

VicSport Update: Participation Trends of Australian Children

It is impossible to talk about lifestyle related diseases without asking, why are there still a significant number of Australians who do not undertake the minimum amount of physical activity required on a daily basis to promote positive health benefits?

An investigation into the participation rates of our children may provide an answer. It has long been recognised that many of the beliefs and behaviours we carry through our lives are developed during childhood. Our physical activity and eating patterns often become so entrenched during childhood that they are difficult to change even as highly intelligent adults who should – and quite often do – know better.

I was recently asked to give a keynote presentation on the physical activity patterns of Australian children, so set about seeking out reliable data on the sport and physical activity trends of young Australians. Although there is not a lot of comprehensive data available (despite the importance of getting our children active), the data that is available simply highlighted what coaches, teachers, community workers and researchers have suspected for some time.

Despite efforts from the sector and government to promote the benefits of physical activity, and the risks associated with sedentary lifestyles, a large number of children in Australia do not engage in adequate amounts of physical activity.

The Children's Participation in Cultural and Leisure Activities¹ (CPCLA) is one of the few comprehensive surveys conducted into the physical activity practices of Australian children. Conducted as part of the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) Monthly Population Survey in 2000, 2003 and 2006, the CPCLA survey collects information on children's participation in selected organised sport and cultural activities outside of school hours in the 12 months prior to interview. The survey also collects information on use of computers and the internet during and outside of school hours for the same period, and information on participation in other selected leisure activities (such as skateboarding/rollerblading and watching television, videos or DVDs) in the two weeks prior to interview.

According to the CPCLA survey, in 2006 there were approximately 2,664,700 children in Australia aged between 5 and 14 years. Results showed around 63 per cent (1,691,100) of children had engaged in a sporting activity outside of school hours (which had been organised by a club or association) at some time during the preceding year. At 63%, more children engaged in organised sport than the 33%(869,600) who engaged in the cultural activities measured by the survey (playing a musical instrument, singing, dancing or drama) for the same period.

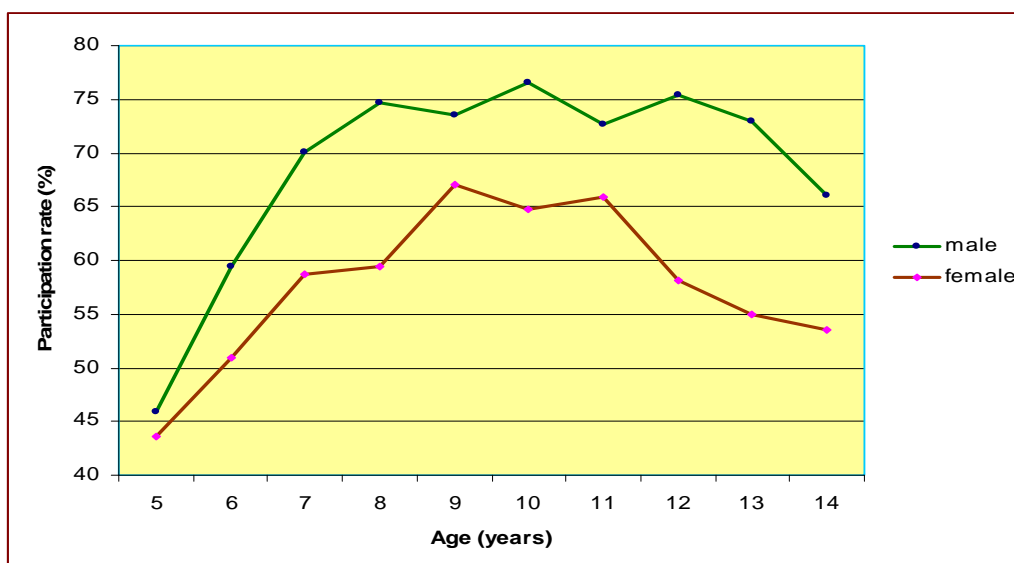
Disturbingly, around 27% (716,400) of children did not take part in either an organised sport or cultural activity outside of school hours in the 12 months prior to survey. The survey also showed 97 % of children had watched television, videos or DVDs in the two weeks prior to interview. On average, 19.9 hours of television based viewing was recorded outside of school hours for the two weeks prior to interview.

From 2000 to 2006 there was a marginal increase in sport participation rates from 59% in 2000, to 63% in 2006. This was due primarily to a 6% increase in participation rates for girls (52% to 58%), and a 3% increase for boys (66% to 69%). Interestingly, in the six years from 2000 to 2006, the activity recording the greatest increase in participation rate was bike riding, which increased by 9% among girls and 3% for boys.

A comparison of trends by age shows the lowest participation rate recorded for children is at age 5 (45%), while the highest rate recorded was at age 10 (71%). After the age of 10, participation rates progressively decline to 59.8% at age 14. These findings support anecdotal evidence that suggests as children move into high school years, their participation rates tend to decline. A comparison of participation rates for boys and girls (see graph 1) shows that the participation rate in organised sport for combined ages is much higher for boys (69%) than girls (58%). An analysis of participation rates across ages shows both boys and girls follow very similar patterns in reaching their peak participation rates between the ages of 8 and 12 years, after which noticeable declines take place up to 14 years.

Participation rates in organised sport at five years of age are very similar for boys (45.9%) and girls (43.6%). Participation rates continue to increase for both boys and girls before reaching their maximum levels somewhere around the age of 9-10. For girls, the maximum rate of participation was recorded at age 9 (67.1%) while boys reached their maximum rate of 76.5% at 10 years of age. The participation rate for both boys (66.1%) and girls (53.5%) then progressively declines to the age of 14.

Graph 1: Children's Participation Rates in Organised Sport by Age and Gender

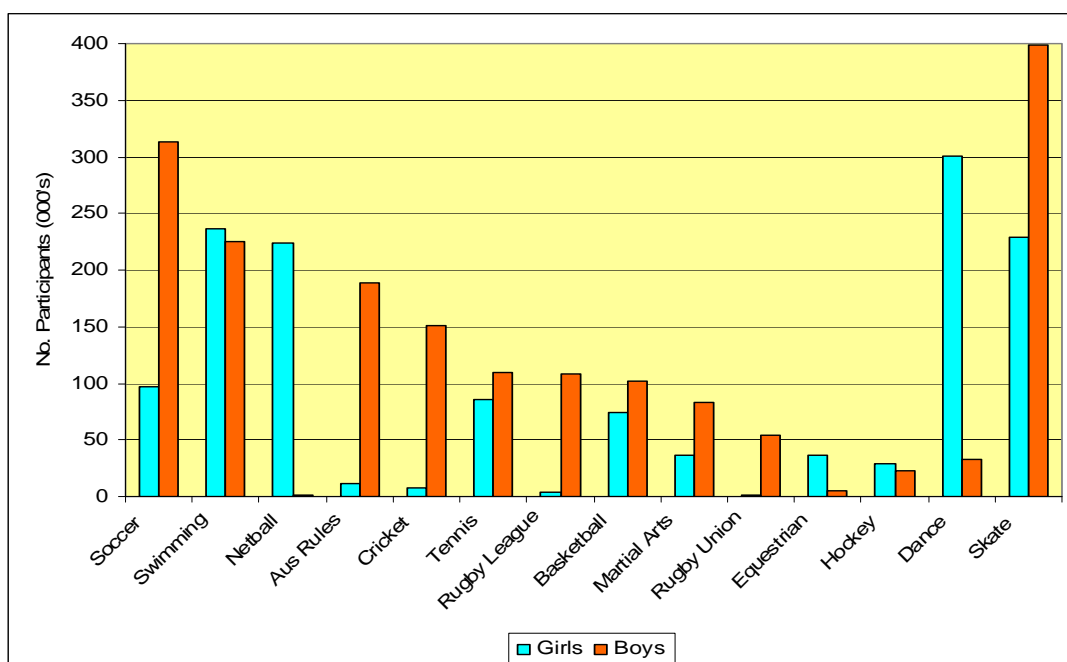


The cut-off age for data collected in the CPCLA survey is 14 so there is no data for participation rates for the ages 15-18. The closest data that could be found for participation rates for this age group comes from the 2001 Household Income and Labour Dynamics survey, which showed 46% of 15-17 year olds exercised three times per week or more. This data indicates the combined participation rates for males and females remains at levels similar to those measured at 14. Given this data was not measured on a gender specific basis however, it is not possible to further analyse participation rates by gender to better understand if participation rates vary significantly for 15 to 17 year olds.

In regard to participation rates for specific sporting activities (see graph 2) for children aged 5-14 years, the most popular organised sport activities were soccer and swimming (a large proportion of the participation rate for swimming in this age group would be due to involvement in learn to swim programs, and not only club/squad swimming training). On a gender specific basis, for girls, the most popular organised sport activities were swimming, netball and soccer. For boys, the most popular activities were soccer, swimming, Australian Football and cricket. Interestingly, survey results showed the most popular activities for both girls (dance) and boys (skate based activities) aged 5-14 years were not 'traditional' structured sports, but were alternative physical activities. In addition, results also showed more children aged 5-14 years indicated they engaged in bike riding more regularly than any other physical activity. According to the survey, 803,000 girls and 1,000,000 boys rode a bike at some time during the year prior to survey.

These findings, although they must be approached with some caution given the survey assessed these activities on the basis of a child having engaged in this activity at "some time during 12 months prior to interview", do indicate children are looking for both the traditional "mainstream" and "alternative" physical activity opportunities.

Graph 2: Most popular participation activities for boys and girls aged 5-14 years



While the figures outlined indicate that a significant number of children are engaged in physical activities as noted previously, this data is based on participation in these activities at “some time” during the 12 months prior to survey. To make a more realistic assessment of the value of engagement in these activities, it is important to assess them in regard to the amount of time each week children engage in activities.

When looking at frequency of participation in organised sport, of the 1.69 million children aged 5-14 years who engaged in physical activity during the year, only 836,000 (49.4%) were involved 53 times (once per week) or more. For girls, only 45% of all those participating did so once per week or more, whilst for boys, it was 52.8%.

This indicates that, although many children engage in organised sport during the course of a year, they may not do so often enough to achieve the minimum levels of activity required to promote health benefits. This is an important consideration given that recent research by the Queensland University of Technology² showed today's school leaver has access to around 5000 hours less school-based physical activity than children in the 1970s.

From the statistical evidence provided it is clear community sporting clubs and organisations are doing a great job in providing physical activity opportunities for young people outside of school – a remarkable fact given these clubs rely almost entirely on volunteer labour. The statistics also indicate, however, that 55% of Australian girls and 47% of Australian boys aged 5-14 years are not engaged once per week or more. This is not good enough. Clearly more needs to be done to get our children active, and more needs to be done to support the community sporting clubs who often struggle on a daily basis to procure the resources they need to get our kids active.

Kate Roffey
CEO

References:

1. *Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006). Children's Participation in Cultural and Leisure Activities. Accessed at www.abs.gov.au*
2. *Fynes-Clinton, J. (2007). Kids Locked Out – Children's Sport is Beyond the Budget of Many Parents. The Courier Mail, 10 March.*