

Parental experiences of physical activity

Study findings

November 2023

WHAT DID PARENTS SAY?

Some things change, some stay the same

About travelling:

“...so I consistently cycle to work, that’s been, yeah, essentially a given as the simplest way of getting to and from work.” (father)

“So, we are able to walk to Beavers and Scouts, weather permitting. Time dependent as well...Trampolining’s too far to walk to but cricket is only down the road.” (mother)

About household work:

“So, it has shifted, but whether it feels more... no, I don’t think it’s more, I think it’s about the same. I think it’s a different type of activity. I think it’s more just tidying up after them now, and I think when they’re younger, it’s more around sort of they’re making a mess with food.” (father)

About leisure activities:

“I love to be outside. I love it because you’re alone, you just put [on] some shoes and you can do almost every time. Rain or snow or it’s hot. So I think it’s very easy to go running.” (mother)

“...it’s pretty easy to recount my physical activity because it’s, it hasn’t changed at all actually... especially during the early years when you’re absolutely exhausted and you’re really struggling for any time. the thing I hung onto was going out and having a game of football.” (father)

Thank you for taking part in this project.

For more information, please contact: studyhelp@mrc-epid.cam.ac.uk, citing “Parental physical activity study”



OVERVIEW

Our study looked at how and why physical activity in parents changes as their children grow older. We did online interviews with 12 mothers and 12 fathers, each lasting up to 60 minutes. We looked for patterns in the information given by the parents and wrote down interview quotes to support this.

We were able to identify common themes across the interviews. They showed that changes in physical activity after becoming a parent depended on the types of activities (e.g. for leisure, transport or at work), that children had an influence on parental activity, which changed as they grew older; and that partners were important sources of support to continuing to be active. In this newsletter we give quotes from the interviews to illustrate these findings.

The lead researcher, Rachel Simpson, has written up the findings for her PhD thesis. The findings will inform future policy, practice and research.

IMPACT OF THE CHILD(REN)

In the early days

".. obviously there'd be the odd sort of taking them out in the pushchair for a walk and ... doing the odd bits and pieces cleaning-wise ... but yeah, actively going out of my way to do some sort of physical activity, that completely stopped." (mother)

"she's a lovely child, but for the first 7 months she basically screamed her head off, non-stop 24 hours a day and, and we were like exhausted zombies but...the thing I hung onto was going out and having a game of football or going for a run." (father)

"Then when she was small, both myself and my wife, we would always make sure we had time to, yeah, okay you're minding the kids, you go off and do... and actually I think it's about priorities, you know." (father)

"I was breastfeeding and I think when you're breastfeeding you don't want to exercise because your breasts feel really heavy and they hurt." (mother)



When they grow older

"When they became toddlers, it was a case of if I try to stay at home and do nothing, they will get very irritable and just moody." (mother)

"When he was about nine months old, I started having him on the bike and so the walks would change into, and the drive on a Sunday would change into ... being a cycle ride." (mother)

"...taking boys with me to hockey has actually made it easier...when we had...four under 5, going to hockey was quite a challenge." (father)

"He'll almost every day ask me, "Have you done your yoga?" like he's quite interested to make sure I'm still doing it, which is nice." (mother)

"...it's since they're all out of pushchairs and things we've got quite a lot of footpaths around us so we can quite easily do a...2 or 3 mile loop... and we gradually, you know the distance has gone up." (father)

"I think it becomes harder because you have to juggle so many different things. Especially now they've got their own clubs and stuff that they do in the evenings and at weekends, it's trying to find the time around them." (mother)



Keeping motivated

"...spending time with [child], it's a really nice thing to do as a dad, you know, spend time with my daughter and she's behind me and then we normally go somewhere where there's something for her to do at the other end, ...whatever it is, you know, we try and find destinations that she'll like, so I think that's one of my big motivations for cycling." (father)