How do adolescents with autism spectrum disorders perceive participation in physical activities?

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Introduction

Physical inactivity is a big and current public health problem. Especially adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are less physically active. Only few of them achieve the recommendation of daily physical activity (PA) and many of them participate in fewer physical activities compared to typically developing peers. The reasons for not participating in physical activities depend on several factors, yet not comprehensively described from the adolescents’ point of view. Therefore the purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the perceptions, experiences and reflections of adolescents with ASDs’ participation in PA.

Participants and methods

Twenty-four adolescents, diagnosed with ASD without a co-occurring intellectual disability, aged 12-16 years, participated in the study. Data was collected using qualitative interviews and inductively analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

Results

The participating adolescents were a heterogeneous group in regard to their PA habits and preferences. However, all of them expressed that their willingness to participate in PA was conditioned regarding; what, where, when and with whom. The adolescents perceived varied challenges in the activity and the social context during PA, especially during the mandatory physical education. Perceived demands, freedom of choice, physical ability and sense of control affected their PA participation.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that the adolescents’ willingness to participate was associated with interacting and individual-related conditions. These, conditions to participate in PA can erroneously be interpreted as unwillingness to participate in PA at all. Thus aspects of autonomy and knowledge about individual conditions and needs have to be recognized when physical activity enhancing interventions are planned and offered for this population.