

MOTHERS WITH DEPENDENT CHILDREN

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Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide an understanding of the motivations and barriers specific to women who have dependent children (mothers) that enable or impede their participation and volunteering in sport and leisure time physical activity. Issues and opportunities for further research evolving from the literature are identified, examples of sport programs that have acted to address issues for mothers are discussed, followed by recommendations to further advance organisations in the quest to increase opportunities for mothers in sport and leisure time physical activity. Finally, a case study on a sport development program is presented to illustrate some of the considerations in getting mothers actively involved and connected through sport.

Many women with dependent children also have other caring roles including looking after parents and grandchildren, and/or socio-demographic characteristics which impact on their sport and physical activity options and behaviours. While acknowledging the intersection of these and other roles, the focus of this chapter is on women as mothers.

Literature Review

A range of studies spanning more than 30 years have provided consistent evidence that mothers commonly prioritise the physical activity needs of their family before their own (Currie, 2004; Lewis & Ridge, 2005;). However, research specifically on why mothers participate in organised sport and the benefits that they accrue from this participation is somewhat limited. Therefore, the literature presented in this chapter takes a broad view of sport involvement and covers mothers' leisure time physical activity (LTPA, encompassing active recreation) as well as their involvement in formally organised sport. Mothers are not a

homogeneous group, and clearly their involvement in sport will be influenced by individual, cultural, economic, environmental and societal considerations. However, the extant literature suggests that these mothers' level and type of involvement can be explained by considering two key aspects: (i) motivations; (ii) barriers. It is important to acknowledge the body of work pertaining to gender based leisure constraints and related theory, however this literature tends to mainly refer to women in general rather than women as mothers.

Involvement in LTPA and sport

Research suggests that the motivation of mothers to participate in LTPA and play sport can be classified into four main factors:

1. Sense of belonging
2. Body awareness
3. Health and wellbeing
4. Identity

Assuming a role in sport as a volunteer is underpinned by a different set of motivations, related to parenting and motherhood.

Sense of Belonging.

Numerous studies have found that the primary motivation of mothers' participation in LTPA and sport is related to gaining and retaining a sense of belonging and social networks (Hanlon, Morris & Nabbs, 2010). For example, it has been found that social interaction and camaraderie of being a team member can attract working mothers to sports programs, and accountability to team members can motivate them to continue (Dixon, 2009). Similarly, meaningful connections to others was created in a netball program for mothers, and weekly commitment encouraged longer term involvement (Walsh et al., 2018). Likewise, collective social spaces to belong and "fit in" with other women retained mothers in a study on climbing

(Dilley & Scraton, 2010). Evidence suggests that emotional and relational connections add value to mothers' participation in sport (Spowart, Burrows & Shaw, 2010).

In their research on recreational runners McGannon, McMahon and Gonsalves (2017) found that blogging offered mothers the opportunity for social connection that worked to keep them committed to activity. The social connection gained through blogging allowed mothers to express how they felt about, in this case running, noting a sense of strength, confidence, accomplishment and pride in their achievements (McGannon et al., 2017). Blogs afforded an opportunity to share stories of empowerment and thus encourage other mothers to become runners (McGannon, et al, 2017).

Belonging to a group can provide women with opportunities to collectively challenge and disrupt ideals of motherhood. For example, having an identity alongside that of a mother, developing an ethical self-stylization that was akin to a lifestyle and valuing feelings of enjoyment and fulfilment were found to be important aspects of women's involvement in surfing (Spowart et al., 2010). Traditional gendered identities and roles were challenged by mothers who climbed and found space in which to "be" and "be different" (Dilley & Scraton, 2010, p. 136). LTPA, provided the opportunity to disassociate from the demands of motherhood and its expectations (O'Brien, Lloyd & Riot, 2016). Motivations to re-frame discourses of a good mother and prioritise their own needs for physical activity can include: recognising the importance of time out for mental health; placing an emphasis on health and social benefits; and engaging in "pleasure, play, transgression, social interaction and release" (Lewis & Ridge, 2005, p. 2304).

Body Awareness.

Engaging with the physicality of one's body is another important contributor to mothers' involvement. Engagement with activity can be tracked from when a woman is pregnant. In a study of pregnant women who exercised, women described sensuous embodied connections,

coupled with negotiated “biomedical discourses of risk, health and maternal responsibility” (Nash, 2011, p. 62). In O’Brien et al.’s research, (2016), recognition of post child birth changes in physical strength and capability led mothers with young children to alter their activity patterns to engage previously unused muscles and create an embodied sense of self. Changes in physicality from surfing was evident from mothers and in turn this contributed to their feeling of wellbeing (Spowart et al., 2010).

Tensions however exist for many mothers who engage in LTPA to meet coercive body ideals (Currie, 2004). For example, in one study pregnant women were motivated to exercise by the belief it would benefit the foetus and assist with maintaining their physical appearance (Nash, 2011). However, issues of body image, particularly post-baby bodies, evoke feelings of shame and embarrassment that negatively impacted on women engaging in physical activity. This included mothers who did not want to exercise around “20-year old babes in their mid-drifts” (Nash, 2011, p. 40).

Running is often linked to providing a way to change body shape or appearance (Bond & Batey, 2005). In the study of recreational running mentioned earlier, running was empowering for the mothers involved, as it was a sport in which they were doing the activity for themselves, rather than to achieve limiting normative ideals of the female body (McGannon et al., 2017). Transformative connections have been identified in studies where mothers found their running led to them discovering previously unknown capacities (cf Bond & Batey, 2005; McGannon et al., 2017).

Health and Wellbeing.

Health and wellbeing motivations of mothers to be physically active can be associated with the life cycle as a mother. For example, pram walking was found to encourage mothers with babies to get out of the house (Currie & Develin, 2002) and mothers with older children often engage in LTPA programs with their children to spend more time together (Ransdell et

al., 2001). In contrast, Dixon (2009) identified that having family members involved in a mother's activity could constrain their enjoyment and influence their choice of activity.

Physical activity has been used to reframe women's view of themselves as better mothers, improve their mood and provide an avenue of relaxation (Lewis & Ridge 2005). Actively negotiating time for the 'self' has been found to motivate mothers to sustain their participation and raise their confidence to cope with life as a mother. Mothers who play sport can temporarily escape the ethic of care and create "time and space for themselves" (Bond & Batey, 2005, p. 77). In a study of mothers who snowboard, the passion of snowboarding and experiences of freedom were major driving factors that underpinned the mothers' active persistence for negotiating time to participate (Spowart, Hughson & Shaw, 2008). Similarly, O'Brien et al., (2016) argue that participation in physical activity allows mothers to feel different to their everyday lives through experiencing pleasure and enjoyment. Mothers in their study described emotions such as "feeling good", "peace and quiet", and feelings of excitement and being energised (O'Brien et al., 2016, p. 228). The feeling of pleasure was also an incentive in a study of mothers who surfed, as their sense of an embodied identity allowed them to be a "different self" (Spowart et al, 2010, p.1193).

The unequal division of domestic labour in heterosexual relationships has long been identified as a barrier for mothers to access leisure (e.g. Brown et al., 2001). Therefore, having good support networks provides mothers with the motivation and opportunity to devote time to the 'self' and participate in LTPA and/or play sport. Support from partners, family members and friends enable mothers to negotiate time for themselves (Spowart et al., 2008), and to access LTPA and sport (Brown, et al., 2001; Dixon, 2009; Dilley & Scraton, 2010; Hamilton, Cox & White, 2012). This includes support from husbands/partners with their schedules to enable access and assist mothers who juggle work and school schedules to

negotiate time for sport and provision of childcare facilities (Bond & Batey, 2005; Dixon, 2009).

Identity.

Through participating in sport women can see themselves as more than simply a mother (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; McGannon et al., 2015; McGannon et al., 2017). Participating in LTPA and sport reinforced their self-definition in positive ways, encouraged them to pursue activities such as running (Bond & Batey, 2005), and recognise themselves as a “role mother/advocate” and “resilient mother runner” (McGannon et al., 2017, p.129). For some mothers a sense of identity is gained through exercise, this might be as an elite athlete or as a role model. For others exercise considerations regarding their cultural identity is important.

Elite athlete.

Mothers who play sport can fulfil competitive goals and maintain an athletic identity (McGannon et al, 2017; McGannon et al., 2018; Nash, 2011) but may need to negotiate work-family balance in order to meet specific sport performance goals (McGannon et al., 2018). For elite women athletes with children, sport provides the opportunity to achieve athletic goals, think positively and improve their focus (McGannon et al., 2015). The identity of motherhood can also temper performance pressures, while an athletic identity helps manage the demands of motherhood (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; Palmer & Leberman, 2009). The ability to train and compete gave mothers in McGannon et al.’s (2018) study a sense of balance in their lives, reduced their stress and allowed them to be better mothers through “compatible competitive athlete-mother identities” (p.45).

The social expectations however of motherhood (selfless, self-sacrificing, feelings of guilt), can impede elite athlete’s re-entry into their sport, with many having to balance and juggle expectations of motherhood with training and competing (Appleby & Fisher, 2009). The guilt mothers experience intensifies when they return to sport (Palmer & Leberman,

2009; McGannon et al., 2015; Ronkainen, Watkins, & Ryba, 2016), particularly when they relied on support to enable them to train and compete (Geirc et al., 2016). Other research on elite athletes who are mothers has suggested that an athletic identity is incompatible with motherhood resulting in withdrawal from sport (Ronkainen et al., 2016).

Role models.

Physically active mothers have been portrayed as role models for their children (Batey & Owton, 2014; McGannon et al., 2017; McGannon et al 2018; Nash, 2011). For example, playing netball allowed mothers to feel as if they were a role model for the family, reinforcing their role 'good mother' role (Walsh et al., 2018).

Elite athletes re-framed the ethic of care, suggesting that a return to sport allowed them to role model for their children while blending "their identities as mothers and athletes" (Darroch & Hillsberg, 2017, p. 67). Similarly, Appleby and Fisher (2009, p. 8) argue that through role modelling women both accepted and resisted the social construction of motherhood and in this way, sport offered a "transformative process of embodying, resisting and negotiation". Sport became a site of empowerment where women developed new identities and capabilities, such as a complex understanding of self, "deploying this construct to legitimize their desire to train and compete" (Darroch & Hillsberg, 2017, p. 67). By extension elite athletes also saw themselves as role models for other women to encourage them to continue being active after child birth (Palmer & Leberman, 2009).

Culture and ethnicity.

While there is a growing body of work on the various cultural and ethnic dimensions of participation of women in LTPA and sport, few studies have explored the specific sub-group of mothers.

Generic research with women has identified that the support of family and friends is of critical importance to motivate mothers from culturally diverse backgrounds to participate in

LTPA and sport. For example, Latina women suggest that exercising with their husbands, and other friends provides motivation for them to engage in LTPA (Skowron, Stodkolsa & Shiness, 2008). In many cultures with strong traditions of family responsibility the latter takes precedence over individual needs and may lead to women experiencing guilt and shame if they focus on themselves in sport (Stronach et al. 2016).

Organisations that actively support the provision of culturally appropriate programs, facilities, childcare and norms of culturally appropriate behaviour have been found to influence the decision of mothers to engage in LTPA (Skowron et al., 2008) and sport (Sawrikar & Muir, 2010). However, some ethnic minority groups can feel marginalised or excluded from sport participation. For example, in Australia mothers from culturally diverse backgrounds have reported that they feel sport is “exclusively a white institution” (Sawrikar & Muir, 2010, p. 366) where racism occurs (Stornach et al., 2016). Feelings of exclusion, coupled with a lack of belonging, and discomfort from not knowing the rules of the game can lead to mothers opting out of participation (Sawrikar & Muir, 2010).

Volunteering Mothers.

In many western countries, where youth sport systems rely on volunteer labour to survive, there is a significant level of parental volunteering; often across multiple roles such as coach, manager, board member etc. In Australia more than 20 percent of mothers of children 5-14 years old volunteer for a sport and recreation organisation (ABS, 2009). There are a range of intrinsic reasons why mothers volunteer including: spending time with their children, personal and career development and developing social networks (Women in Sport, 2017). The motivations to volunteer also overlaps some of the above stated motivations for participation, namely for a sense of belonging and identity.

In study of working coach-mothers, taking on the role of coach provided an opportunity to spend time with their children, helped their children and others develop life skills, and role

model behaviour (particularly for their sons) which enriched their involvement (Leberman & LaVoi, 2011). The mothers in this study also noted the passion for the sport they coached provided motivation for their involvement.

Sport leadership volunteering can assist mothers form a strong sport identity, and it can be coupled with a motivation to mentor and develop others while also bringing about change (Leberman & Palmer, 2009). Mothers who coach see it as an opportunity to challenge “perceptions about women in positions of power and leadership” (Leberman & Lavoie, 2011, p. 481).

Volunteering can generate positive feelings that have the potential to transfer to women’s other roles, as workers and mothers. Through sport leadership roles mothers have acquired greater tolerance, become organised and focused on personal growth to enable them to be better leaders (Leberman & Palmer, 2009). The mothers in the latter study believed that more women would volunteer to coach if organisations recruited using the tactic of translating mothering skills onto coaching.

Support networks provide motivation and enablers for mothers to volunteer in sport. Strong social supports, including a supportive partner, can be drawn on to overcome societal disapproval of assuming leadership roles, and organisational resistance to accepting the presence of children in a sport setting (Leberman & Palmer, 2009)., Mothers recommended that organisations support co-coaching approaches as this reduces time commitments and may entice more mothers to coach (Leberman & Palmer, 2009). Sharing the load meant women are more able to manage worker-mother-coach roles, reducing the feelings of inadequacy, guilt and stress (Leberman & LaVoi, 2011).

Identification of Issues and Opportunities for Further Research

While there is a growing body of research on women in sport in general; our specific knowledge about mothers playing or volunteering in sport is relatively sparse. This is

particularly notable within different sub-groups across dimensions such as culture, ethnicity, religion, (dis)ability, gender identification, etc. and within different participation populations such as recreational participants, elite athletes, and volunteers. A prime opportunity exists to advance knowledge in this field to identify how sport can develop and be more inclusive to women who are mothers across this diverse range of circumstance and situations.

Establishing and retaining connections is a pervasive theme throughout the literature. This presents an opportunity to further develop our understanding of mothers' participation through a lens of various conceptualisations of embodied connections through sport.

From a personal perspective as a mother, there is an opportunity to further examine ways in which sport can enable mothers who may feel ill at ease with their bodies after childbirth to feel more comfortable in a sporting environment. Other research opportunities include: exploring what mothers require to play or volunteer in sport within their particular life cycle stage; identifying how sport makes women feel external to being a mother; mother's identity associated with engaging in sport, both at amateur and elite level; and role modelling. A deeper examination of the physicality of sport could provide insights into how sport can assist mothers capitalise on opportunities for health and wellbeing and/or develop on body-mind connections.

The reliance on support networks provides an opportunity for research to focus on how the sport environment can connect women to groups who are also mothers. In addition research is required to understand the strategies and support networks of family and friends that enable acceptance and access for mothers to be physically active and volunteer in sport. For example, mothers exercising identity is interesting as it points towards relying on social networks to assist with physical activity becoming part of life or a habit rather than a chore.

A connected environment that brings people together, provides an opportunity to explore how sport organisations can build connections to enable mothers gain a sense of belonging in

group programs and to access programs and volunteer roles through the provision of family friendly facilities. Findings could be translated to new knowledge on practical implications for management in sport on strategies and programs required to strengthen connections to recruit and retain mothers in general and within the different sub-groups.

The new knowledge gained from these research opportunities could be used to develop policies, strategies and initiatives to assist organisations in the quest to attract and retain mothers as participants and volunteers in sport.

Practical Actions Taken to Address the Need to Connect Mothers to Sport

There are many practice-based instances of mothers or sport organisations across the globe taking action to embed connections through sport for mothers. Examples of blogging, creating an exercise identity, and providing a female friendly program and a connected school environment.

Belonging Through Blogging (Australia)

Blogging can provide a sense of belonging to a group, it is low cost, and available to mothers regardless of the time of day. A Cycling Mums Australia website was created by a mother who struggled to find a training space she felt comfortable with after having children. The site contains stories posted by mothers and seven ambassadors were appointed to share their stories to help women achieve their cycling goals

<http://www.cyclingmumsaustralia.com.au/>

Sport Creating an Exercise Identity (England)

Mothers can also be encouraged to re-engage in sport through focused interventions (Cramp & Brawley, 2006). An example of a focused intervention is Back to Netball (B2N), a program to re-engage inactive mums in England. B2N allows mothers to explore their exercising identity and as a result “participants begin to view exercise as central to their weekly routines and an important part of who they are” (Walsh, et al., 2018, p. 615). The

program emphasises social connection, rather than skills, and feedback on the program indicated that women developed a sense of competence, confidence and capabilities (Walsh et al., 2018).

Family Friendly Program (Australia)

Mums Who Ball and Baby Ballers programs are two interconnected programs conducted by Basketball ACT (Australia). Mums Who Ball is a mother's daytime weekly competition focused on the fundamentals of basketball and game play. Weekly commitment is optional and there are no requirements for ongoing registration. The competition runs for four 10 minute quarters. On the court adjacent to the mothers playing is the Baby Ballers program where their children aged 6 months to 4 years, experience visual and kinaesthetic learning <https://www.playbytherules.net.au/resources/case-studies/basketball-act-mums-who-ball>

Support Network through School Settings (USA)

To encourage social connections and camaraderie with other mothers, districts and parishes of schools have come together to create a sport environment for mothers. A mother's volleyball league located within the Jasonville School district (USA), has run for over 40 years and comprises close to 300 mothers (<http://the-source.net/mothers-volleyball-league-celebrates-40th-anniversary/>). The Archdiocese of Baltimore (USA), created a similar program that has been running for over 10 years (<https://www.archbalt.org/ihtm-moms-basketball-league-scores-big/>). Both examples involve the mothers fund raising for the hosting schools.

Recommendations

In addition to the research opportunities identified in this chapter, we provide five practical recommendations for governing sport bodies and schools. These recommendations (Table 1), are based on the findings identified in the literature reviewed and focus on

education, policy and practice to enable women greater opportunities as mothers to build connections and support networks.

Table 1

Building Connections and Support Networks through Sport

Recommendation	Implications
Government health, school and sport bodies to educate younger women before they become mothers about the importance of maintaining a connection to sport	Increased awareness by women on the connection sport provides for their mental and physical wellbeing as a mother
Sport organisations to increase understanding on what mothers need to play and volunteer in their sport	Increased understanding will enable amendments to infrastructure, policies, strategies and programs that are more inclusive to a broader range of members
Sport organisations to create a blog on their social media for mothers who play or volunteer in their sport	Assist mothers to identify strategies for managing the demands of motherhood and involvement in sport, how sport helps them as a mother (e.g. role model to their children), and how they feel as an individual playing or volunteering in sport
Sport organisations to create family friendly scheduling and programs e.g., the option for mothers to participate in sport at the same time and venue as their child, mother and child programs	Increased number of mothers playing instead of sitting while their child plays sport, children see their mothers playing sport (role model), exercise identity formed

Schools in collaboration with sport organisations to initiate sport programs targeted to mothers at convenient times e.g., just after ‘school drop off’ or prior to ‘school pick up’, in return mothers organise a fund raiser event for the school	Schools represent a safe and familiar space to play sport where embodied connections are made for mothers
Sport organisation to introduce ‘shared volunteering’ to assist with work, domestic and family responsibilities	Prevalence of co-coaching, co-officiating, and being a co-committee member in sport e.g., alternating weeks of coaching or officiating for half a season

Case Study in Australia

The following case study is an example of ‘Sport for development’. Soccer (football) is used as a tool to engage mothers in the community and provide an opportunity for the participants to achieve connections relating to intrapersonal, interpersonal and organisational aspects.

Soccer Mums Program <https://soccermums.com.au/>

Aim.

An introductory football program designed specifically for less active mothers (particularly those with children school aged or younger), to increase their physical activity, have fun, meet others, and learn basic football skills. No experience required.

Initiative.

Created by Football Federation Victoria, partnered with Melbourne City Football Club, and funded from VicHealth.

Program.

The length of the program varies from 4 – 10 weeks depending on venue availability. Each weekly session is 30 – 45 minutes, tailored to the needs of the participants and conducted by Program Deliverers who understand the demands of being a mother and the need to create a social and fun environment. The hashtags typify the focus of the program #nojudgement #noexperiencerequired #jointhefun Sessions are conducted on training nights at the club where mothers can deliver their child/ren to training and then participate in their own session that is completed before their child/ren's session. Mothers who do not have a child playing football or associated with a club can still join the program.

Website.

Provides options for women to register for a program, a free come and try session, and/or attend a Melbourne City Football Club Match Day. The site also allows people to register to be a Program Deliverer and the recruitment process includes the need for potential deliverers to understand and appreciate the life of a mother and to create a fun and social environment for participants. Clubs can also register interest to host a program and are supported by a Program project manager and can request/nominate a person to be a Deliverer for their club.

The site provides a video link to a 'soccer mums' program including responses and a photo gallery of women's experiences.

Soccer Mums Deliverer.

This is a paid position. The person needs to complete a Deliverer's course or one-on-one training depending on the launch of the program at the club. A manual provides support for the Deliverer on program delivery and activities to use. .

Cost. The cost to participate in each session was \$10AUS in metropolitan areas and \$5AUS in regional areas, with discounts advertised at various times for different programs. Each program has two free sessions included in the upfront registration fee.

Value-add.

A female football festival for participants is held annually to provide the opportunity for mothers to network and play football. Half time at Melbourne City games, include exhibition games by participants.

Outcomes.

In the first 18 months there has been an overwhelming number of registered (680) participants. It is expected the second 18 months will result in 2,500 participants. Satisfaction with the program remains high, with interest in rolling out this program nationally from other member Federations. Amendments to enhance the program based on participant feedback include inserting to the Deliverer manual more challenges for the mothers e.g., more skill-based and technical information and upskilling the leadership of Deliverers.

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