knowledge about the impact of fatherhood on actual MVPA and sport participation appears to lag behind the knowledge about the impact of motherhood on MVPA and sport participation (Bellows-Riecken and Rhodes, 2008).

1.4. Fatherhood as time-constraint or as social activity?

In the literature, two conflicting mechanisms are postulated regarding the impact of fatherhood on men's lives. Below, we apply them to MVPA and sport. On the one hand, scholars have argued that, in similar lines or reasoning as for women, having children decreases the amount of time men are able to invest in MVPA and sport (e.g., Bellows-Riecken and Rhodes, 2008). Being a parent consumes time that could have otherwise been spent on other activities, such as sport. In addition, becoming a father may alter one's social network. Scholars (Eggebeen and Knoester, 2001; Keizer et al., 2010) have argued that these changes could be either long-lasting –becoming a father is seen as a transforming event that changes men's outlook, attitudes and behaviour permanently, or temporary –changes in men's behaviour depend on their life course stage and the extent to which men actively perform the role of father. If the restricting impact of fatherhood on men's lives is long-lasting, we would likely see that fathers have lower rates of MVPA and sport participation compared to childless men. If the impact of fatherhood on men's lives is temporary, it is expected that the rates of MVPA and sport participation of fathers start to resemble those when they were still childless, once they become empty nesters. We expect this pattern to hold stronger for sport participation than MVPA; Men who view sport as a central aspect of their lives, i.e. who have a strong sport identity (Brewer et al., 1993), might seize the opportunity of the empty nest to take up previous rates of sport participation.

The second, and conflicting, hypothesis is that fatherhood might increase MVPA, including sport participation. It is argued that fathers want to set an example of healthy sport and physical activity behaviour for their children, and function as role models for their children (e.g., Isgor et al., 2013; Shropshire and Carroll, 1997; Yao and Rhodes, 2015). In addition, fathers may become involved in sport club activities of their children or engage in joint activities with their children. If the latter mechanism is the leading mechanisms, we expect to find that

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