

## UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENT FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

**Overview of Research outlined in Article:** Eime, R., Harvey, J., Sawyer, N., Craike, M., Polman, R., Symons, C., Payne, W. Understanding the contexts of adolescent female participation in sport and physical activity? In press *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*.

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The physical and psychological benefits of physical activity (PA) are well known, yet despite this many people do not meet the recommended levels of PA. Recently, adolescent girls have come under the spotlight; there has been a noticeably sharp reduction in PA for teenage girls as they transition from primary school into secondary school, and again, as they enter into the final two years of secondary school. This has serious implications for the future health and wellbeing of women and for their ongoing participation in PA, as they transition into adulthood.

To understand more about this, a team of researchers at the University of Ballarat and Victoria University led by Dr Rochelle Eime sought to examine this decline across modes (group/individual PA; competitive and non competitive) and settings (school; club; neighbourhood) to identify whether there are consistent patterns of participation and determinants for female adolescents. Female school students from Year 7 (ages 11 – 13 years) and Year 11 (ages 16 – 20 years) at metropolitan, regional and rural Australian schools participated in the study and completed detailed information about past and current PA across different modes and settings.

The findings show some concerning trends. For example, and irrespective of age group, less than half the adolescent girls met or exceeded the recommended PA on the previous day. A comparison of participation between adolescent girls in Year 7 and Year 11 showed that younger adolescents were more likely to participate in physical education at school and in all competitive contexts (except school team sports) than older adolescents. Instead, Year 11 students had higher participation rates in non competitive and non organised PA. It appears that in the latter years of school females moved away from PA in group sports, such as netball or gymnastics and pursued individual PA such as jogging or walking.

These findings are important as they offers insights into PA for females adolescents in early and late secondary school and greatly informs future strategic planning for programs and policies to address the decline of, and to promote greater uptake of PA for young women in school and as they transition into adulthood.

Physical Education programs at school engage early adolescents in PA, however this wanes with age. While sporting clubs are in a unique position to independently reinforce the importance of PA for adolescents and young women the links could be most effectively developed between schools and community sports clubs, to engage adolescents in high level PA activities.

Future planning that facilitates PA for adolescents in organised sport is advocated for long term health and well-being, from adolescents into early adulthood and beyond. Strengthening the participation in organised PA for adolescent girls could help to reduce the population health problems currently experienced including obesity, being overweight and poorer health (especially for women in regional Australia).

*For more information about this study contact Dr Rochelle Eime, joint VicHealth Research Practice Fellow (Physical Activity) at the University of Ballarat and Victoria University, Email: [r.eime@ballarat.edu.au](mailto:r.eime@ballarat.edu.au)*