

Teens interested in healthy minds -- and ripped bodies

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Dreams of washboard abs and toned arms may seem to be the main motivation for the average teen to lace up their running shoes. But over 1,000 Montreal high school students disagree. Teens, it seems, are smarter than their parents when it comes to approaching exercise as something that affects one's whole body.

In a recent study on adolescent perceptions surrounding physical activity, James Gavin, professor in Concordia University's Department of Applied Human Sciences, found that teens are just as aware of the mental benefits of exercise -- such as increased confidence, self-esteem and autonomy -- as they are of physical benefits.

"We're looking at a generation that has grown up with parents who have yo-yo'd around exercise, talked incessantly about what they should do and what they haven't been doing. These adolescents are savvy about the lingo of exercise, seeing it as part of a lifestyle whereas a generation ago there might have been less of a pervasive awareness," says Gavin.

Prompted in part by current statistics that show most teens are not getting enough exercise, Gavin and his colleagues surveyed students from both public and private schools in Montreal. The researchers gauged teens' perceptions of physical activity by interviewing participants in small groups and asking them to discuss questions such as what they thought people got out of exercise, and how they thought physical activity affected overall mood, actions, and personality.

Although teens did comment on physical benefits of exercise like flexibility and endurance, they also perceived elements like leadership and team skills development, positive emotional impact, and character development to be just as beneficial. The study also found that these responses were equally common among boys and girls.

Gavin, who is also Director of the Centre for Human Relations and Community Studies at Concordia, says he was surprised to find that the teens were so aware of the personal growth benefits associated with physical activity. He feels that the news about the teens' sophisticated understanding of physical activities should be a wakeup call to those who market exercise based solely on looks. "It's a hugely important finding because the marketing of exercise to both adolescents and adults has been largely around how it makes you look better, helps you lose weight," he says.

Also interesting was teens' advice when asked what suggestions they would have for their physical education instructors. "The predominant response was 'we need more variety, choice, and flexibility,'" says Gavin, adding that many said they were on the lookout for new ways to interest themselves in physical activity. "If physical education in the school system looks like running around a gym and doing calisthenics, or playing certain games they've been playing since grade school, then it may not have the appeal or impact they are looking for," says Gavin.

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