



## Do peers matter? A review of peer and/or friends' influence on physical activity among American adolescents

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### A B S T R A C T

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This systematic review investigated the relationship between peer and/or friend variables and physical activity among adolescents by synthesising cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental research conducted in the US. Seven electronic databases were searched to identify related articles published within the last 10 years and the articles reviewed included adolescents between 10 and 18 years. Studies reporting a measure of physical activity for adolescents and at least one potential peer and/or friend variable were included. Research demonstrated that peers and friends have an important role to play in the physical activity behavior of adolescents. Six processes were identified through which peers and/or friends may have an influence on physical activity including: peer and/or friend support, presence of peers and friends, peer norms, friendship quality and acceptance, peer crowds, and peer victimization. The theoretical significance of these results is assessed and the development of peer-related physical activity programs for adolescents is discussed.

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Regular physical activity (PA) during childhood and adolescence is associated with several physical and psychological benefits (Aaron, Jekal, & LaPorte, 2005; Janz et al., 2006). Leading an active lifestyle is likely to reduce health problems such as hypertension, osteoporosis, and the incidence of chronic diseases including coronary heart disease and diabetes in later life (Warburton, Nicol, & Bredin, 2006). PA is also associated with enhanced mental health and improved self-esteem and self-identity among adolescents (Bowden & Greenberg, 2009). Recommendations have been issued for young people to promote regular activities of a moderate and vigorous intensity (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2008), however, large percentages of children and adolescents lag behind such recommendations. Furthermore, nearly half of American youths aged 12–21 years are not active on a regular basis (USDHHS, 2008). The Center for Disease Control and Prevention national study of young people aged 9–13 years found that 61.5% do not participate in any organized PA during their non-school hours (Duke, Huhman, & Heitzler, 2003). Further evidence has shown that PA declines between childhood and adolescence (Grunbaum et al., 2004; Sallis, 2000), and girls have been found to engage in less PA compared to boys (Berkey, Rockett, Gillman, & Colditz, 2003; Pate, Pfeiffer, Trost, Ziegler, & Dowda, 2004). The alarming decline in PA during adolescence, particularly among young females, presents an important challenge to researchers and professionals in health and PA (Duncan, Duncan, & Strycker, 2005).

Parents are an important source of influence on their children's PA (Edwardson & Gorely, 2010). However, as children move toward adolescence (roughly the period between ages 10 and 19 years), they spend increased time with peers enhancing the

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potential for the norms and behaviors of peers to influence their PA levels (Duncan, Duncan, Strycker, & Chaumeton, 2007). Adolescents' experiences with peers in PA can be explored at several levels of social complexity, ranging from individuals' social orientations and perceptions to their interactions, relationships, and group level processes (Smith, 2003). Adolescents' physical and socio-emotional competencies are developed through engaging in team sports with their peers as well as other physical and leisure activities, such as physical education (Salvy et al., 2008). The peer relationships and friendships that are developed through PA offer important opportunities for companionship, support, and recreation. Peer victimization and social isolation, on the other hand, may impose constraints on access to physical activities (Storch et al., 2006). Considering the potential role that peer and/or friend influences may have on adolescents' PA, a comprehensive understanding and synthesis of the research that has been carried out in this area is needed.

Past research in this area has varied considerably in the manner by which 'peers' or 'friends' are operationalized. The term 'peers' has been referred to in the literature as youths' best and closest friends (Kobus, 2003), friends (Springer, Kelder, & Hoelscher, 2006), best friend on a team (Cox, Duncheon, & McDavid, 2009), an unfamiliar peer (Mallet & Lallemand, 2003), and members of reputation-based peer crowds (Strauss, Rodzisky, Burack, & Colin, 2001). For the purpose of the present review, a 'peer' can be defined as a person who is equal to another with respect to certain characteristics such as skills, educational level, age, background, and social status (Reber & Reber, 2001, p.518), whereas, a 'friend' can be defined as a person with whom one has a bond of mutual affection (Adams, Blieszner, & de Vries, 2000). Given that 'peers' and 'friends' have been operationalized in different ways in previous research, the current review considers articles examining the relationship between peer and/or friends' influence on PA among adolescents.

Researchers have considered a number of factors in the peer and/or friend domains that may be related to PA behaviors among adolescents including: social support for PA, presence of peers or friends during PA, peer norms, peer acceptance and friendships, peer crowd affiliation, and peer victimization. Social support can be defined as "all those forms of support provided by other individuals and groups that help an individual cope with life" (Reber & Reber, 2001, p. 691). In the physical activity literature, social support refers to tasks or steps that significant others take to facilitate behavior. There are different types of peer support for physical activity including instrumental and direct support (e.g., peers or friends partaking in physical activity with the adolescent); emotional and motivational support (e.g., peers providing encouragement or praise for physical activity); or observational support (e.g., peer modeling of physical activity).

Another aspect of the peer social context, important to consider in relation to PA, is whether or not youths engage in more activity in the presence or company of peers and close friends than when alone. Peer norms, defined as perceptions of peers' approval for PA, may also be associated with PA (Baker, Little, & Brownell, 2003). Friendship sport quality and peer acceptance are other processes through which peers and/or friends may have an influence on PA. Friendship describes a close relationship between two individuals that is reciprocal in nature and defined by certain qualities such as companionship, loyalty, and esteem enhancement. Peer acceptance, also referred to as popularity, peer status, or social acceptance, describes how the peer group (e.g., teammates, classmates) feels about a specific individual in that group (Stuntz & Weiss, 2009). Distinction between these constructs is important because, although adolescents who have strong friendships may also demonstrate favorable peer acceptance, some adolescents may have a close friend but feel low acceptance by the broader peer group or vice versa (i.e., popular with their peer group but do not have a close, intimate friend).

Peer crowd affiliation is another aspect of the peer context that has recently been examined in relation to PA. Peer crowds are large groups of peers who are defined by their similarity in interests, appearance, or attitudes (Brown, 1990). Peer crowd affiliations provide the adolescent with a sense of identity and belonging, and opportunities for social interactions and examples of common peer crowds include 'populars', 'brains', and 'jocks' (Brown, 1990; La Greca & Prinstein, 1999). Peer victimization, the experience of being a target of peers' aggressive behavior (Storch & Ledley, 2005), is another peer process that may be related to lower levels of activity among adolescents. The current review will synthesize the existing literature on each of these peer processes and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how peer and/or friends' influence may be related to physical activity behaviors among adolescents.

Efrat (2009) reviewed research on the relationship between peer and/or friends' influence and PA behaviors among children, however, Efrat's review focused solely on studies with elementary school children (aged 6–12 years). Given that the influence of peers and friends become increasingly important as children move into adolescence and gain increased autonomy (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007), it is particularly worthwhile to examine peer and/or friends' influence on PA among adolescents.

Adolescents have larger networks of peers than children as well as more stable, intimate, and supportive friendships that occupy more time and have more influence over attitudes and behaviors (Prinstein, Brechwald, & Cohen, 2011). The present paper, therefore, expands on the existing literature by providing a review of research on peer and/or friends' influence on PA behaviors among adolescents. While there have been many studies carried out investigating peer and/or friends' influences on adolescents' PA, there has not yet been a systematic review of such research. This paper is, therefore, a necessity in this area of study.

## Method

### Search

Potentially relevant studies were located by searching electronic databases for primary and review articles. The following databases were searched to identify studies for the current review: Academic Search Premier (EBSCO), Applied Social Sciences

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