Boys and men over 70 more vigorously active than their female peers

Researchers in the UK and US have found that exercise levels vary between genders at all ages. Boys were found to be more physically active than girls on the playground, and in the over-70 group men exercised more intensively than women.

The findings come from two UK-based projects, A-Class (‘Active City of Liverpool, Active Schools and SportsLinx’) and OPAL (‘Older People and Active Living’), which were presented at the UK Society for Behavioural Medicine conference in Exeter, UK on 6 January.

The A-CLASS project, coordinated through Liverpool John Moores University, assessed the activity levels of Liverpool children by observing the activities of 10- and 11-year-olds on school playgrounds. They found that because of the different ways that boys and girls socialise, boys end up having around 6% more 'vigorous-play' time than girls.

According to Dr Nicky Ridgers of Liverpool John Moores University, ‘Our study shows that girls and boys play differently. Girls tend to spend time in smaller groups and engage in verbal games, conversation and socialising. Most boys play in larger groups, which lend themselves more to physically active games, such as football.’

To encourage girls to be more physically active, Dr Ridgers concluded, ‘schools should be aware of the differences between the way girls and boys behave in the playground and the fact that girls tend to favour small group activities. They could then consider the availability of equipment and provision of playtime activities that would encourage girls to take part in more vigorously active play.’

The A-Class project assessed the effects of structured exercise activity programmes on children's physical activity, health and fitness over a two-year period. The research addresses concerns about the rising numbers of overweight or obese children. While the initial results do not show the impact of different playtime activities on weight, the team believes it may be a factor.

Dr Ridgers said: 'It is a concern that girls' activity levels are lower than boys and, although it is just one piece in a complex picture, this could be contributing to girls being overweight and obese.'

The two-year OPAL project examined the movements of elderly residents in Bristol, UK. The researchers worked closely with 240 people aged 70 to 96 from many different neighbourhoods, assessing activity using accelerometry and GPS; examining the purposes of daily journeys and physical function; and evaluating mental well-being. The study placed particular emphasis on understanding the effect of neighbourhood characteristics on activity.

Project leader Professor Ken Fox of the University of Bristol said: ‘Older people find it difficult to build sufficient activity into
their lives. Our project is designed to provide a solid foundation on which to build programmes and policy to improve the physical activity levels of older people as the benefits are profound.'

OPAL's preliminary results show that men are significantly more active than women. 'In this study we are observing very low levels of activity among most people over 70,' commented Professor Fox. 'More than 70% of the people involved in the research take fewer than 5,000 steps a day, for example. Women are more likely to be less active than men and have lower levels of physical function.'

The study found that men perform more higher-intensity physical activity than women, and attributed this discrepancy to men taking more trips out of the house. However, the researchers also found that men also sit down for longer periods in the day.

'Women do more lower-intensity activity, which probably represents daily tasks around the house,' Professor Fox explained. 'This would suggest that traditional family roles are still identifiable in this generation. We are now taking a closer look at what may lie behind this gender difference and are attempting to identify the best ways of promoting physical activity to help improve mental well-being and physical fitness among the over 70s.'

Professor Adrian Taylor of the University of Exeter said: 'Society and our environment are leading us to do increasingly less physical activity with adverse health consequences such as heart disease, diabetes and mental health problems for people of all ages. Studies like these are helping us to understand how physically active the UK population really is, which can then be used to inform how best to promote greater physical activity across all age groups.'

Source: University of Bristol; Schools Health Education Unit (SHEU)

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