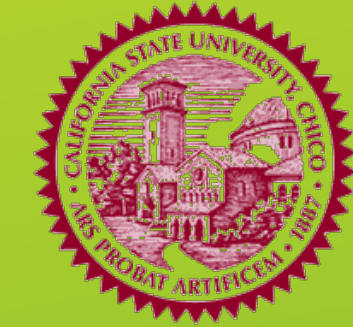


“Just Invite Us”: Autistic Adults’ Recommendations for Developing More Accessible Physical Activity Opportunities

Andrew M. Colombo-Dougovito, Ph.D., C.A.P.E.¹, A. Josephine Blagrove, Ph.D.², & Seán Healy, Ph.D.³

¹University of North Texas ²California State University, Chico ³University of Delaware/Dublin City University



Background

- Autistic adults are reported to engage in lower levels of physical activity (PA) than non-autistic peers.
- Research on PA participation among autistic adults is sparse; primarily, this research has focused on eliciting the perspective of parents and caregivers of autistic adults to construct the PA experiences of their adult children or clients.
- Although this research has supplied a preliminary insight into PA participation among autistic adults and the barriers they may face, this perspective is second hand and, therefore, ancillary to the actual lived experiences of autistic individuals.
- To identify how to provide accessible supportive PA experiences, the direct input of autistic adults is also required to understand their needs.

Method

- This study used a qualitative descriptive design with a constructivist lens to examine autistic participants’ recommendations in PA.
“Constructivism sees the world, and what we can know about the world, as socially constructed.”
- This approach allowed us to situate participants’ responses into the social and environmental contexts that occurred during data collection while also respecting the complexities and subtle nuances, which are influenced by society, of the participants’ lived experiences.
- These data were part of a larger grounded theory study exploring the adoption and maintenance of PA among autistic adults.
- We then conducted a thematic analysis, using an inductive approach, at a semantic level, with a constructionist paradigm, following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke: (1) familiarization with the data; (2) coding, which consisted of using a first-cycle coding method, looking for exploratory categories from preliminary codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) writing up.

Participants

Self-identified gender	
Female	9 (39.13%)
Male	14 (60.86%)
Age range (in years)	
18–24	6 (26.09%)
25–34	4 (17.39%)
35–44	4 (17.39%)
45–54	3 (13.04%)
55+	6 (26.09%)
Diagnosis	
Formal	20 (86.96%)
Self	3 (13.04%)
Highest level of education	
High school	8 (34.72%)
College	13 (56.52%)
Not reported	2 (8.70%)
Employment	
Unemployed	6 (26.08%)
Self-employed	8 (34.78%)
Part time	2 (8.70%)
Full time	3 (13.04%)
Retired	3 (13.04%)
Not reported	1 (4.34%)
Income (\$)	
>10K	10 (43.48%)
10–29K	1 (4.34%)
30–49K	1 (4.34%)
50–69K	1 (4.34%)
70–89K	1 (4.34%)
90K+	3 (13.04%)
Not reported	6 (26.08%)
Marital status	
Single	9 (39.13%)
Married	10 (43.48%)
Relationship	2 (8.70%)
Divorced	1 (4.34%)
Not reported	1 (4.34%)
Living situation	
Lives with family (either partner or partner+kids)	14 (60.87%)
Living with parent	6 (26.08%)
Living independently	3 (13.04%)
Location	
United States	21 (91.30%)
United Kingdom	2 (8.70%)

Findings

- Two themes were developed during the data analysis process*: (1) *It’s helpful to have someone there to support*; and (2) *It’s that sensory thing, it always is*.
 - *Both theme titles were derived directly from participant quotes within that theme.

Theme Excerpts

It’s helpful to have someone there to support

- This theme encapsulates the importance of having vocal advocates willing to encourage and support the autistic persons in both individual and group activities. Support from a loved one—whether a sibling, parent, close friend, spouse, or significant other—was the key for most participants starting and/or maintaining PA.
- Support for PA most frequently came from the participants’ parents who were perceived to know when appropriate to push and when to hold back with their children.
I think when mum instinctively, without knowing how I was different, instinctively understood that I needed to try everything. And she would encourage me even if I decided no to [inaudible], “No, I don’t really want it.” She would encourage me to take two or three weeks out and then try again for two weeks. Planning it ahead, saying, “What if you leave it for three weeks, have a rest, go back for two weeks and leave it again?” (Sandra)
- Many participants also advocated for autistic children’s voices being prioritized and not buried by their parents’ beliefs of what they needed:
[G]et the input from the person themselves, who actually hold the diagnosis. I know some families try to get their children involved in a lot of activities, but maybe it’s not necessarily what the child wants. Like have they ever sat down with the child and said, “what do you or not—do not want? Instead of making all the decisions. I think its kind of ableist to go about it that way. (Nicole)

It’s that sensory thing, it always is

- This theme highlights the critical role that sensory factors play in the success of PA experiences for autistic adults across the lifespan, and how unique sensory needs may be met.
- Sensory overload played out in diverse ways for the autistic adults in this study.
 - David shared that his “senses were constantly under attack” in a gym setting.
 - For William, being in group settings was challenging; yet, he has learned to cope: “when people start to get rowdy, it just makes me very uncomfortable, but I have gotten used to it.”
 - Nicole, Ashley, and Zebo also shared the overwhelming feelings of being in crowds.
 - Sandra talked about crowds and movement in a unique way and the need to mitigate too many bodies in a shared space: “Not always the sound, but the movement loudness, that’s right—would be too much [to want to participate].”
- When appropriately supported and in an accessible environment, for some adults, PA provided sensory benefits long after the single bout of PA.
The more I exercise, also the better my sensory experience is. Like I found—since I’ve noticed that, my office has fluorescent lights, and I start to get a headache. If I stand up and move, stretch it helps a lot. (Elizabeth)

Implications

- The findings demonstrate (often) simplistic straight-forward methods of making PA more accessible for autistic adults: (1) **listening to the perspectives and insight of autistic adults**, (2) **consideration of sensory stimuli when planning for PA participation**, and (3) **encouraging and providing social supports for PA participation**.
- Practitioners working with autistic adults such as personal trainers, physical educators, and physical therapists should continue to stay current with the evidenced practices of their field regarding working with autistic populations, as well as consulting their autistic clients for areas that need to be addressed or accommodated or as one participant succinctly suggested, **“Just invite us.”**
- By **incorporating existing social supports**, autistic adults may be **more comfortable** engaging with certain PA pursuits and may more easily maintain motivation to be physically active. This, however, runs counter to held stereotypes about the social desires of autistic individuals
- By **recognizing the sensory overload** that PA spaces can present, simple adjustments to lighting, sound, and organization may alleviate some or all potential issues. However, these adjustments **should not be limited to an “autism-friendly” hour**, but applied universally; especially, as it is not only autistic persons who have sensory issues in public spaces.

Funding

This work was funded through a Research Seed Grant from the Office of Research & Economic Development at the University of North Texas.

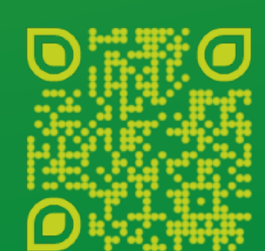
Contact

¹andrew.colombo-dougovito@unt.edu @ThatHippieProf
²ablgrave@csuchico.edu @blgraveaj
³healys@udel.edu

Article



Abstract



INSAR 2021
May 1-4
Online