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Informing Parent Targeted Interventions to Promote Increased Physical Activity Among Youth

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Physical activity is protective for cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and obesity.¹ Among children, physical activity has also been shown to benefit academic performance,² along with social and psychological functioning.³ While several countries including the U.S. and Canada recommend that children get at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity every day,^{4,5} many children do not meet these recommendations.

Campaigns such as the ParticipACTION “Think Again” public service announcements (PSA) described in this issue, *Family Well-Being and Social Environments* in the *Journal of Applied Research on Children*, are therefore very important public health efforts. The campaign aimed to make parents aware of recommendations regarding children’s physical activity and the reality that many children do not meet these recommendations. It is critical that evaluations of such campaigns take place to ensure that the appropriate message is received by the intended audience. That is why the work by Faulkner et al reported in this issue, is so important. Faulkner found that most parents received the 60 minutes a day of physical activity recommendation message, but many did not perceive it applied to their own children for a variety of reasons. This discovery points to the need for such campaigns to be paired with

additional intervention components to help bring this message home to parents.

To date, most interventions to promote greater physical activity among children have been school based. School based programs with multiple components were found to be effective in increasing children's physical activity.⁶ Such interventions can include different things, but systematic reviews suggest that interventions that include family and parent components have the greatest impact on children's physical activity.⁶ Direct contact to engage parents in ways to support their child's physical activity may have the most promise, but have not been thoroughly evaluated.⁷

Obesity prevention interventions that target general parenting as a component of the intervention have evidence of successfully impacting children's weight status.⁸ General parenting is often defined as the emotional climate and relationship a parent establishes in their home when interacting with their child.⁹ It is made up of a parent's attitude of their role as a parent and the behaviors they engage in to raise or socialize their child. Parenting practices on the other hand, are typically thought of as context specific (e.g. homework) and are specific behaviors parents engage in to influence their child's behavior in that context (e.g. restricting the child from watching TV until homework is complete or

providing transportation for the child to attend sports practice).⁹ To date, there are very few reports of interventions targeting general parenting or specific physical activity parenting practices to increase children's physical activity.¹⁰ The exception are a few parenting targeted interventions that incorporated physical activity in obesity prevention.^{8,11}

Targeting parents as agents of change to increase children's physical activity, especially among younger children is a compelling strategy. However Faulkner et al's findings suggest that in order to be successful, parenting interventions need to also target parental attitudes about their child's physical activity. Similarly, researchers from the United Kingdom have demonstrated that many parents with elementary school aged children believe their child to be active enough, and do not see a need to increase their activity.¹⁰ While parents perceive costs, lack of time, and environmental factors (e.g., weather) as key barriers to children getting more physical activity, parents' lack of concern over the need to increase their child's physical activity is a critical barrier that needs to be addressed by future physical activity parenting interventions. Faulkner et al's findings suggest that a PSA may be one way to make some parents aware of physical activity recommendations, but a PSA needs to be paired with components to change parent's attitudes and practical solutions to overcome parent perceived barriers to increasing their child's physical

activity. Others have suggested that highlighting the positive outcomes of meeting physical activity guidelines other than just weight related outcomes as important messages for physical activity parenting interventions.¹⁰ Future public health physical activity campaigns and interventions need to use evidence based methods to change parents' attitudes and use creative new interventions methods, such as partnering parents and children together to support each other in physical activity behavior change.¹²

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