

# Experiences with Social Participation in Group Physical Activity Programs for Older Adults

C. Zimmer, M. H. McDonough, J. Hewson, A. Toohey, C. Din, P. R. E. Crocker, & E. V. Bennett

## Purpose

To understand older adults' experiences with social participation in group physical activity (PA) programs, in order to inform the development of delivery models that promote and sustain engagement.



## Results

### 1. Ways group PA programs influence social participation

- **A meaningful context for connecting**
  - Participants became familiar to one another & formed connections by participating in an activity of shared interest.
- **Instructors' expectations of social interaction**
  - Instructors organized program spaces to be conducive to socializing & facilitated small talk & engagement between participants.
  - Some instructors hampered social interaction by keeping participants moving and eliminating partner activities.

## Study Methods

Observations and focus groups were conducted and analyzed using interpretive description.

- **Phase 1:** observations of group PA programs at 4 recreation facilities (295 participants from 16 programs were observed)
- **Phase 2:** focus groups with PA program participants, to understand their experiences and perspectives regarding social participation in the program (38 participants aged 55-80)

### 2. Ways social participation addresses psychosocial needs



- **Increasing social contact and interaction**
  - Participants attended because they valued socializing. For some, the program comprised most or all of their social contact.
  - Socializing was vital to social participation (but not everyone liked constant chatter).
- **Fostering social relationships and belonging**
  - Participants could develop weak or close social ties & build a close group of friends.
  - Perceptions of genuine relationships helped form a sense of belonging and community.
- **Promoting regular engagement**
  - Positive experiences with social participation grew interest in and commitment to classes.
  - Being active with others was more fun.
  - Caring social relationships created motivation to attend classes.

## Take Home Messages

- Emphasizing the social experience built around shared interests encourages social participation
- Social interaction is critical to social participation
- Instructor training should highlight the value & benefits of social experiences for older adults
- Instructor training should help instructors balance physical and social aspects
- Opportunities for social interaction should be suited to participants' preferences for socializing

## Acknowledgements

Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The authors thank the City of Calgary. Infographic created by Rowan Van Roessel.

## Full report published at:

Zimmer, C., McDonough, M. H., Hewson, J., Toohey, A., Din, C., Crocker, P. R. E., & Bennett, E. V. (2021). Experiences with social participation in group physical activity programs for older adults. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 43(4), 335-344. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.2020-0335>.

Open access at:

<https://prism.ucalgary.ca/handle/1880/113534>



UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY  
FACULTY OF KINESIOLOGY  
Relationships and Exercise Lab

For more information on this study and the Relationships and Exercise Lab, contact Dr. Meghan McDonough at [meghan.mcdonough@ucalgary.ca](mailto:meghan.mcdonough@ucalgary.ca)