Health Research Charities Ireland

CHARITY-FUNDED RESEARCH IMPACT STORY

Title of project: Participation in physical activity: What really matters to adolescents with physical disability?
"Youth Experience Matters"

Project time frames: November 2022 - February 2024

Lead researcher: Dr Ailish Malone, Senior Lecturer in Physiotherapy, School of Physiotherapy, RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences.

HRCI Charity Funder: The Central Remedial Clinic

OVERVIEW

Physical activity is hugely important in keeping our bodies and minds healthy. But people with physical disability, especially teenagers, tend to do less physical activity than their peers, meaning means they're more at risk of poor health in adulthood. Members of RCSI's Young Person's Advisory Group stressed that many of them had experienced isolation and exclusion when trying to participate in physical activity.

In response, Dr Ailish Malone and her team, supported by funding from the Central Remedial Clinic (CRC) and the Health Research Board (HRB), planned a study to understand the experiences of adolescents with physical disability in physical activity, and their priorities for participating in the future.

PARTICIPATION

Young people and teenagers with physical disability were central to all stages of the project, and their expertise in their own lived experienced was recognised throughout.

Over 100 teenagers (aged 13 to 17) with physical disability completed a questionnaire measuring current engagement in physical activity, and suggested ideas for improving participation. This generated 108 ideas which were then voted on to develop the top 10 priorities for physical activity participation. The priorities for the teenagers related to things like feeling accepted, being involved, and the accessibility of the environment.

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OUTPUTS

This project was developed from the start with impact in mind. An early benefit was that some of the young participants were inspired to ask their healthcare teams about getting active. After the study was finished, the team worked hard to share the results widely including through a beautifully designed infographic and a booklet for policy makers and national governing bodies in healthcare, disability and sport.

They also organised a 'World Café' event focused on translating each of the 10 priorities into actions for change. Over 40 people attended this event including young people with disability and their families, health care professionals, teachers and special needs assistants, policy makers, people working in sports organisations, and community volunteers. They captured the important discussions on the day through creating a visual recording, and the co-funding charity, the CRC, produced a short video about the event.

IMPACT

Since then, the research has led to a number of tangible impacts for young people. The first was to grow connections between sectors involved in supporting physical activity. This was spearheaded by an event called Move-Connect-Thrive, at which young people with physical disability and their families engaged with public representatives from national and local government and senior policymakers from Sport Ireland, to highlight the importance of their participation. The project team collaborated with another RCSI project called My Moving Brain, to enable young people with physical disability and other neurological conditions to experience inclusive sport.

A PhD scholar is now doing further work on the priorities, including a review on ways community and healthcare professionals around the world have worked together to support physical activity participation in young people with physical disability and how these might be implemented in Ireland. The team are also working on an online crowdsourced directory of accessible health and physical activity services called Access Information Map.

A new project started in December 2025 called CO-PARtake funded by the HRB and CRC as an Applied Partnership Award. Created with young people and families, healthcare, and community professionals, CO-PARtake aims to strengthen links between healthcare and community by adapting a physical activity referral scheme to meet the needs and preferences of young people with physical disability.