

Exploring parents' physical activity motivation during the COVID-19 pandemic: a mixed-methods study from a self-determination theory perspective

Lydia Emm-Collison,^{1*} Robert Walker,¹ Ruth Salway,^{1,2}
Danielle House,¹ Kate Sansum,¹ Katie Breheny,²
Sarah Churchward,³ Joanna G Williams,^{2,4}
Frank de Vocht^{2,5} and Russell Jago^{1,2,5}

¹Centre for Exercise, Nutrition & Health Sciences, School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

²Population Health Sciences, Bristol Medical School, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

³Independent Public Member of the Project Team

⁴Communities and Public Health, Bristol City Council, Bristol, UK

⁵The National Institute for Health Research, Applied Research Collaboration West (NIHR ARC West), University Hospitals Bristol and Weston NHS Foundation Trust, Bristol, UK

*Corresponding author Lydia.Emm-Collison@bristol.ac.uk

Published March 2024

DOI: 10.3310/KPKW8220

Plain language summary

Exploring parents' physical activity motivation during the COVID-19 pandemic: a mixed-methods study from a self-determination theory perspective

Public Health Research 2024

DOI: 10.3310/KPKW8220

NIHR Journals Library www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk

Plain language summary

What was the question?

The COVID-19 pandemic affected parents' ability to be active. Motivation is important for taking part in physical activity. We wanted to know how motivation for exercise had changed since before the pandemic and how it might still impact parents' physical activity.

What did we do?

We asked groups of parents of children in year 6 (aged 10–11 years) to complete a questionnaire and wear a device that measures physical activity. One group did this before the pandemic and two groups did this after the lockdowns. We also spoke to parents two times after schools reopened. We asked about their physical activity, what they felt helped or stopped them being active and how this changed during the pandemic.

What did we find?

Motivation plays a part in how much physical activity parents do. Enjoying activities, being active because it is part of your identity and being active due to health make parents more active. Some parents felt they were more active in the first lockdown, as they had more time, freedom and a choice of new and exciting activities, while others felt the lockdowns led to them being less active. This was due to a loss of connection with other people and feeling less confident in their physical activity.

What does this mean?

This means that

- it is important that parents are well-supported in their physical activity post pandemic
- efforts to help parents be active should focus on creating opportunities for parents to try new activities
- opportunities for parents to be active together might lead to more physical activity, improved connections with others and better well-being.