GIRLS AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY: A MULTI-METHOD QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Abstract
The present study examined the multilayered social contexts that foster or hinder adolescent girls’ participation in physical activity. The current study consisted of two phases, prospective interviews followed by focus group discussions. The interviews utilized a guided, life history format with 7 girls of diverse backgrounds, ages 9-15 years old over a 4-year period. Key themes that emerged in the interviews were used to inform the focus group discussions. In total, 4 focus groups discussions were conducted with 13 girls of diverse backgrounds, ages 12-13 years old. Both the interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and analyzed for themes using a constructivist grounded theory methodology. Data analysis was informed by the feminist theoretical approach, with an emphasis on social and contextual factors. The domains of school, family, peers, and embodied experiences of physicality emerged as facilitative contexts to engagement with physical activity during childhood. During adolescence, however, these contexts became barriers to physical activity. This study suggests that physical activity promotion programs for adolescent girls require multifaceted strategies, with a particular emphasis on the intersection of gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnocultural/racial heritage.
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mother; your wisdom and strength is such a source of inspiration. Thank you for dragging me to the baseball field twenty four years ago.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The current research has aimed to examine the well-documented trend of girls’ reduced involvement in physical activities when they enter adolescence. This research therefore has investigated the ways in which girls’ physical activity becomes restricted through adolescence and the complex social and relational contexts that shape this restriction. The study drew upon two bodies of literature, the discourse of embodiment, “experience of engagement of the body with the world” (Allan, 2005, p.177), and the research on physical activity. Caspersen and colleagues’ definition of physical activity was used, which was defined as “any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that results in energy expenditure” (Caspersen et al., 1985, p.127). The current investigation used the term “physical activity” to encompass a broad range of activities involving exercise, sport, and physical education. Physical activities involved engagement in high-energy activities including sports, make-believe games, team games, and explorations indoors and outside, during and after school hours, and organized or spontaneous forms of play. The literature regarding both embodiment and physical activity identifies adolescent girls to be the most at risk group for the development of decreased body satisfaction and significant declines in physical activity (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2007; McVey et al., 2003).

Adolescence is a time when many girls begin to feel disconnected from their bodies (Piran & Ross, 2005), and when a significant drop in self and body esteem have been repeatedly documented (Fox, 1999). For example, approximately 76% of girls (ages 12-16) report that they are dissatisfied with their bodies (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001), a dissatisfaction associated with a range of eating disorders, substance use patterns, self-harm behaviours, and disengagement from physical activity (Tolman & Debold, 1994; Fredrickson
& Roberts, 1997). Several prospective studies have found that low body satisfaction during early and middle adolescence predicts higher levels of global mental distress, including lower self-esteem and depressive symptoms (Holsen, Kraft, Roysamb, 2001; Johnson & Wardle, 2005; Stice & Bearman, 2001). Low body satisfaction is also related to higher levels of eating disorders and related disordered eating (Cooley & Toray, 1996; Stice, 2001; The McKnight Investigators, 2003), dieting, unhealthy weight control behaviours, and lower levels of physical activity (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2003). Both cross-sectional and prospective research reveals that participation in nonelite, nonlean physical activities can serve as a protective factor by enhancing confidence and a sense of competence in the body, as well as improving body satisfaction (Haines & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006).

A number of research studies have suggested that engagement with physical activities and parental and peer attitudes encouraging physical activity can act as protective factors to improve body satisfaction among adolescent girls (Kelly et al., 2004; Stice & Shaw, 2004). In addition, participation in physical activities decreases symptoms of depression and anxiety and improves mental well-being (Fox, 1999). Smolak, Murnen, and Ruble’s (2000) meta-analytic review of research examining the relationship between eating disorders and physical activity suggests that participation in certain sports can be a protective factor particularly among high school girls. There is little longitudinal research on the physical activity patterns of adolescent girls as they transition into womanhood. Adolescent girls, especially those who are less privileged related to socioeconomic standing or other social factors are consistently found to have the lowest physical activity levels (Sallis et al., 2000). Low levels of physical activity among Canadians, particularly adolescent girls have been highlighted as a major concern regarding their lifelong well-being (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2007). Physical activity is essential to adolescents’ positive psychological and physical development, while
inactivity has been linked to adverse consequences, such as negative body image and related conditions (Haines & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006). These studies suggest that being physically active may increase a girl’s self-esteem by shifting the focus from what her body looks like to what her body can do. In addition, research has found a connection between participation in physical activities leading to experiences of empowerment through the development of confidence, assertiveness, skills, and strength (Theberge, 1985; Deem & Gilroy, 1998; Gorely et al., 2003). Therefore, the research suggests that engaging in physical activity may be a protective factor against mental illnesses for young women.

Physical activity is essential in adolescents’ healthy physical development, while inactivity has been linked to childhood obesity, cardiovascular disease risk factors and type 2 diabetes (McKenzie & Kahan, 2008). Studies consistently show that physical activity declines rapidly during adolescence (Sallis, 2000; Caspersen, Peteira, & Curran, 2000; Kimm, et al., 2002; Allison & Adlaf, 1997). Sadly, 91% of Canadians ages 12-24 are not getting the recommended amount of physical activity with girls being less active than boys at nearly every age (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2007). While the research identifies adolescent girls as an at-risk group for physical inactivity there is limited knowledge about the reasons why girls perceive more barriers particularly around adolescence.

Traditionally, research focusing on physical activity participation has adopted quantitative methods in order to develop large studies that could assess trends in participation and attitudes among participants (Allender, Cowburn, & Foster, 2006). However, these studies are unable to explain the reasons for participation or non-participation in physical activity in the same manner that qualitative approaches can. Qualitative methods allow participants to share their individual experiences, motives and reveal barriers to participation in physical activity (Thomas, Nelson, & Silverman, 2005). A review of the qualitative
research in the UK examining participation in sport and physical activity found that adolescent girls expressed barriers linked to negative experiences at school, peer pressure, identity conflict, uniforms, boys’ dominance in class, competitive classes and lack of teacher support (Allender, Cowburn, & Foster, 2006). While the research revealing barriers to girls’ engagement with physical activity is a crucial step forward in addressing the problem of girls’ disconnection from their bodies, little attention has been given to uncovering the processes that result in girls’ disengagement from physical activities.

Diverging from previous research, the current qualitative research study invited the participants to talk directly about how they experience their bodies in various social arenas. By talking to the girls about their experiences compared to listing a set of barriers and facilitators to their engagement with physical activities, this research uncovered the concurrent social processes that disrupt adolescent girls’ freedom to engage physically with their bodies. By examining the social forces, which work to restrict girls’ engagement in physical activities this research documented the progression from passionate engagement with physical activities as children to a gradual but recognizable shift to reduced involvement with physical activities while entering into adolescence.

The objectives of this research included: 1) Examination of the multilayered social contexts (school, family, peers, and embodied experiences of physicality) that fostered or hindered girls’ participation in physical activity; and 2) investigation of the impact of changes in physical activity patterns on girls’ self and body experiences. It was expected that the exploration would lead to knowledge that could be applied towards school-based and other initiatives that will empower girls to live in their bodies in a more active and constructive way than the commonly observed patterns of disengagement from physical activities (Sallis et al., 2000) and negative body evaluations (Cash et al., 2004), patterns
observed at puberty and maintained throughout the life span (Tammelin et al., 2003).
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to understand how varied social contexts fostered or hindered girls’ participation in physical activity and how these changes in physical activity patterns impacted girls’ self and body experiences it was important to review several bodies of research. The fields of literature that are discussed in the following section include: (1) embodiment; (2) the social construction of sport and gender; (3) physical activities’ association with psychological and physical health; (4) barriers and facilitators to engagement with physical activity; and (5) efforts to increase physical activity.

Embodiment

To understand how complex social and relational contexts shape adolescent girls’ restriction of physical activity and the impact that reduced engagement has on girls’ relationship with their bodies, it was important to examine the literature on embodiment.

The literature on girls and women’s mental and physical health illustrates the central role the body plays in moderating how they feel and live in their bodies. To date, the research has predominantly used the construct body image to tap into how individuals’ perceive their physical body and how they feel others’ perceive it. While body image is useful in understanding how individuals perceive their external appearances and whether this perception is distorted, the construct neglects to capture the range of individuals’ body-based experiences. In addition, the emphasis on an externalized view of the body supports a conceptual framework rooted in the artificial separation between mind and body. Increasingly researchers are recognizing the shortcomings of using body image to understand how individuals live in their bodies wholly with both mind and body present. Perspectives on Embodiment, editors Weiss and Haber (1999) state that the transition from “the body” to
embodiment “corresponds directly to a shift from viewing the body as a nongendered, prediscursive phenomenon that plays a central role in perception, cognition, action and nature to a way of living or inhabiting the world through one’s acculturated body” (Weiss & Haber, 1999 p. xiv). Therefore, understanding the complex social processes affecting girls and women’s physical and mental health requires an understanding of how social locations such as gender, ethnocultural/racial heritage, socioeconomic status, (dis)ability, and other markers of power influence how one lives in the body.

Piran and Teall (2012) similarly suggest that utilizing embodiment may expand the current understanding of mental health issues beyond the construct of body image. They explain that embodiment differs from body image in several important ways such as the range of body-related experiences it can cover, its inner focus, and the nature of the dialectical relationship with the social context. First, they suggest that embodiment represents a range of experience from positive practices such as self-care to disruptions in embodiment such as alexithymia to negative body image. Therefore, embodiment can address a range of co-existing behavioural disruptions related to women’s health and well-being that body image cannot adequately explain. For example engaging in risky sexual activities without desire. In her book *Dilemmas of Desire*, Deborah Tolman (2002) interviews girls about their experiences of sexual desire. Some of the girls report not experiencing desire when engaged in sexual activities. Tolman and Debold refer to the femininity’s association with the absence of desire/hunger as the “no-body body” of femininity, “an image [that] is flat, has no feelings, is silent…can have no appetitive, no hunger, no desire, and no power of its own” (Tolman & Debold, 1993, pg. 301). Tolman utilizes the construct of embodiment in her work and defines it as, “the experiential sense of living in and through our bodies. It is premised on the ability to feel our bodily sensations,
one of which is sexual desire” (Tolman, 2002, p. 50). As a result, Tolman’s work, also puts forward evidence for the usefulness of using the term embodiment which can capture the complexity of body based experiences over the concept of body image.

The second reason Piran and Teall suggest that the construct of embodiment is different from body image is that it allows for the body to be conceptualized as a site of human subjectivity rather than an evaluation of oneself from the outside. Since body image requires an internalization of an external gaze towards one’s body then even positive body image implies an objectified perspective of the body. Similarly Blood (2005), also proposes an alternative framework to understanding the “lived body” through highlighting the importance of inner bodily awareness rather than body image.

Third, Piran and Teall maintain that embodiment reflects the complexity of the body-culture relation. Katzman and Lee’s (1997) cultural perspective on disordered eating critiques body image as a construct that conceptualizes eating disorders as mainly a Western culturally bound syndrome that overvalues sexism at the exclusion of other systemic social process of oppression such as poverty, heterosexism, and racism. Piran and Teall suggest that the construct of embodiment is more inclusive of multiple and diverse disruptions in the body domain in relation to varied social conditions. Therefore incorporating embodiment perspective is advantageous as societies become increasingly diverse and culturally integrated. In their chapter, Piran and Teall’s (2012) definition of embodiment is rooted in Merleau-Ponty (1962) and his students’ work that defines embodiment as the “experience of engagement of the body with the world” (Allan, 2005, p.177). Piran and Teall believe this definition, “reflects not only the breadth of possible subjectively-perceived embodied experiences, but also their inextricable connection to social contexts and structures” (Piran & Teall, 2012, p.2).
In order to understand the theoretical shift from body image to embodiment, it was important to briefly understand the ideological foundations of both terms. The construct body image is rooted in Rene Descarte’s separation of the mind and body, *Cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”) (Descarte, 1662). Hence, Cartesian rationalization insinuates that individual’s identities can exist independently of their bodies. In her writings, Susan Bordo (1993) argues that the Cartesian dualism results in a disembodied self by the way it constructs the body as something apart from the true self. In contrast, she suggests that the body is an essential aspect of one’s identity. In *Unbearable Weight*, Bordo asserts that the central features of Cartesian dualism are: 1) “the body is experienced as *alien*, as the not-self, the not-me,” 2) “the body is experienced as *confinement and limitation*: a ‘prison’, a ‘swamp’, a ‘cage’,” 3) “the body is the *enemy*, the body as the source of obscurity and confusion in our thinking,” 4) “the body as the locus of all that threatens our attempts at control” (Bordo, 1993, p.144-145). These features of the Cartesian dualism result in the popular notion of the “mind over body” mentality in which there is a constant struggle between rational versus irrational, a concept rooted in ancient philosophical arguments associating the mind with masculinity and the body with femininity. A patriarchal line of reasoning that maintained a social order in which masculinity was to be viewed as naturally superior. Feminist thinkers have argued against naturalized dualisms (mind/ body, masculine/feminine, rational/irrational) that inherently create and maintain power differentials (Bordo, 1993).

French existential-phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) challenged the mechanistic view of the body perpetuated by Cartesian rationalization. His work on the phenomenology of the “lived body” emphasizes the understanding of the body as an active agent, and the source of human subjectivity (Crossley, 1995). Therefore, perception plays an
essential role in understanding as well as engaging with the world, asserting that perception is an embodied experience. While Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that the body has an object side (i.e. sensible side which can be seen and touched, etc) he also advocated for another side, a conscious side that sees and touches and experiences its world in a meaningful way (Crossley, 1995). He argues that the active body does not passively receive messages from the world but actively derives meaning from its engagement with the environment. Therefore the body is an individual’s way of being-in-the-world of experiencing and belonging to its environment.

Merleau-Ponty moves beyond a narrow understanding of the body as an object allowing psychological theory to incorporate the body in its entirety. Subjectivity is not an inner realm, set back from the real world. It is a sentient engagement with and openness to the world, which assumes and consequently embodies sociocultural discourses. Therefore the primary way of learning about the world is through the body. Weiss (1999) argues that “while Merleau-Ponty does provide the first systematic phenomenological investigation of the body as the ground for all perception… he too, never recognizes the primary impact that sex, gender, class, race have on how as well as what it is that we experience” (Weiss, 1999, p. 41).

Feminist theorists draw upon Merleau-Ponty’s work to show how the body is experienced through gender. Coy (2009) argues that women’s lived experiences have been framed by centuries of patriarchal ideologies linking women synonymously with the body, from Hippocrates’ theory that female ‘hysteria’ was caused by the floating womb to Descartes’ dualism of male/female and mind/body. The creation of such dichotomous categories creates a hierarchy that continues to pervade various social institutions. Consequently, Witz (2000) argues that feminist scholarship has been hesitant to focus on the
physical body out of concern of reinforcing the connection of ‘female’ with ‘body.’ Bordo (1993) claims that feminist theorists have recognized for some time that control over the body is the centre of women’s lived experience. Therefore, the current investigation intentionally explored how girls’ embodied experiences affected or mediate their participation in or disengagement from physical activity and sport.

Philosopher Iris Young’s (1980) essay, “Throwing like a girl” offers an insightful exploration of how girls’ socialization in a patriarchal culture results in what she calls “modalities of feminine bodily comportment,” the reality that “feminine existence in the body frequently is both subject and object itself at the same time and in reference to the same act” (Young, 1980, p. 143). Women’s lack of practice in using their bodies and performing physical tasks results in perceiving their bodies to be fragile rather than a medium of agency and power. Thus, Young asserts, “throwing like a girl is the result of women’s constraint and confinement in which girls fail to fully utilize the body’s spatial and lateral possibilities” (Young, 1980, p.145). Young’s account combines the insights of the lived body by Merleau-Ponty and the theory of the situation of women as theorized by de Beauvoir to illustrate that feminine bodily comportment is not the result of physiology. Young emphasizes that, “girls and women not being given the opportunity to use their full body capabilities in free and open engagement with world, nor are they encouraged as much as boys to develop specific bodily skills. Girls play is often more sedentary and enclosing than the play of boys, in school and after school activities girls are not encouraged in sports. Girls are not asked often to perform tasks demanding physical effort and strength, while as the boys grow older they are asked to do so more and more” (Young, 1980, p. 54).

The fact that women live in their bodies as both object as well as subject illustrates the dual relationship that girls and women must negotiate when engaging in physical activities.
Young argues that the objectified bodily existence accounts for the self-consciousness of the feminine relation to her body and resulting distance she takes from her body. Due to internalized objectification, the spatial modality adopted by girls and women results in restricted movements such that limbs are kept enclosed and around themselves. Young (1980) points out that for a woman to open her body freely with extension and outward directedness may invite objectification. The risk of being gazed, judged, or evaluated is not the only threat of objectification. Women also live with the danger of the invasion of her body space and in its extreme form, bodily violence. Young (1980) argues that the enclosed space, which has been described as a modality of feminine spatiality is in part a defense against such invasion. Women tend to project an existential barrier enclosed around them in order to keep the other at a distance. Therefore women learn to live within a confined and enclosed space in order to project some small area in which she can exist as a free subject.

Young’s research was important for the current investigation because she sets a foundation of how differential socialization between girls and boys affects how the two genders learn to live in their bodies. Additionally, this important essay highlights how one’s gendered embodiment is further influenced by the potential of harm or unwanted gazes, this is particularly relevant for girls in physical activities as the majority of sports is conducted in the public context and in front of mixed gender audiences. Finally, Young’s essay draws attention to the negotiation between subject and object that needs to be negotiated by girls when engaging in physical activity. Consequently, Young’s work has often been referenced in research investigating girls and women’s embodiment when engaging in physical activities and sport. Some of these studies will be highlighted below.

Yarnal and colleagues’ (2006) interview and observational study investigates how participation in a fire fighting camp resulted in young women becoming more aware of their
experiences of embodiment. The researchers suggest that learning how to fight fires required the young women to learn about their bodies, to use their bodies, and therefore, to be embodied. Embodiment was thought to have occurred through incremental learning comprised of information, practice, failure, working through problems, and reflectivity. These processes were consistent with Goffman (1972) and Merleau-Ponty's (1962) discussion of the body as a source of meaningful action that has the potential to transform a situation by serving as a source of learning and knowing. Yarnal and colleagues (2006) argued that elements within the camp space were critical to embodied learning. One of the elements highlighted was the social context comprised of both crew leaders and campers. Crew leaders acted as role models through mentoring, motivating, monitoring, and disciplining campers in order to have them learn a range of skills and knowledge needed to fight fires. In addition the social solidarity between campers such as relying on each other for safety was also seen as a critical element to embodiment. Unfortunately the researchers did not follow the participants to see how their experiences at Camp Blaze may have generalized to other social contexts. This research highlighted the necessity of having a social environment that encouraged embodiment through positive role models, motivation, and group solidarity. Yarnel and colleagues’ (2006) study informed the current investigation as participants were asked about how their varied social domains affected their sense of embodiment.

Theberge’s (2003) research similarly draws upon interviews conducted at an adolescent girls’ hockey camp and examines an analysis of the relationship between gender, sport, and physicality. Theberge highlighted how the participants’ narratives described hockey as being a physical sport that often demanded them to be “aggressive,” powerful, and fearless in the use of their bodies. While the participants’ describe the physicality of the game
they also highlight the range of emotions they felt when playing, such as excitement, pride, and delight. In addition, the study also drew attention to the participants’ responses to gender-based differences in hockey such as the prohibition of body checking in girls and women’s hockey.

Theberge’s research identifies that participants experience mixed feelings about gender based differential rules. Another important theme illustrated by Theberge’s research was how many of the participants spoke about differences in the organization of men’s and women’s hockey that bear on the practice of the sports. Theberge stated that, “most significantly for the analysis of gender and embodiment developed here, players suggest in their accounts that the superior skill level of male players, including the more intense physicality, is an outcome of the more advanced development and greater support for boys’ programs” (Theberge, 2003, p. 510). Theberge made an important connection between examining gender inequities and embodiment, however, the participants are not asked directly about how these gender inequities influence the body based practices they engage in, in and outside of the hockey rink. For example, Blinde and Taub’s (1992) research highlighted how female athletes often prescribe to femininity norms outside of the sports arena. Therefore, while Theberge’s research makes the important link between gender inequity and embodiment, it was important for the current research to extend on this knowledge and examine how this inequity directly affects the embodied experiences of young women.

Impett and colleagues (2006) also use embodiment to examine how yoga affects self-objectification. The researchers define embodiment as, “an awareness of and responsiveness to bodily sensations” (Impett et al., 2006, p. 40). The study documented a decrease in self-objectification for women after participation in a two-month yoga intervention. More
specifically, the participants reported caring less about their physical appearance and paid more attention to how their bodies felt. These results suggest that increasing frequency in physical activities that focus on connection to the body may lead to increased embodiment and well-being. While this study is useful in illustrating the connection between yoga and feelings of greater connection to the body, it is important to recognize that the participants who committed to the two-month yoga intervention were already signed up for yoga classes. Therefore, it is possible that the participants may have already been more connected to their bodies than a community sample and occupied locations of privilege related to social class.

The research examining how physical activity affects girls and women’s sense of embodiment reveals the usefulness of the construct of embodiment to understanding how girls are living in and experiencing their bodies. In addition, to embodiment both Yamal and colleagues’ and Theberge’s research identify notions related to gender and gender inequities. The next section will examine the social construction of both sport and gender.

**The Social Construction of Sport and Gender**

To examine how varied social forces impact adolescent girls’ participation in physical activity, social discourses related to gender and sport are discussed. First, the social construction of sport is addressed through an exploration of girls and women’s historical involvement in sports, as well attitudes and behaviours towards female athleticism. Second, the social construction of gender is described by briefly examining philosophical understandings of sex and gender followed by research reviewing gender role conformity and resistance. Lastly, this section briefly reviews literature on gender differences that arise during adolescence.

**The Social Construction of Sport**
Sport refers to any activity involving physical exertion and skill that is governed by a set of rules or practices (adapted from Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2008). Historically, sports have been viewed as belonging exclusively to the masculine domain. Women were excluded from participation in sport due to gender expectations and physiology (Powell, 1981). During the Victorian era, women’s bodies were viewed by the medical professionals as frail and not able to engage in sport without causing uterine damage (Ibid). During this time, Elizabeth Blackwell the first female physician in the United States argued in a series of lectures and later in her book, Laws of Life, With Special Reference to the Physical Education of Girls, that the first law of life was the necessity of exercise. Blackwell’s work was radical for the time as she went against the conventional wisdom of her colleagues and advocated physical fitness for girls and women (Blackwell, 1852). During the same time, liberal feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft, fought for women’s right during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries arguing that rights of freedom and equality are owed to all rational beings regardless of sex (Jagger, 1983). Roth and Baslow (2004) insist that liberal feminists were instrumental in the passage of important legislations for women in sport. In 1972 the United States’ Title IX, the Educational Amendment Act, banned sex discrimination in education and forced federally funded institutions to be equitable in their distribution of resources devoted to sports (Durrant, 1992). In Canada, similar efforts in the 1970s were established to create equal opportunities for girls in school-based sport programs such as the development of the first National Conference on Women in Sport and the establishment of the provincial human-rights commission allowing individuals to address sport-related sex discrimination (Status of Women Canada, 2002).

While girls’ participation rates rose dramatically in sports, they have never equaled the level of boys’ participation (Statistics Canada, 2005). Although, Canadian policies
initiated proactive efforts to level the playing ground between men and women, such legislation could not transform social barriers related to the perception of sports and gender. In *Taking the Field: Women, Men and Sports*, Messner (2002) identifies that while girls and women have increased their participation rates in sports, the domain of sports remains a contested space. He argues that gender is collectively constructed through the day-to-day practices of sports participants, the structured rules and hierarchies of sport institutions, and the dominant images and messages spread by sports media. Overall Messner’s (2002) work reveals that while much progress has been made, multiple barriers continue to obstruct gender equity for girls and women’s sports.

Therefore, while girls and women may have been given more accessibility to engage in sports, more research is needed to understand how the social construction of femininity influences girls and women’s attitudes and perceptions towards sports. It is impossible to increase girls and women’s involvement in physical activity without understanding the social processes that prevent or lead them to disengage.

Lorber (1993) argues that despite increased participation by girls and women in sports, sport continues to be inherently oppressive towards women. Men continue to shape and control the institution of sport by the ways in which they use their power to ensure that they get priority in everything, from amenities, to coaches, to scholarships (Nelson, 1994). Urquhart and Crossman’s (1999) content analysis of gender in the *Globe and Mail’s* coverage of the Winter Olympics games from 1924-1992 reported that female athletes were underrepresented compared to male athletes. For example, male athletes were written about four times as much, and photographed three times as much as female athletes. In 1994 there were only 48 women (13%) among the 377 athletes celebrated in Canada’s Sports Hall of Fame. In 2001, there were only 63 (15%) among the honoured athletes (Canada’s Sports Hall
In a more recent study, MacKay and Dallaire (2009) examined the coverage of women’s and men’s varsity sports teams in the student newspapers at the University of Ottawa, Canada between the academic years of 2004-2007. The authors found few differences in the number and or length of published articles and photographs of male and female athletes. They reported finding that female athletes were not sexualized and were not represented as gendered subjects in the student-run newspapers. These findings are encouraging and suggest reduced gender discrimination within the varsity community. However, research on campus print media have demonstrated that gender inequities do persist, but to a lesser extent compared to mainstream media sources (Huffman et al., 2004; Melvin, 1996; Oliver, 2002; Wann et al., 1998). Historically, university environments have been viewed as a birthplace for social change with students being able to openly critique oppressive social discourses related to gender, race, and class. Therefore, it is encouraging that even a snapshot of media representation revealed equitable coverage and representation.

Another media source that perpetuates women’s invisibility and competence in athletics are commercials and advertisements. In a mid-1990s campaign, Nike portrayed itself as helping empower girls through sports participation a term referred to as “cause-related marketing” (Gladstone, 1997). Lucas (2000) examined these Nike commercials and criticizes them as being disempowering and representing girls as lacking in agency. Lucas examines several commercials by Nike, one called “If you let me play” which featured predominately white adolescent girls addressing the camera and asking to play sports and identifying potential benefits of their sports participation. Lucas (2000) argues that while Nike’s commercials aimed to increase girls participation in sports, the basic structure of the text with girls asking permission to play reinforces and contributes to dominant oppressive
ideologies by normalizing the idea that sports belongs to the masculine domain. In the second commercial entitled “There is a girl being born in America” girls are featured playing sports, while other girls are playing with dolls, putting on lip-gloss, and playing dress up. Athleticism and femininity are presented as divergent pairs through the images and commentary such as "someone will give her a doll, someone will give her a ball, and someone will give her a chance." Lucas (2000) argues that the message insinuates that girls’ choices are dependent on those who have the power to influence and or control them such as their parents, teachers, and coaches.

The current investigation assumed that most of the participants in the study, both individual interviews and focus groups have had contact with mainstream media sources such as television, magazines, newspapers, and the internet. As such, the current study explored how the participants perceived and responded to media images and messages related to girls/women and sports.

These mainstream media representations of girls and women’s participation in sport suggests that while girls and women have more opportunities to participate, sport is still predominantly viewed as a masculine activity. Sport has been theorized to be a gendered institution that works under patriarchal notions of male power, control and the domination of women (Connell, 1987). Similarly, Messner (2002) believes sport to be a social institution that tends to reproduce, maintain and naturalize a hierarchy of gender. Therefore, it is not surprising that girls and women are hesitant to enter the domain of sports since they are aware of gender norms and the discrimination female athletes face. Marquis (2005) argues that sport is one of the most influential social sites that continue to define and maintain “masculine hegemony,” the prioritizing of masculine over feminine. As a result, girls who participate in sport often struggle between their desires to engage in physical
activity while also wanting to conform to the gender ideals of femininity. The increased number of women participating in this “male” activity has created a tension in and challenge to the traditional gender order, one in which men did “masculine” activities and women did “feminine” activities (Cahn, 1994). One solution to this tension has been the creation of feminized sports such as gymnastics, dance, synchronized swimming, and cheerleading. These competitive sports are traditionally viewed as characterizing more feminine features such as emphasizing beauty, thinness, and cooperativeness. While these sports allow girls and women to engage in physical activity more freely, they also perpetuate gender dichotomies that reinforce notions around what girls and boys should be doing.

Metheny (1965) was one of the first scholars to identify gender stereotypes in sport. Her work highlighted that typical women’s sports are usually individual activities valuing aesthetics compared to typical men’s sports which are often group efforts valuing direct competition. Although Metheny’s analysis was conducted more than 40 years ago, more recent research reveals that gender stereotypes in sports have remained stable (Kane & Snyder, 1989; Matteo, 1988; Csizma et al., 1988). Klomsten, Marsh, and Skaalvik’s (2005) research investigated possible gender differences in how adolescents valued the importance of masculine and feminine characteristics within sport and physical education. In addition they also examined how adolescents’ ratings of gender values were associated with their participation in gendered sport. Their findings suggested that boys valued a muscular appearance, strength, sports competence, endurance strength, and masculinity, whereas, girls rated appearance good-looking face, appearance slender, and femininity. In addition, girls and boys participated in their traditionally gender appropriate sport to a greater extent. Klomsten and colleagues (2005) suggest that further research should explore whether girls who participate in stereotypical feminine sports exhibit different values than those who
participate in stereotypical masculine sports.

Another area of research focuses on apologetic behaviours among female athletes. Felshin (1974) argued that sport’s perpetual association with masculinity has led to the tendency for female athletes to engage in apologetic behaviours. Subsequently researchers have highlighted a wide range of apologetic behaviours such as: participating in feminine sports, advocating conservative gender ideas, emphasizing the superiority of male athletes, downplaying athleticism, highlighting participation in feminine activities, emphasizing femininity in appearance, wearing sexy clothing, minimizing muscular development or display, emphasizing small size and fitness, moving in feminine ways, including players who are heterosexual and fit feminine beauty ideals while excluding women who do not fit these criteria, avoiding association with lesbian or masculine females, putting down masculine or lesbian females, concealing lesbianism/bisexuality, associating with boyfriends, arranging to be seen with men, avoiding being seen with women in public, avoiding physical contact with women in public, and avoiding talk about lesbianism (Adams et al., 2005; Berlage, 1987; Blinde and Taub, 1992a, 1992b; Cooky and McDonald, 2005; Cox and Thompson, 2000; Del Rey, 1977, 1978a, 1978b; Ezzell, 2009; Felshin, 1974; Festle, 1996; George, 2005; Griffin, 1998; Halpert, 1997; Kolnes, 1995; Lowe, 1998). The extensive research conducted on apologetic behaviours suggests that female athletes are aware that their behaviours are not socially sanctioned. Therefore engaging in apologetic behaviours allows female athletes to gain social approval and avoid prejudice and discrimination by others (Ezzell, 2009; Halpert, 1997; Lowe, 1998). Additionally, Festle (1996) insists that apologetic behaviours allow “stereotypes and sexist assumptions to continue…rather than insisting that there [is] nothing wrong with [female athletes]” (p.256). One dilemma with studying apologetic behaviours is
that it equates all idealized feminine behaviours with being apologetic. However, some feminine behaviours are not done to apologize for sport, many women regardless of their involvement with sport engage in feminine behaviours due to internalized gender norms and the social power they gain from engaging in them. Malcolm (2003) argues that in order to distinguish between stereotypical feminine practices and apologetic behaviours it is “important to keep in mind that the athlete also must be motivated by a fear of being perceived as too masculine to be employing the classic apologetic defense. In other words, she must recognize the cultural contradiction between femininity and athleticism and she must act on her desire to prove her femininity to others” (p. 1390). There are few studies that employ survey questions that enable researchers to understand the athletes’ reasoning behind feminine behaviours and directly link these behaviours to stereotypes of women athletes (Malcolm, 2003). Davis-Delano and colleagues (2009) created a questionnaire for researchers “to see if, how, and why athletes engage in apologetic behaviour” (p. 137). Some of Davis-Delano and colleagues’ items will be employed in the current investigation during the focus group discussions. For example, items such as “because of stereotypes of female athletes, I try to look feminine (such as wearing make-up, wearing bows, or having long hair),” and “because of stereotypes of female athletes, I avoid being aggressive or using physical force” (p.147). Discussing apologetic behaviours with adolescent girls allowed for the placement of these behaviours in a larger social context and allowed for better understanding of how the identities and behaviours of female athletes and non-athletes are socially constructed. Additionally the focus group discussions would allow for understanding the thinking that underlies the behaviour.

Davis-Delano and colleagues (2009) argue that apologetic behaviours should be viewed in the context of a larger struggle over gender norms. “While many social forces
encourage conformity to dominant gender ideals, other social forces allow or encourage new
gender ideals or non-conformity to old ideals. For example, some families, coaches, friends,
media texts and workplaces encourage conformity to dominant gender ideals while others
encourage behaviour that deviates from these ideals (Davis-Delano et al., 2009, p. 144).
Davis-Delano’s study suggests that female athletes occupy multiple social contexts and act in
ways that both conform to and resist dominant gender ideals. Therefore, apologetic behaviour
is a performative act (Butler, 1990) of complicity to idealized aspects of femininity that
marks women as different from men and allows female athletes greater social approval in a
heteronormative context.

Roth and Baslow (2004) argue that sports should be a feminist concern as the cultural
institution of sport has the power to affect women’s status in society, and currently is not
serving them in a positive manner. In addition, they suggest that gender norms related to
femininity not only act to convince women of their “natural” weakness compared to men but
also by making them weaker (Roth & Baslow, 2004). They argue that, “the masculine ideal is
one of physical strength, large size, and aggressiveness. The feminine ideal, on the other
hand, is beautiful, small, thin, and perhaps most importantly weak” (Roth & Baslow, 1994,
pp.249). The authors outline that femininity is reinforced in sport in several ways. First,
associating female athleticism with female sex appeal is used to deemphasize women’s
physical power and capabilities. For example Nelson (1994) suggests that in gymnastics,
figure skating, dance, and cheerleading, femininity is written into the rules of the sport.
Second, female athletes who do not conform to ideals of femininity are threatened by
drawing their sexuality into question. Roth and Baslow (2004) state “the fear of being labeled
or outted as lesbian can lead to an even greater emphasis on femininity by female athletes
either to prove that they are not lesbians or to hide the fact that they are. And these fears, of

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course, are justified given the level of homophobia in society” (p. 253). Third, according to Dowling (2000), sports sociologists find it important to notice, “sex testing became institutionalized just as women began storming the upper ranks of athletic competition” (p. 174). The testing is the ultimate accusation of masculinity as women are required to prove that, “though strong, they [a]re actually female and not male” (Dowling, 2000, p. 188). Finally, if allegations of lesbianism and maleness are not enough to jeopardize women’s participation in sport, further barriers are further set in their paths. For example competition is often segregated by sex and female versions of sports are developed such as the no-body checking rule that applies to Canadian women’s hockey (Dowling, 2000; Theberge, 2000).

Research reveals that children internalize gender norms related to sports and alter their participation in order to conform to their prescribed gender. In their study, Schmalz and Kerstette (2006) report that the participation rates in perceived gender specific sports is significantly different among girls and boys. These authors demonstrated three notable findings. First, they revealed that children restrict their behaviours and participation to conform to gender norms regarding appropriate behaviours. Second, girls and boys participated the most in gender-neutral physical activities such as swimming, running, soccer, and bicycling. Finally, children as young as eight years of age are aware of and are influenced by gender stereotypes associated with sports and physical activities. These findings suggest that stereotypes in sports and physical activities still persist and affect participation levels.

The research literature suggests that although society’s awareness of gender stereotyping in sports and physical activities has increased, traditional stereotypes pertaining to females persevere. Female athletes continue to face discrimination in the realm of sports through the ways in which mainstream media presents them as gendered or sexualized.
objects, their sexual orientation drawn in to question, gender segregation and female versions of sports. Encouraging girls and women to participate in sports and confront traditional female stereotypes can challenge the existing gender inequality.

One social institution that has been criticized for reinforcing gender differences is education. For the purposes of this study, physical education and the school context was a primary focus as there are persistent gender inequities in many physical education programs (Hutchinson, 1995). As a discipline, physical education provides a series of methods and principles through which ‘desired’ sets of bodily practice are embedded (Rail & Harvey, 1995). Foucault argues that schools’ use of disciplinary practices produce “subjected and practiced bodies, docile bodies” (Foucault, 1979). Foucault explains that a “docile body” is a subject that is trained and shaped to obey the wishes of authority-it is a body marked by power relations. Some theorists believe that physical education reinforces power differentials by the different ways boys and girls are evaluated and taught to engage physically with their bodies (Hutchinson, 1995; Hellison & Templin, 1991). Scholars have argued that physical education is concerned with disciplinary practices that produce a certain type of body and physical education’s values may be a result of existing within a patriarchal culture where representations of the body are highly influential (Garrett, 2004).

The primary aim of physical education in most Western school systems is to provide students with knowledge, skills, capabilities, and values devoted to maintaining a healthy lifestyle into adulthood. While both male and female students must participate in health and physical education courses, Coakely (1994) argues that physical education is gendered in ideology by the way it celebrates individualistic, middle class and male values. Thus, physical education evaluates students on skills related to traditionally masculine qualities such as power, strength and aggression, which may put girls at a disadvantage. In spite of
this, some researchers have found that participating in physical activity for girls can teach them to challenge negative social interpretations of female embodiment. As a consequence, these girls experience social and personal empowerment through gained strength and acquired skills (Theberge, 1985; Deem & Gilroy, 1998; Gorely et al., 2003). Therefore, it is important that physical education courses are developed in such a way to be gender inclusive since studies have shown that while the gender gap in sport participation appears to be decreasing, there is evidence that boys and girls are participating in different physical activities (Fasting, 2003; Pfister, 1993). Differences in sport participation appears to be linked to the gendered construction of sports such that boys participate in more masculine defined sports, whereas girls participate more in feminine sports (Fasting, 2003).

The notion that some activities are characterized as masculine and other activities as feminine is based on social constructions of gender that perpetuate gender differences through stereotypes and the differential socialization of boys and girls.

**The Social Construction of Gender**

Simone de Beauvoir claims, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” signifying a paradigm shift between notions of sex and gender. The current investigation used Lorber’s (1999) definition of gender, which was defined as, “process of social construction, a system of social stratification, and an institution that structures every aspect of our lives because of its embeddedness in the family, the workplace, and the state as well as in sexuality, language and culture” (p. 417). In de Beauvoir’s groundbreaking work, *The Second Sex* (1949), she delineates the difference between nature versus nurture by asserting that women’s inferior location in society is not a result of biological, psychological, or intellectual differences between men and women but of difference in their situation and socialization. She draws upon philosopher Hegel’s notion of the *Other* to understand women’s subordinate position.
Such that in order for an individual to define itself, it must also define something in opposition to itself. De Beauvoir states “[A]t the moment when man asserts himself as subject and free being, the idea of the Other arises” (p. 79). She argues that historically, men have monopolized the position of subjectivity, resulting in women’s occupying the role of object. She claims that passivity; an essential characteristic of femininity is taught if not imposed on them by society. Similarly, Judith Butler (1990) argues that gender is a learned social construction and asserts that gender is “in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts precede; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time-an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender…must be understood as the mundane way in which body gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (p.403). In her influential book, *Gender Troubles*, Butler makes a case that gender is created by the performative effect of repeated acts. Therefore, rather than being expressions of an innate gender identity, acts and gestures which are learned and repeated over time create the illusion of an innate and stable gender core (Connell, 2002). Butler’s notion of “doing gender” is important for the current investigation as these “stylized repetition of acts” differentiate how girls and boys are socialized to live and behave in their bodies. Therefore, the consequence of embodying a gendered body that is marked by femininity leads to a disruption in girls and women’s ability to strive in physical activity and sport.

French philosopher, Michel Foucault’s work similarly explores the relationship of bodily experiences and disciplinary power. Foucault argues that the body is a primary site of social control. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault a student of Merleau-Ponty examines the practices of training and punishment associated with disciplinary power (Crossley, 1993). He argues that these practices were developed in social institutional settings such as prisons,
military establishments, medicine, factories and schools but were later applied more broadly as techniques of social control. Foucault alleges that in modern society penal power is largely invisible, and it is those who are subjected to it that are visible. In illustrating this point, he focuses on the Panopticon, an architectural prison design conceived by Jeremy Bentham that enables every prisoner to be observed at any time from a central watchtower. As a result the prisoners experience constant surveillance (Crossley, 1993). Foucault asserts that the essential characteristic of disciplinary power is that it is exercised directly on the body. Disciplinary practices subject bodily behaviours to a process of constant surveillance that allows for continuous and pervasive control of individual conduct (Mills, 2003). The goal of these practices is to optimize the body’s capacities, skills and productivity and to foster its usefulness and docility: “What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act on the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behavior. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it…Thus, discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, “docile” bodies” (Foucault, 1977, p. 138-139).

Some feminist writers have found Foucault’s argument that the body is the primary site of power useful in their explorations of the social control of women. However, Foucault’s work has also been subject to strong criticism by feminist thinkers. The most commonly cited feminist objections center around two issues: his view of subjectivity as constructed by power and his failure to distinguish differential bodily experiences between men and women.

First, Nancy Fraser (1989) challenges Foucault’s claim that relations of power create different subjectivities. She argues that if individuals are merely the effects of power, simple ‘docile bodies’ shaped by power, then it is increasingly difficult to explain who resists power. Similar to Fraser’s criticisms, Nancy Hartsock (1990) contends that Foucault’s concept of
modern power is problematic because it acts to reduce individuals to ‘docile bodies’ rather than subjects with the capacity to oppose power. She claims that Foucault’s understanding of the subject as an effect of power neglects the existence of subjects that challenge power relations and by doing so, prevents women’s liberation.

The second criticism of Foucault’s work has been his neglect to theorize differing bodily experiences between the genders. Sandra Lee Bartky (1988) claims, “Foucault treats the body throughout as if it were one, as if bodily experiences of men and women did not differ…he [Foucault] is blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine” (p. 131-132). She explores disciplinary practices that produce a body that in gesture and appearance is recognizably feminine. She claims that there are three categories of practice: “those that aim to produce a body of certain size and general configuration; those that bring forth from this body a specific repertoire of gestures, postures, and movements; and those directed toward the display of this body as an ornamented surface” (p. 132). Bartky argues that disciplinary practices such as exercising, dieting, make-up, hair removal, and wearing of fashionable attire are part of the process by which the ideal body of femininity is constructed. Therefore, insisting that, “the disciplinary project of femininity is a “set-up”: It requires such radical and extensive measures of bodily transformation that virtually every woman who gives herself to it is destined in some degree to fail…many women are without time or resources to provide themselves with even the minimum of what such a regiment requires…The burdens poor women bear in this regard are not merely psychological, since conformity to the prevailing standards of bodily acceptability is a known factor in economic mobility” (Bartky, 1988, p.139). Bartky (1988) suggests that the disciplinary power that “inscribe femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular” (p.142). Bartky’s
extension of Foucault’s work was important to the current investigation because it
highlighted that the ideals of femininity such as feminine bodily movements, dieting, and
wearing of make-up may disrupt girls and women’s connection to their bodies and therefore
hinder their ability to feel confident engaging in physical activity. Femininity is therefore
seen in this study as something that is learned through multiple social process.

It is widely accepted that parental socialization differs depending on the gender of the
child (Witt, 1997). According to Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory, children become
gendered or display sex differences in behaviour and attitudes by reinforcement and
modeling provided by their parents. From the day a baby is born, the gendering process
begins with sex appropriate clothing and toys that reinforce notions about femininity and
masculinity such as pink dolls and blue trucks. A meta-analysis examining parents’
differential socialization of boys and girls in over 170 studies reported that the only
socialization area to show a significant effect is the encouragement of sex-typed activities by
parents (Lytton & Romney, 1991). These findings suggest that parents’ promotion of gender
stereotypical activities may influence a child’s gendered identity and their display of gender
appropriate behaviours. For the current research this finding was particularly significant as it
suggested that girls and boys are receiving differential messages regarding what activities
they should be and should not be engaging in. Consequently, girls learn that sports are “boy”
activities, whereas role-playing games such as house are “girl” activities. From a young age,
children learn a set of behavioural expectations related to being either male or female, gender
roles that restrict the ways in which they engage in play and, as a consequence, hinder
creativity. Growing up, girls and boys learn quickly that individuals who violate gender
norms are likely to experience embarrassment or social disapproval (Harrison & Lynch,
2005).
Since gender role adherence provides greater possibility of social acceptance, it is not surprising that young children conform to social roles from a young age. As early as grade one, gender norms concerning the appropriateness of sport and physical activity influence whether girls or boys will participate or not (Eccles & Harold, 1991). These stereotypes persist throughout the lifespan with women not wanting to participate in sports predominantly labeled as masculine (Sargaria & Sargaria, 1984). These findings suggest that gender based socialization greatly restricts girls’ and boys’ freedom to engage in their bodies in similar ways. At very young ages, children are responded to differently by parents and peers based on their gender (Greendorfer, 1993). Some of the differential treatment is due to social expectations such that girls have more opportunities to gain social skills whereas boys are given more opportunities to develop motor skills (Bronstein, 1988). As a consequence girls are not encouraged to the same extent as boys to engage physically with their bodies. Accordingly, the socialization of the gender dichotomy reinforces girls to be passive and boys to be active.

In Western culture, femininity is linked to behaviours related to gentleness, dependency, emotionality, submissiveness and vanity. Whereas stereotypical masculinity often implies behaviours associated with toughness, protectiveness, assertiveness, independence and competitiveness (Rathus, Nevid, & Rathus-Fichner, 1993).

Historically, femininity and masculinity were assumed to be “natural” innate differences between males and females. Today, we understand that gender stereotypes are not innate but formed through social and cultural processes. Margaret Mead’s anthropological work addressed the issue of difference in temperament between males and females through an examination of three societies. Her research revealed no differences in temperament between the sexes and concluded that differences resulted from socialization and cultural
expectations held for each sex (Mead, 1935). Mead’s study resulted in many people rethinking the innateness of feminine/masculine traits, temperaments, and identities. In addition, her work set the stage for the nature versus nurture debate that remains today. Whether innate or learned, there is little argument that it is difficult to challenge the gender norm. Burke and Tully’s (1977) found that children with cross-sex identities (girls who displayed masculine behaviours and boys who displayed feminine behaviours) were advised against engaging in gender-inappropriate behaviours and reported being called names such as “tomboy”, “sissy” or “homo” when compared to children with gender appropriate identities.

Burke and Tully’s research reveals the reinforcement of heteronormative behaviours beginning in childhood. Heteronormativity is the essentialist belief that there are two genders, male and female. It is a view of the world that creates binaries between boys and girls since it assumes that each sex has a differential set of behaviours and expectations (Sullivan, 2003). Therefore, when girls engage in stereotypical masculine behaviour such as rough and tumble play they are labeled as “tomboys.” Athletic girls are continually pressured to become more “girly” and are rewarded for conforming to proper feminine codes of appearance and behaviours. For athletic girls, the hegemonic ideals of heteronormativity restrict their ability to continue to engage in sport since doing so often draws their sexuality into question (Adams, Schmitke, & Franklin, 2005).

Today, the homophobic atmosphere within women and girls’ sports continues to pressure female athletes to prove their femininity in attempts to avoid the lesbian stigma. For lesbian athletes negotiating their identities is even more difficult as they are coerced to comply with the rule “don’t ask, don’t tell.” These athletes remain silenced fearing the loss of fans, corporate finances, or a place on the team if they are to come out of the closet (Adams et al., 2005). Susan Ziegler, sports psychologist, criticizes the Women’s National Basketball
Association (WNBA) for its inclusion of courses on make-up and fashion into rookies’ orientation. Ziegler argues, “Once you begin to worry about how the person looks as opposed to how she plays, you've crossed the line into dangerous play. We're not really focused on marketing them as athletes but as feminine objects” (Ryan, 2008, p.1).

The sexualization of female athleticism is not a new concept. Nor is the marketing of the female body. Women’s bodies have a long history of being objectified in a patriarchal culture. Some theorists believe that the reason for women’s greater prevalence of mental illness is linked to living in a patriarchal society that sexually objectifies women’s bodies. Fredrickson and Roberts’ (1997) Objectification Theory asserts that girls and women internalize an observer’s perspective as the primary view of their physical selves and in doing so they think of themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated by others. Self-objectification is theorized to lead to various of emotional and behavioural costs such as increased self-consciousness, habitual body monitoring, feelings of shame and anxiety, decreased experiences of flow states (i.e. being totally absorbed in an activity) and mental illnesses such as eating disorders and depression (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Research on the interaction between physical activity and self-objectification has revealed mixed results. Greenleaf’s (2005) study found that women who internalize an observer’s view of their bodies are less likely to be physically active. However, this research did not further explore the reasons for the relationship between self-objectification and decreased participation in physical activity. Another study found that women reported higher levels of self-objectification while exercising (Wolfe, 1999). Possible reasons for women’s increased vulnerability to self-objectifying thoughts while exercising could be related to an exercise environment that promotes thinness and draws attention to the body (fitness rooms with mirrored walls). In addition, previous research reveals that improving physical appearance is
the primary motive for exercise among women, which suggests that women are more likely to focus on weight and shape concerns while exercising (McDonald & Thompson, 1992; Silberstein, Striegel-Moore, Timko & Rodin, 1988). A more recent study found that appearance based motives for exercise was related to self-objectification (Strelan, Mehaffey, & Tiggemann, 2003). These findings imply that there is a relationship between self-objectification and physical activity however the reasons remain unclear as some research reveals that women engage in physical activity for weight loss purposes while other research has found that self-objectification is linked to decreases in physical activity. To better understand the link between physical activity and self-objectification it would be useful to investigate age dependent variables in order to understand if the reasons for engagement or disengagement with physical activity are related to age and how this would also influence the degree of self-objectifying thoughts. This was important for the current research as adolescent girls have been identified as an at risk group for both physical inactivity and self-objectifying thoughts (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2007; Craig et al., 2001).

Adolescence and the Development of Gender Differences

The current research focused on adolescent girls because this group has been identified as an at risk group for both self-objectification and physical inactivity. Puberty marks the transition from one phase of life to another. For girls, this transition represents entrance into womanhood, a phase that transforms the way girls socially and physically exists in the world. Examples of normative challenges that confront girls during puberty include physical changes, increased peer pressure, and intensified sexual desire (Levine & Smolak, 1992; McVey et al., 2003; Tolman, 2002). The maturing of a girl’s body such as the development of breasts and hips may relate to changes in girls’ involvement in physical
activity, such as the decision to engage in sports during menstruation or not wanting to be physically active in front of adolescent boys (Dwyer et al., 2006).

However for most girls, the physical renegotiation with their bodies is less problematic than the social changes that come along with their new bodies. Whether contested or not, the new, more womanly, body is increasingly looked at, remarked on, and assessed by others (Dion et al., 1990). In a culture obsessed with women’s beauty, girls are increasingly being subjected to messages telling them how their bodies are undesirable the way they are (Wolf, 1991). Predictably, the predominant group engaging in disordered eating habits, cosmetic surgery and the consumption of beauty products are young women (Jones et al., 2001).

Puberty, a time associated with weight gain is a vulnerable time for the development of body weight and shape preoccupations (Pike & Striegel-Moore, 1997). Some girls may express mild discomfort with their bodies, while others may express complete disgust. The research on adolescent girls has consistently shown that puberty is related to girls’ negative body image development and this dissatisfaction with their bodies is further emphasized throughout the process of adolescence and remains static for the rest of their adult lives (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984). The continuum of girls’ connections with their bodies’ ranges from healthier relations with the body to self-destructive behaviours related to body dissatisfaction such as eating disorders (Shisslak, Crago, & Estes, 1995). The research suggests that adolescent girls tend to aggregate at the more problematic end of the continuum: It has been found that 52% of girls begin dieting before age 14 (Johnson et al., 1984), 71% of adolescent girls want to be thinner despite being at a healthy weight (Paxton et al., 1991), and girls identified more perceived fear of being fat than of cancer, nuclear war, or the death of their parents (Berzins, 1999). Piran and Ross (2005) make a case that the
development of a negative body image is related to several “body anchored practices” such as disordered eating habits and substance abuse. Girls with negative body image have been found to be more susceptible to developing eating disorders, substance abuse and depression compared to girls with a more positive body image (Piran & Ross, 2005).

McCarthy (1990) argues that a “cultural ideal of thinness for women” is directly linked to higher levels of depression found among women than men (p. 206). Depression has been consistently found to affect more women than men (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990). From early adolescence through the rest of the lifespan, the rate of depression for women outnumbers men 2:1 (Weissman et al., 1996). In childhood, the incidence of depression between boys and girls are similar, but by age 14 girls’ rates of depression begin to increase dramatically, whereas boys’ rates remain low or decrease (Wade, Cairney, Pevalin, 2002; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001).

Nolen-Hoeksema (2001) argues that during adolescence girls face increased social pressures to conform to the feminine gender role, a role that is often characterized as lacking in social power. Nolen-Hoeksema found that the onset of puberty coincided with increased restrictions for girls but not for boys from both parents and teachers.

The negative impacts of puberty for adolescent girls are further revealed through self-esteem studies. Among child populations, 60% of girls and 67% of boys report feeling both confident and positive about themselves (Dukes & Martinez, 1994). However, by high school, girls’ level of confidence drops to 29% but for boys the drop is less significant at 46%. Gilligan (1990) theorizes that the gender gap in self-confidence that becomes apparent during adolescence may be due to girls beginning to see the conflict between how they see themselves and how others may view them.
Regardless of whether girls resist or internalize adverse social external pressures, one thing that remains consistent is that the entrance into adolescence corresponds in time with girls feeling increasingly negative about themselves and their bodies. One area that appears to be related to adolescent girls’ connection to their bodies is physical activity.

**Physical Activity’s Association with Mental and Physical Health**

The following section reviews the literature on physical activity and its association to adolescent girls’ mental and physical health.

In many developed countries around the world there is a trend towards a more sedentary lifestyle amongst children and adolescents. With increasing access to computers, television, and media entertainment children seem to be participating in forms of play that require less engagement with their bodies. The result is more sedentary behaviour during school and recreational time (Dietz, 2005). This is particularly worrisome, as physical activity has been found to be essential to the healthy psychological and physical development of children and adolescents (McKenzie & Kahan, 2008).

Canada’s Physical Activity Guides for Children and Youth recommends ninety minutes per day of moderate to vigorous physical activity (Canadian Fitness Lifestyle Research Institute, 2001). The 2007 Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth reports an astounding 91% Canadian youth are not getting the recommended amount of physical activity. Girls are less active than boys at nearly every age, identify more barriers to physical activity, and take only as much physical education as they need to graduate (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2007).

In 2000, Health Canada reported that Canadian girls between the ages of five and twelve were less active than boys of the same age, such that only 38 % of girls and 48 % of boys were considered to be getting the recommended amount of physical activity (Health
Canada, 2002). The difference is more significant among adolescents, such that twice the numbers of boys compared to girls are achieving the optimal level of physical activity (Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute, 2001).

In the United States, Pratt, Macera, and Blanton’s (1999) survey on the level of physical activity and inactivity in children and adults, found that between the grades of nine and twelve, girls’ physical activity levels fell from approximately 66% to 44%. The drastic decline in physical activity rates among adolescents, particularly among adolescent girls, continues to be an ongoing concern. Health care professionals stress that “no pill, either currently or prospectively in use, holds as much promise for sustained health as a lifetime program of regular physical activity” (Health Canada, 2003).

**Physical Activity’s Association with Mental Health**

Physical activity has been found to have positive association on mental health for individuals regardless of their age. Increasing evidence reveals that mental and physical health are correlated such that changes in one often leads to changes in the other (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006). The value of continued engagement with physical activity is particularly valuable during the stressful time of adolescence. The effects of physical activity on mental health will be covered in the following sections: education, substance use, body image and weight loss behaviours, depression, self-esteem, and sexual health. The end of the section will be followed by a critical examination of the literature and ways in which the current investigation can extend the existing knowledge.

**Education.** Many researchers in the area of physical activity have reported a tendency in which a girl’s participation leads to success in other important areas of her life such as in education.

In a comprehensive review of the literature pertaining to sport participation and
educational attainment, Hartmann (2008) concluded, “research has time and again demonstrated a strong and positive correlation between high school sports participation and academic achievement” (p. 3). Stevenson (2007) economy based research separates the effects of sports participation from other confounding factors such as school size, climate, social and personal differences to better understand the cause and effect relationship between high schools sports participation in girls and achievement later in life. Stevenson complex analysis reported that increasing girls’ sports participation had a direct effect on women’s education and employment. She stated, “It’s not just that the people who are going to do well in life play sports, but that sports help people do better in life ” (Stevenson, 2007, p. 504). Similarly, a longitudinal study of 22696 high school students found that both female and male athletes had higher grades, higher educational aspirations, and fewer school-related discipline problems compared to non-athletes (Fejgin, 1994). In particular, the research suggests that girls who participate in sports are more likely to experience academic success and graduate from high school than those who do not play sports (Sabo et al., 1989). In areas outside of education, a 2002 National Youth Survey of Civic Engagement in the United States reported finding that young women who participate in sports were more likely to volunteer, be registered to vote, feel comfortable with public speaking, and follow the news compared to young women who had not participated in sports (Lopez & Moore, 2006). Sibley and Etnier (2003) reported that regular physical activity enhances children’s academic achievement, academic readiness and perceptual skills. Crissey and colleagues (2005) research makes a case that girls involved in sports that challenge gender stereotypes achieve higher grades in science classes compared with girls who participate in more typical “feminine” sports such as dance and cheerleading. Furthermore, the research suggests that girls of colour may benefit more than their Caucasian counterparts. African-American
female student-athletes have a graduation success rate of 66%, 16% higher than African-American female students who are non-athletes. (NCAA News, 2008). Similarly, Hispanic-American female athletes were found to score higher on achievement tests and to graduate high school, attend college, and make progress towards a bachelor’s degree more often than their non-athletic peers (Sabo, Melnick, & Vanfossen, 1989). It is important to draw attention to the importance of physical activity and sport in marginalized groups as it has been documented that girls of colour are less likely to be athletic than boys of colour. Sabo and Veliz (2008) argue that girls of colour appear to be one of the most disadvantaged populations since they are affected by both gender and racial inequities. In addition, the authors argue that girls in immigrant families are less likely than their male counterparts to participate in physical activities and sports possibly due to traditional values held by their parents (Sabo & Veliz, 2008).

Substance use. Research on the relationship between adolescent substance use and physical activity is similar to the literature on education such that engagement with physical activity and sport appears to be a protective factor for most adolescent girls. Substances that will be discussed in the following section will pertain to smoking tobacco, alcohol, illicit drugs, and anabolic steroids.

Overall, Canadian smoking rates have been decreasing steadily since 1985 in all age groups (Health Canada, 2007). However, recent statistics from Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada reveal that while overall adolescent girls’ (ages 15-19) smoking prevalence has decreased it has not dropped as steadily as adolescent boys. In fact smoking prevalence amongst adolescent girls has been higher than adolescent boys since 2006. A 2008 CDC report estimated that 19% of secondary school girls are current smokers. In the United States,
Caucasian-American girls report the highest rates (23%) and African-American girls the lowest (8%), with Hispanic-America girls reporting intermediate rates (15%).

Research suggests that participation in sports may act as a protective factor against smoking among adolescent girls. Melnick and colleagues (2001) reported that compared to non-athletes, female athletes are less likely to report cigarette use. A nationally U.S. representative study of secondary school students found that organized sports participants were 22% less likely to be cigarette smokers, regardless of gender (Castrucci et al., 2004). Physical activity has also been associated with delayed onset of smoking or the reduced likelihood that an individual will begin to smoke. Verkooijen and colleagues (2008) reported that highly active girls are less than half as likely as their less-active peers to start smoking cigarettes. Rodriguez and Audrain-McGovern (2005) suggests that physical activity contributes to a self-concept associated with being healthy, which in turn reduces the odds of tobacco use.

Similar to research on tobacco smoking, the literature on drug use similarly reveals that adolescent girls engaged in sports are less likely to use marijuana, cocaine or “other” illicit drugs (such as LSD, PCP, speed or heroin), less likely to be suicidal and more likely to have positive body images than non-athletic adolescent girls (Miller et al., 2000). Nearly one in five eighth grade girls, one in three tenth grade girls, and more than four in ten twelfth grade girls have used an illicit drug at least once in their lifetimes (Johnston et al., 2008). Overall, most studies show lower rates of drug use by female athletes compared to their nonathletic peers. For example, findings from studies done by Ewing (1998) and Page (1998) show that athletic participation may help protect girls against drug use because using drugs may jeopardize their eligibility to play or may hamper their athletic performance. Two nationwide studies carried out in the United States reported findings that female school or community
athletes were significantly less likely to use marijuana, cocaine, or most other illicit drugs. The protective effect of sports was strongest for white girls (Miller et al., 2001; Pate et al., 2000).

In contrast to tobacco and drug use literature, the research on the relationship between female athletic participation and alcohol consumption has largely been found to be inconsistent. Alcohol continues to be the substance of choice among adolescent girls. Of secondary school girls, 76% have tried alcohol in their lifetime and 45% report drinking in the past month (Centers for Disease Control, 2008). Rates of binge drinking increase with age, ranging from 10% of middle school girls (Johnston et al., 2008) to 33% of senior level secondary school girls (CDC, 2008). Several studies reported finding that female athletes in secondary school or postsecondary schools (college/university) were more likely than non-athletes to engage in problem drinking, including binge drinking (Hildebrand et al., 2001; Hoffman, 2006; Wichstrom & Wichstrom, 2009; Wilson et al., 2004). In contrast, some researchers reported finding the opposite effect, or none at all (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Mays & Thompson, 2009; Storch et al., 2005; Yusko et al., 2008). Therefore suggesting that the influence of athletic participation on drinking behaviour is complex and mediated by social factors such as peer influences, sport-related identities, and sport subcultures (Martens et al., 2006; Miller et al., 2003; Wichstrom & Wichstrom, 2009).

Another area of concern facing adolescent athletes is the rising prevalence of anabolic steroid use. Many, but not all, female adolescent steroid users participate in organized sports (Bahrke et al., 2000). Anabolic-androgenic steroids are a major concern for health care professionals as adolescent users are often unaware of how steroid use can alter the natural physical and hormonal changes associated with adolescence. Most studies find that steroid use is more common among athletes than non-athletes but interestingly a substantial number
of steroid users report no athletic involvement (Bahrke et al., 2000). Steroid use is primarily used to accelerate the development of muscle mass and therefore may be tempting for individuals seeking to maximize performance in strength-based sports such as weightlifting. A report from the CDC (2008) reported that the fastest-growing steroid user population is female with approximately 2.7% of high school girls in the United States admitting to using steroids at least once in their lifetimes without a doctor’s prescription. Bahrke and colleagues (2000) suggest that many adolescent girls are motivated to use steroids in order to move closer to the ideal body that emphasizes a lean muscular physique. Preoccupation with body shape can be what links sports and steroid use (Irving et al., 2002). Anabolic steroids are body-shaping agents and cause a loss in body fat and an increase in lean muscle tissue. Elliot and Goldberg (2000) suggest that young women may use steroids for weight loss purposes and may be part of a pattern of disordered eating, poor body image, and preoccupation with weight. Steroids may also play a role in the “female athlete triad” a condition characterized by a combination of disordered eating, amenorrhea and osteoporosis, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section (Denham et al., 2007; Otis et al., 1997).

**Body image and weight loss behaviours.** Increasingly, researchers have recognized that the majority of adolescent girls report being dissatisfied with their body’s weight and shape (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002; Smolak, 1996). Clark and Tiggemann (2006) reported that approximately 50% of girls’ ages nine to twelve rated their own bodies as too heavy, although fewer than 15% were objectively overweight. In addition, Tiggemann (2001) found that active adolescent girls were less affected by media messages regarding idealized images than sedentary adolescent girls. Active girls also reported higher levels of body satisfaction and could better distinguish between the functionality and appearance of their bodies than inactive girls. A potential risk associated with extreme body dissatisfaction is the
development of disordered eating behaviours aimed to reduce and control body weight. Eating disorders are on the rise in North America, affecting as many as 10-million Americans (National Eating Disorders Association, 2009) and over 90% of victims are female (Hoek & van Hoeken, 2003; Mitchell & Bulik, 2006). In Canada, 1.5% of women aged 15-25 have an eating disorder (Government of Canada, 2006). The prevalence of anorexia and bulimia appears to increase during the transition from adolescence to young adulthood (Hoek, 2007). More than half of adolescent girls use unhealthy weight control techniques such as skipping meals, fasting, smoking cigarettes, self-induced vomiting, and taking laxatives (Neumark-Sztainer, 2005). Research on the relationship between body satisfaction and physical activity has shown them to be positively correlated, such that increases in one area often lead to increases in the other (Tremblay, Inman, & Willms, 2000; Kirkcaldy, Shephard & Siefen, 2002). Additionally, sports participation tends to have a positive effect on body satisfaction over time. In one study, women who participated in organized sports prior to college reported having a significantly better sense of positive body image while in college (Richman & Shaffer, 2000). On average, female athletes are more likely to have a positive body image, and less likely to consider themselves overweight, than female nonathletes (Hausenblas & Downs, 2001; Miller et al., 2001). According to Sabo and Velez (2008), girls participating in three or more sports per year are more likely to have high scores on body-esteem measurements at all grade levels.

In spite of this, some research has reported that female athletes may be at a higher risk to develop body dissatisfaction as a result of increased pressures linked to athletic performance. Taub and Blinde (1992) argue that the more competitive an adolescent girl is, the more vulnerable she can be to developing body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. Factors that contribute to female athletes engaging in weight control methods include: sports
that emphasize lean body weight composition and appearance; pressure from coaches, parents, or trainers to reduce their body weight; and personality characteristics such as competitiveness, perfectionism and self-motivation. Eating disorders are most common in aesthetic sports that are scored on appearance or form (e.g., dancing, figure skating, or gymnastics); after puberty, the small-breasted, narrow-hipped ideal for these sports is difficult to attain without pathogenic weight control techniques (Bonci et al., 2008; Engel et al., 2003; Greydanus & Patel, 2004; Ryan, 1995; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004). Lean sports such as running, swimming, or cycling may also invite pathogenic weight-control behaviours. One recent study found 3% of non-lean-sport athletes at high risk for disordered eating compared to 25% of lean-sport athletes (Reinking & Alexander, 2005). Elite athletes are at greater risk for disordered eating behaviours than those who compete at a lower level or participate in recreational sports only (Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004; Smolak et al., 2000). In one study, almost 20% of female high school athletes reported disordered eating in the past month (Pernick et al., 2006). A second study found middle and high school girls to be at least twice as likely to use vomiting, laxatives, or steroids if they participated in weight-sensitive sports (Vertalino et al., 2007). Competitive female athletes may also be at risk for the “female athlete triad.” Since this condition often goes unrecognized it is difficult to treat and can result in loss of bone mineral density that can never be regained (Silby & Smith, 2000). The mixed findings on female athletic participation and disordered eating are problematic since adolescent girls have been identified as an at-risk group for both physical inactivity and eating disorders. Therefore, it is important to clarify the role athletic participation has in the development of girls’ connection to their bodies.

In order to better understand the relationship between athletic participation and eating problems Smolak, Murnen and Ruble (2000) conducted a meta-analysis of 34 studies that
examined this relationship. The researchers’ review of the literature found that risk factors for the development of eating disorders were linked to age and the type of sport the female athlete participated in. More specifically, female college athletes involved in elite sports that emphasized lean body composition and appearance were found to be at the highest risk for the onset of disordered eating. Similar findings have been reported by following studies such that girls who participate in sports or athletic activities traditionally considered “feminine” or aesthetic, such as cheerleading, dance, or gymnastics, are more likely to report being ashamed of their bodies, feeling overweight, and actively trying to lose weight than girls who don’t participate in feminine sports (Crissey & Honea, 2006; Parsons & Betz, 2001). Smolak, Murnen and Ruble (2000) reported that high school female athletes in non-lean, non-elite sports were found to have healthier eating in terms of eating problems and also reported substantially higher body satisfaction when compared to non-athletes. These findings suggest that there seems to be circumstances that facilitate increased risk for eating problems and other conditions in which athletic participation is associated with decreased risk. In addition, the authors note that the research literature appears to be biased towards eating problems as their samples focus on high-risk sports such as dance and gymnastics, which cannot generalize to other sports and physical activities that young women may be engaging in. Protective factors such as athletic participation in non-elite, non-lean sports for fun, fitness and social interaction were found to be valuable, especially to developing girls. Exercise and sport participation can be used as a therapeutic and preventive intervention for enhancing the physical and mental health of adolescent females. It also can enhance mental health by offering them positive feelings about body image, improved self-esteem, tangible experiences of competency and success and increased self-confidence (Fox, 1999).
**Self-esteem.** Self-esteem, a positive or negative evaluation of one’s own worth, is a key indicator of psychological well-being (Rosenberg, 1989). Self-esteem is a product of two factors: a sense of competence or self-efficacy based on one’s performance or accomplishments and an awareness of how others perceive her/him (McGee & Williams, 2000). In Western cultures, girls tend to experience a significant decline in self-esteem over the course of adolescence, with the most severe loss found in Caucasian girls (Baldwin & Hoffmann, 2002; Biro et al., 2006). Adolescence captures a time when girls face immense changes and report lowered levels of self-esteem (Dukes & Martinez, 1994). Many adolescent girls face intensified pressures from peers, teachers and parents and are simultaneously making decisions that may influence the rest of their lives. Another important contributor for low female self-esteem is living in culture that pervasively sexualizes and objectifies young women (American Psychological Association, 2007). Low self-esteem is linked with low life satisfaction, loneliness, anxiety, resentment, irritability, and depression (Henderson & King, 1998). Health care professionals have identified concerning low levels of self-esteem amongst adolescent girls. Girls with low self-esteem are more likely to drop out of sports are more susceptible to peer pressure surrounding drugs and alcohol (CAAWS, 1995).

Research shows that sports participation is positively associated with self-esteem in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary girls and women (McHale et al., 2005; Dishman et al., 2006; Armstrong & Oomen-Early, 2009). Additionally, positive outcomes from youth participation in sport and physical activities include the development of life skills such as learning to compete and cooperate with peers, taking risks, regulating self-control and appropriately dealing with success and failure. In addition, engagement with sport and physical activity promotes the development of sense of self while also increasing self-esteem.
which is especially important to girls entering adolescence (Smith & Smoll, 1996). Furthermore, girls who participated in after-school physical activities were found to be more likely to have a positive sense of self than girls who participated in non-physical activities (Melpomene Institute, 1996). Subsequent studies examining the effects of physical activity on female children and adolescents found that regular engagement is associated with mental health benefits such as improved self-esteem (Parfitt & Eston, 2005), decreased social problems (Kirkaldy et al., 2002), increased levels of social maturity and social competence (Fletcher, Nickerson, & Wright, 2003), increased efficacy, decreased tobacco, alcohol and other drug use, and lower incidence of eating disorders (Robert-McComb, Reid, & Zumalt, 2008). Bredmeier and Shield’s (1986) research on female athletes found that they reported higher levels of self-esteem that allowed them to resist peer pressures related to self-harm and risky sexual activities. These researchers further reported that athletic girls are better at conflict resolution since the communication skills learned during sports games transfers over to daily activities.

However, homophobia and conforming to gender appropriate behaviour can complicate the link between sports participation and self-esteem as female athletes may fear being perceived as masculine by their peers (Daniels & Leaper, 2006; Richman & Shaffer, 2000). In one study, eleventh-grade girls who endorsed a strongly feminine gender role orientation had lower self-esteem if they played competitive sports but higher self-esteem if they played recreational sports that were more socially-oriented and less competitive (Bowker et al., 2006). As discussed previously in the section reviewing the literature on the social construction of sport and gender, female athletes can be at risk for discrimination based on homophobic and sexist notions of what types of activities young women should engage in and appearance rules related to idealized aspects of femininity.
Depression and suicidality. While many adolescent girls struggle with sociocultural factors that can lead to lowered self-esteem, they are further susceptible to hormonal and biological changes throughout puberty that can culminate in the development of depressive symptoms. Before adolescence, girls and boys experience depression at about the same frequency. However, by adolescence, girls become more likely to experience depression than boys (Bebbington, 2003). Research studies have revealed that exercise can reduce depressive symptoms across the lifespan, helping children (Sallis, et al., 2000), adolescents (Dishman, et al., 2006), young adults (McKercher, et al., 2009), the middle-aged (Brown et al., 2005), and the elderly (Strawbridge et al., 2002). Sports involvement may have long-lasting effects on mental health. For example, female college athletes are 63% less likely than their nonathlete peers to be clinically depressed ten years later (Wyshak, 2001). Half of all girls who participate in some kind of sport experience higher than average levels of self-esteem and less depression (Coltan & Gore, 1991). Additionally, physical activity can be protective against suicidal ideation (Taliaferro et al., 2008). In adolescents and young adults who made nearly lethal suicide attempts, one study found far lower levels of physical activity, even after controlling for explanatory factors such as depression and alcoholism (Simon et al., 2004).

Although the relationship between overall physical activity and female suicidality depends partly on the motive for exercise, multiple studies have confirmed that women who participate in sports are less likely to consider, plan, or attempt suicide (Ferron et al., 1999; Harrison & Narayan, 2003). Unlike exercise alone, sports participation generally takes place within the context of a social network of coaches, teammates, parents, and others that fosters pro-social behavior and provides a therapeutic emotional support base. Exercise alone is not necessarily protective against suicidality for women; in fact, girls and women who engage in frequent exercise may have an elevated risk of suicidal behavior, possibly because they seek
to lose weight in order to compensate for poor body image, low self-esteem, and depression (Brown & Blanton, 2002; Taliaferro et al., 2008b; Thome & Espelage, 2004).

**Sexual health.** Recent research suggests that athletic participation may reduce risky sexual behaviours in young women, such as early sexual initiation, multiple sexual partners, unprotected sex, and sex under the influence of drugs or alcohol (Lehman & Koerner, 2004). Lehman and Koerner (2004) suggest that one possible explanation is that female athletes are better equipped to tap resources needed (such as self-esteem, coping skills, a sense of self-empowerment and efficacy, and even physical strength) to resist pressure to take sexual risks. Another explanation may be that girls who participate in sports have more incentive to avoid risky behaviours, as consequences like pregnancy could jeopardize their opportunity to play (Dodge & Jaccard, 2002). Yet a third possibility is that organized, supervised athletic participation narrows the after-school “window of greatest opportunity” for risky sexual experimentation. Lehman and Koerner (2004) found that among sexually active adolescent girls, those involved in organized team sports are more likely to seek out sexual health-related information or services; for example, they are more likely to discuss contraceptive use or sexual history with their sex partners. Several studies also have highlighted that female high school and college athletes are significantly less likely to get pregnant than their non-athlete peers (Dodge & Jaccard, 2002; Miller et al., 1999; Page et al., 1998; Rome et al., 1998; Sabo et al., 1998). The link between sports participation and reduced pregnancy rates is found across racial and ethnic categories, including Caucasian, African-American, and Hispanic girls in a United States sample (Sabo et al., 1998). One reason for lower athlete pregnancy rates is that girls at highest risk for pregnancy are less likely to get involved (or stay involved) with sports. Athletes tend to be younger and better educated, and are more likely to be Caucasian, all factors that reduce pregnancy risk.
Athletes also engage in less sexual-risk behaviour, in part because they are more reluctant to risk pregnancy (Dodge & Ja
card, 2002). Being both physically active and a team sports’ participant are associated with lower prevalence of sexual risk-taking behaviours for adolescent girls (Kulig et al., 2003). Adolescent female athletes are less than half as likely to get pregnant as female non-athletes (5% and 11%, respectively), more likely to report that they had never had sexual intercourse than female non-athletes (54% and 41%, respectively), and more likely to experience their first sexual intercourse later in adolescence than female non-athletes (Sabo et al., 1998).

**Physical Activity’s Association with Physical Health**

Physical activity improves children’s mental health and contributes to their growth and development. Numerous research studies are highlighting the importance of a physically active lifestyle in order to lower risk for heart disease, certain cancers, obesity, osteoporosis, and Alzheimer’s disease. These diseases are among the leading causes of death for women in North America (Women’s Sports Foundation, 2009) and will be discussed in depth to illustrate the importance of physical activity for young women’s physical health.

**Heart disease.** Cardiovascular heart disease (CHD) is a term used for a number of diseases impacting heart functioning and is the number one cause of death for women over the age of 55 (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2009). Herrmann (2008) argues that there is a general lack of awareness that CHD kills more women than all of the various cancers combined. In addition Godfrey and Manson (2008) research reveal that most women perceive that they are at a lower risk than they actually are. Quinn (2008) suggests that the ignorance related to heart disease may result from the majority of research being conducted after the Second World War to have been focused on Caucasian men. As a result heart disease came to be seen primarily as an illness that affects men. However, fewer women than
men survive heart disease and more women than men die from a heart attack (American Heart Association, 2009). Research reveals that physically active women are less likely to suffer from CHD. In addition engagement with physical activity can reduce many of the risk factors associated with CHD (Ibid). The Women’s Health Study (2008) a prospective cohort study of 38,987 women who were free of CHD at baseline found that by ten years, women who reported engaging in physical activity at least five days a week for thirty minutes were 31% less likely to be at risk for CHD compared to women who were more sedentary. Additionally the large-scale study also reported finding that overweight women who exercised reduced their risk of CHD with women of comparable weight (Weinstein et al., 2008). The research literature reveals that engagement in physical activity reduces several risk factors associated with cardiovascular heart disease and physically active women are less likely to develop CHD. Therefore the current study examining adolescent girls’ participation in physical activity is important because behavioural patterns established in adolescence continue into adulthood (Janz et al., 2000).

**Cancer.** Similar to the literature on cardiovascular heart disease, the research examining risks associated with cancer also reveals that physically active women are less likely to develop a number of cancers (McTiernan, 2008). Irwin’s (2009) research reveals strong evidence demonstrating that physical activity reduces risk for breast and colon cancer. A review of over sixty breast cancer studies identified a 25-30% reduction in breast cancer for physically active women (Friedenreich & Cust, 2008). Bernstein and colleagues (1994) research looked at young women to determine whether participation in physical activities during their reproductive years had reduced risk for breast cancer. The research study followed epidemiologic evidence suggesting that cumulative exposure to ovarian hormones is a determinant of breast cancer risk. These authors hypothesized that regular physical
activity alters the production of ovarian hormones and as a consequence reduces risk for the
development of breast cancer. Bernstein and colleagues reported findings that physical
activity offers one modifiable lifestyle characteristic that may substantially reduce a women’s
risk of breast cancer. The authors urge the implementation of regular physical activity
programs as a critical component of a healthy lifestyle that needs to be a priority for young
women.

**Obesity & overweight.** Obesity and overweight are defined as “abnormal or
excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to health. A crude population measure of
obesity is the body mass index (BMI), a person’s weight (in kilograms) divided by the square
of his or her height (in metres). A person with a BMI of 30 or more is generally considered
obese. A person with a BMI equal to or more than 25 is considered overweight” (World
Health Organization, year, from website). Obesity and overweight are leading preventable
causes of mortality and morbidity among women (Redinger, 2008). Carrying excess weight
is associated with high blood pressure, Type II diabetes, cholesterol problems, cardiovascular
heart disease, and some cancers (Gaal et al., 2006; Gill & Malkova, 2006; Dugan, 2008).

There is evidence that physical inactivity is related to childhood obesity, a
phenomenon that researchers are calling a pandemic (Tremblay & Willms, 2003; Chopra &
Darnton-Hill, 2004). This trend is particularly worrisome as the prevalence of childhood
obesity in Canada appears to be on the rise and obesity in childhood is predictive of obesity
in adulthood (Tremblay & Willms, 2003).

However, as it currently stands the literature on obesity is controversial with critics
found both inside and outside of the medical community. Gard and Wright (2005) argue “An
intellectually critical approach to the so-called ‘obesity epidemic’ is important for two
reasons, one straightforward and one more subtle. First, there is the danger that the language
of ‘epidemic’ exaggerates the situation with which we are faced. Regardless of what some might say about the formal definition of ‘epidemic’ it is a word that conjures visions of looming disaster that threatens to engulf us all. It also suggests that obesity is a disease (itself is a contentious idea) that is catching and could claim any one of us. Faced with an ‘epidemic,’ all manner of drastic measures are likely to be advocated and enacted by policy makers and others in position of authority…The second danger is related to the first but concerns the knowledge people draw on when they talk about the ‘obesity epidemic’. As we have already seen, there is a tendency to rely on widely held assumptions about people and the societies in which they live in order to explain what is going on. As with many assumptions, there is the danger that these may be ill informed and unhelpful…and the possible consequences when people (including scientists, journalists, and other authors) offer misguided explanations for the obesity epidemic” (p.7).

Cooper (2010) claims that the epidemiological framework used to treat and prevent obesity has been criticized on three main fronts. First, obesity science critics such as Campos (2005), Gard and Wright (2005), Oliver (2006) and Basham and colleagues (2007), refute the existing medical literature on obesity as there is a great deal that the scientific community does not know about obesity’s effect on human health and the numerous ways of interpreting current overweight and obesity levels. Secondly, Oliver (2006) calls into question the credibility of the International Obesity Task Force as the members that drafted the WHO Report in 2000 entitled “Obesity: Preventing and Managing the Global Epidemic” were also financially supported by various commercial weight loss organizations. Third, Cooper (2010) argues that “the global obesity epidemic rhetoric supports a moral discourse around fatness” (p. 1022), defining fatness as pathological product of individual weakness and resulting in further weight-based stigmatization.
It is not within the scope of the current research to explore in greater detail the controversial literature on obesity. For the purposes of this study, the literature suggests that obesity may have some adverse effects on physical health and as a result governments and health organizations around the world have devised and implemented policies designed to combat obesity through healthy eating and active living campaigns. One area identified to combat the “obesity crisis” and relevant to the current study is that of physical activity.

Numerous research findings have reported benefits from children and adolescents’ engagement in regular physical activity and exercise. Researchers have found positive physical benefits amongst adolescent populations to include: improved aerobic fitness, body composition and muscular strength (Chan et al., 2003); decreased risk of cardiovascular disease and development of type 2 diabetes (Daniels et al., 2005; Katz, 2005); increased bone mineral content and bone mineral density which decreases the risk of osteoporosis in later life (Sundberg et al., 2002); and increased likelihood that regular physical activity will be carried over into adulthood (Janz et al., 2000).

A study examining the economic burden of illness in Canada in 2005 reported that the total cost of obesity has been estimated to be $4.3 billion in direct and indirect healthcare costs (Public Health Agency of Canada, in press). In Canada, the prevalence of overweight and obesity is much higher among Aboriginal people living off the reserve compared to the rest of the population (Tjepkema, 2006; Tremblay et al., 2005). American studies examining prevalence rates among adolescence also found discrepancies between ethnocultural/racial groups. For example a comparison of adolescent girls found that 27.7% of African-Caribbean American girls and 14.5% of Caucasian American girls were obese (Ogden, 2009). However, the researchers did not comment on socioeconomic backgrounds of their participants. One study that controlled for sociodemographic factors in elementary school...
children and their primary caregivers, found that youth who were overweight or obese reported living in less safe neighborhoods (Franzini et al., 2009). Additionally, Joens-Matre and colleagues (2008) reported that overweight and obesity rates tended to be higher in rural areas than urban areas in the United States. In addition, these authors reported that rural youth (40%) in their study were found to belong to families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds compared to urban youth (18%). Another study examining the association between acculturation and certain obesity-related behaviours in newly immigrated Asian-American and Hispanic adolescents found increases in both fast food consumption and physical inactivity even after controlling for possible confounding variables such as socioeconomic status (Unger et al., 2004).

Overall these studies indicate that obesity levels intersect with social locations and suggest that rates increase in individuals from less privileged backgrounds. Regardless of obesity’s physiological effects on individuals, there is also social stigma of being labeled ‘obese’ when already belonging to a less privileged group. Researchers focusing on the social consequences of being labeled obese have found that negative attitudes are often expressed through discriminatory behaviours against individuals perceived to be obese or overweight (Carr & Friedman, 2005). Similarly, Puhl and Brownwell (2006) reported similar findings in their investigation of weight stigmatization, sources of stigma, coping strategies, psychological functioning and eating behaviours amongst self-identified “overweight” participants. Overall, Puhl and Brownwell reported that weight stigma was experienced through negative assumptions from others, receiving negative comments from children, encountering physical barriers and obstacles, and receiving inappropriate comments from doctors and family members. Their findings suggest that obesity treatment and stigma reduction needs to be aimed at multiple targets such as educational and medical settings.
These studies reveal the discrimination faced by individuals labeled as overweight and obese and highlight the necessity of developing physical activity initiatives that do not perpetuate weight stigma.

Overall the critiques on obesity literature highlight the unique challenges that girls from different social locations face and the need for culturally sensitive prevention programs be devised that do not cause stigmatization either on the basis of weight, ethnocultural/racial heritage, and socioeconomic status.

**Physical Activity Association with Mental and Physical Health Conclusions**

A review of the research above illustrates how girls’ participation in sports and physical activities suggests that for the most part, being physically active is beneficial to young women’s physical and mental health. However, the brief review of literature on the effect of physical activity’s on psychological and physical health may not provide an accurate picture. Areas in which the current body of literature can be strengthened would be in the definition of athletic versus nonathletic, identifying the social locations of participants, and using qualitative methods in order to understand the available choices and the decisions young women are making regarding physical activity.

First, the current investigation aimed to critically examine how artificial distinctions such as; athletic versus nonathletic, active versus inactive, and feminine sports versus masculine sports may be problematic in that they create divisions and even hierarchies between girls and between activities. While researchers may be trying to better understand the nature of girls’ involvement in sport and physical activity it was important to explore the language being used to categorize girls as these labels may inadvertently create barriers to participation for “nonathletic/inactive” girls. In addition, research examining the nature of girls’ involvement in sports and physical activity often does not define what the difference is
between categories such as “active” and “inactive” which can unintentionally place girls who are engaged in non-organized noncompetitive forms of physical activities such as hiking into the category of “inactive.”

Furthermore, the labeling of “feminine sports” and “masculine sports” insinuates a hierarchy in which masculine sports are viewed as more difficult, requiring more athletic competence, strength, and competitiveness. The creation of sport hierarchies cannot only lead to division between active girls but also can hinder girls’ flexibility in trying new activities. Labels differentiating sports as “masculine” or “feminine” and the marking of girls as “active” or “inactive” may further place the blame on girls belonging to less privileged groups. For example, girls belonging to working class families may have several obstacles impeding their ability to engage in physical activities such as insufficient financing, lack of transportation, and/or part-time work. As the research currently stands, participants are represented as making “active” or “inactive” lifestyle choices without further insight into the social processes that lead to these choices.

The majority of research reviewing the effects of physical activity participation on mental and physical health neglects to include participants’ demographic variables such as socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnocultural/racial heritage, family structure, and geographical locations. For the most part age and gender were the only consistently reported characteristics. Neglecting to identify the multiple social locations of participants leaves out crucial information to the varied barriers to physical activities that adolescent girls from a variety of backgrounds face. Furthermore, the majority of literature examining the effects of physical activity involvement does not take a critical perspective in understanding how various social processes culminate in reduced participation in physical activities among adolescent girls.
Finally, research in the field of physical activity and sport has predominantly been conducted utilizing quantitative methodologies. While self-report and survey measures may allow for the collection of data in large samples, these measures cannot tap into how adolescent girls’ decisions are shaped by their beliefs, attitudes, and opportunities to participate in sports and physical activities. The current investigation, utilized life history and focus group approaches to better understand how social processes affect adolescent girls’ opportunities to remain physically active.

**Facilitators and Barriers to Physical Activity**

In order to explore the reasons for adolescent girls’ decline in physical activity, this section includes a review of the research that examines both facilitators and barriers to engagement with physical activity.

**Facilitators to Physical Activity**

For some time now, researchers have attempted to uncover reasons for adolescent girls’ disengagement with physical activities. One way to address the issue of declining physical activities rates is to study the reasons why girls are motivated to participate. Research examining facilitating factors has been grouped into two broad categories: social influences and health, well-being and motivation.

**Social influences.** Social facilitators were broken down into several groups: peers, family, other adult figures, and media.

**Peers.** There is a growing recognition that social influences are important to adolescent girls and research suggests a link between peer relationships and physical activity participation (Weiss & Smith, 2002; Whitehead & Biddle, 2008). Participants in Taylor and colleagues’ (1999) study reported spending the majority of their leisure time with friends. The participants also believed that their friends’ attitudes and behaviours greatly influenced
whether or not they engaged in physical activities. Similarly, Whitehead and Biddle’s (2008) focus group study reported that adolescent girls identified their friendships as an important facilitator to their continued engagement in sports and physical activities. Among the forty-seven participants, the majority perceived shared participation to be more fun, comfortable, and encouraging. Flintoff and Scraton (2001) found that engagement in physical activity for many young women depended on having female friends who participated with them.

**Family.** In addition to having active female peers, family members are also a predictor of whether a young woman will remain active throughout her adolescence (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Whitehead & Biddle, 2008). Several studies examining factors that influence adolescent girls’ physical activity reported that parents who are perceived to be encouraging and physically active themselves are viewed as positive influences (Robertson-Wilson et al., 2003; CAAWS, 2009; Epstein et al., 1996). Similarly, Biddle and colleagues’ (2005) review of the research examining the predictors of adolescent girls’ participation in physical activity reported that girls who reported higher levels of physical activity were provided more encouragement by their parents when compared to participants who reported lower levels of activity. Davison and colleagues (2003) reported that mothers and fathers adopt different strategies to encourage their daughter’s physical activity. Mothers were more likely to employ “logistic support” such as taking on roles related to registration, transportation and moral support during sporting events. On the other hand, fathers were more likely to use “explicit modeling” encourage physical activity by their own behaviour, such as leading family outings that involved physical activity (Davison et al., 2003).

In related research, Raudsepp and Roomet (2000) reported that male adolescents’ physical activity was significantly related to fathers’ and brothers’ activity levels whereas female adolescents’ physical activity was associated with both parental and siblings’ physical
activity and fathers’ total weekly physical activity. This finding suggests that for adolescent girls all family members may play an influential role in her level of physical activity, especially her father.

Blackshear’s dissertation (2008) also examined the role of family structure in physical activity among African American adolescent girls. She reported that involvement by fathers such as playing or coaching leads to increased physical activity levels. Having a father present was found to increase physical activity significantly even when demographic and socioeconomic status was controlled (Blackshear, 2009). Not surprisingly, girls from two-parent families were found to have higher physical activity levels than compared to girls from single-parent families (Blackshear, 2009). This discrepancy may be due to financial discrepancies. As Fields (2003) reported finding in the United States that only 15% of children living in two-parent families and 45% of children living in single father families have household incomes less than $30 000 compared to 65% of children living in single mothers families.

In addition to parental support, some studies reported siblings to be facilitators to adolescent girls continued participation in physical activities (CAAWS, 2009, Vu et al., 2006). More specifically Vu and colleagues’ (2006) reported that many adolescent girls identified their older brothers as motivating and encouraging them to engage in physical activity. These research findings suggest that male family members play an essential role in adolescent girls’ continued engagement in physical activity.

**Other adult figures.** In addition to family members, some research on adolescent girls has identified coaches and physical education teachers as sources of support and encouragement (Smith & Smoll, 1990; CAAWS, 2009). Adolescent girls in Robbins’ (2008) research named their physical education teachers or coaches rather than family members as
their most important sources of support. A study of middle school girls reported that the girls were more likely to compete and stay involved in physical education classes when they had teachers who created a safe environment for girls both emotionally and physically and who emphasized effort over skill (Constantinou et al., 2009).

**Media.** Finally, another social influence reported to impact upon adolescent girls’ participation in physical activity is the pressure to conform to the thin ideal perpetuated throughout the media. Groesz and colleagues’ (2001) meta-analytic review of the effects of thin media images on body satisfaction overwhelmingly demonstrated that mass media images lead to body dissatisfaction amongst adolescent girls. Previous research has documented how mass media images have a strong impact on girls’ perceptions of their weight and shape (Field et al., 1999). Predictably, Field and colleagues (1999) observed that the frequency of reading fashion magazines was positively associated with the prevalence of exercise to lose weight.

**Health, well-being and motivation.** While social influences appear to be primary motivators to increased engagement in physical activities, other facilitators that have been identified include: personal fulfillment, enjoyment and fun, physical health, and self-presentation.

**Personal fulfillment.** Haverly and Davison’s (2005) cross sectional study using self-report measures in the United States with 200 male and female middle school participants reported personal fulfillment was the strongest motivating factor for physical activity. Personal fulfillment motivation was associated with factors such as health, improved skills, and enjoyment. In particular, female participants who reported higher levels of personal fulfillment were associated with significantly higher levels of physical activity (Haverly & Davison, 2005). Similarly, Whitehead and Biddle’s (2008) study found that personal
achievement, health benefits, increased confidence, and stress release were identified as crucial motivators. Research identifies physical competence perceptions to be linked with sport motivation (Weis & Petlichkoff, 1989). CAAWS (2009) identified “feeling good” as a common motivator that encompassed feeling healthy, energizing, stress relieving, helping with sleep, and increasing self-confidence. While adolescents can identify the positive benefits of being active, the likelihood of young women’s continued engagement in physical activity was more closely linked to feelings of physical competence and mastery of skill (Klint & Weiss, 1987). In regards to adolescent girls, the research reveals that girls who perceive that they are unskilled are more likely to drop out in attempts to avoid embarrassment in front of their peers.

**Enjoyment and fun.** In addition to skill, another essential motivating influence to adolescents’ engagement in physical activity is whether they enjoy it. In Whitehead and Biddle’s (2008) study, girls who engaged regularly in physical activity stated that enjoyment was their main motivation for being active. Less active participants in the same study identified that physical activity needed to be more fun, informal and unstructured (Whitehead & Biddle, 2008). Similarly, CAAWS (2009) reported that fun, being social, competition, travel opportunities, and feeling skilled or successful were primary motivators for adolescent girls. Petlichkof (1992) also reported that physical activity needed to be fun in order to increase participation. This research suggests that the traditional characteristics of physical education or sport teams may be problematic for adolescent girls as these environments prioritize winning and competition over fun and enjoyment.

**Physical health.** It is important to recognize that a review of the literature on health and well-being motivators reveals that while adolescents may be able to identify the many physical health benefits associated with being active, there is little research revealing that this
actually motivates them to participate. Sleap and Wormald (2001) make a case that during adolescence health problems such as heart disease and osteoporosis are of little concern. Compared to older populations in which improved health is a major motivator to increased physical activity, there seems to not be a strong connection between health motivation and physical activity among adolescent populations. Therefore, while many adolescent girls may identify health as a motivating factor it will be important in the current investigation to untangle “health” and healthy living with weight loss. For the current investigation it will be critical to make this distinction, as all of the adolescent girls participating in the focus groups would have had contact with school based initiatives addressing childhood obesity. One of these policies includes mandatory Daily Physical Activity (DPA) for a minimum of 20 minutes from kindergarten to grade eight (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005).

*Self-presentation.* Concerns over weight linked with increased physical activity has been well documented in the literature, and identified consistently as a noteworthy motivator. Many adolescent girls identify physical activity as means to “look good and lose weight” (CAAWS, 2009, p.18). Adolescent girls in Whitehead and Biddle’s (2008) study similarly reported participating in physical activity to avoid becoming overweight, gaining weight, or as a result of perceived weight gain. Ingledew and Sullivan (2002) reported that female adolescents are more motivated by weight management concerns to be active than are males. Similarly, Saxena and colleagues’ (2002) prospective survey reported finding that adolescent girls’ motivation to lose weight was significantly associated with regular vigorous activity. Sleap and Wormald’s (2001) research also identified young women’s motivation to be thin as a main motivating factor to engage in physical activity. Whereas weight loss appears to be a primary motivator for adolescent girls there are also self-presentation concerns that present a barrier to girls’ engagement with physical activity. These along with other barriers will be
discussed in the following section.

**Barriers to Physical Activity**

The research consistently reveals a decline in physical activity levels during the onset of adolescence, especially for girls, making it important to understand barriers girls face to participation in physical activity. Barriers that have been found to affect adolescent girls’ engagement in physical activity include: social influences, lack of motivation, competence, and enjoyment, priorities and identity, and socioeconomic status and ethnocultural/racial heritage.

**Social influences.** Barriers that related to social influences included: peers, family, other adult figures, media, and stereotypical gender roles and heterosexuality.

**Peers.** Dwyer and colleagues’ (2006) focus group study explored perceived barriers to participation in physical activity among adolescent girls. A total of seventy-three adolescent girls in Toronto, Ontario participated in one of seven focus group sessions. Participants were between the ages of 15 and 16 years old and were selected to ensure enthncultural diversity. The authors reported that the participants’ ethnocultural/racial origins were Asian (35%), White (24%), Black (22%), Latin America (1%), other (8%) and multi-racial (10%). Social markers related to socioeconomic backgrounds or the family structure of participants were not discussed. The focus group consisted of between eight and twelve participants who were asked to discuss covered three topics. First participants were asked “why they do moderate and vigorous physical activity, even if done seldom” (Dwyer, et al., 2006, p. 77). Second, participants were asked to “discuss what makes it difficult for them to do moderate and vigorous physical activity” (Ibid.). Third, they were asked to “suggest what needs to happen in their community to help them and other adolescents become more physically active” (Dwyer, et al., 2006, p. 78). Dwyer and colleagues reported
finding that many of the participants’ commitment to participation in physical activity is threatened when friends drop out. The participants mentioned not having someone joining them to be a deterrent and described the pressure in choosing to go out with friends or participate in physical activity without them (Dwyer et al., 2006).

Regardless of gender, adolescence is recognized as a time when young adults increasingly depend on their friendships for a sense of belonging and support. However, for adolescent girls, friendships are even more crucial since girls are taught to value social connection. If a girl’s friends are no longer engaging in physical activities during recess then she is more likely to sit and talk with them in order to remain socially connected. Whitehead and Biddle’s (2008) study reported that girls perceived being physically active in an environment without friends to be extremely threatening. Girls reported feeling more comfortable when being active with friends but were also willing to participate in sports with unknown girls of a similar age. Similar findings have also been found in Maea and colleagues (2006) research, Sallis and colleagues’ (2000) work, and Cockburn and Clarke’s (2002) research. While the research reveals the importance of friendship for active young women, these studies neglect to understand the explanation for why girls feel the environment of physical activity is threatening when friends and peers are not present. A deeper analysis is needed to explain the reasons behind adolescent girls’ uneasy feelings when engaging in sport or physical activity alone. In addition to their peers, adolescent girls’ romantic partners can also discourage continued engagement with physical activities. For example, participants in Dwyer and colleagues’ (2006) study reported that their boyfriends often complained about the time they spent apart due to her participation in sports.

**Family.** In the same study, parents were also identified as being barriers to engagement with physical activities due to voicing safety concerns such as the possibility of
being harassed, assaulted, and or kidnapped when walking home from practices or games (Dwyer et al., 2006). Additionally, the participants perceived their parents’ anxiety related to their homework and household responsibilities as unsupportive (Dwyer et al., 2006).

Similarly, Coackley and White’s (1992) research with British adolescent girls reported perceived barriers linked to a lack of social support from parents and opposite sex friends. Likewise, Neumark-Sztainer and colleagues’ (2006) cohort study on adolescent girls, reported a major deterrent to physical activity was a lack of support by their parents. Adolescent girls also report a significant drop in the level of support from both fathers and brothers compared with adolescent boys and younger girls (Robbins et al., 2008). Therefore it seems that the lack of social support from the girls’ families and peer groups creates a challenge to girls who want to continue to participate in physical activities. It seems reasonable that if girls are constantly discouraged from engaging in physical activities they would be more likely to drop out in an attempt to gain social approval from their peers and families.

**Other adult figures.** Most research studies highlighting physical education teachers and coaches are positive motivators to adolescent girls’ continued engagement with physical activity, also reported that they could hinder engagement. For example, Sleap and Wormald (2001) documented that teachers play a major role in how girls experience physical education classes with most girls making reference to liking or disliking teachers. Girls who spoke about disliking their teachers described favouritism towards students who were good at sports or on sports teams. Similar findings were also identified in both Cohrane’s (2009) and Cockburn and Clarke’s (2009) research studies with adolescent girls voicing frustration with physical education teachers being perceived as being too “pushy” or “controlling.” As a result the current study, aimed to address the role of teachers and coaches by asking
participants about their ideas on the ways in which these adult figures could facilitate engagement with physical activities amongst adolescent girls.

**Media.** Numerous studies have highlighted an imbalance of media coverage between female and male sports resulting in many girls not being able to identify female athletic role models (Meier, 2005). Cockburn and Clarke’s (2002) research also illustrates the invisibility of female athletes as one adolescent girl in their study says, “I know there are people like me, it’s just that they're not in the magazines” (p.657). Along a similar line, Lucas’ (2000) critique of Nike’s commercial campaign identified the many ways in which media such as television commercials perpetuate sexist notions related to girls’ athletic agency and competence. More specifically, Lucas argues that while Nike’s commercials aims to increase girls participation in sports, the structure of the text with girls asking permission to play reinforces and contributes to dominant oppressive ideologies by normalizing the idea that sports belongs to the masculine domain. In addition, female athletes continue to be confronted with homophobia due to an underlying fear that sports participation will encourage homosexuality (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983). Knight and Gioliano’s (2003) research provides evidence that female athletes’ heterosexuality is often highlighted in the media by emphasizing their relationship with men, and through images of female athletes adhering to idealized aspects of femininity such as posing seductively in tight-fitting clothing. Mainstream media continues to overlook female athletes and frame them as either objects of heterosexual desire or lacking in agency and competence. In doing so the images and messages viewed by adolescent girls depict a clear message that the domain of sports and physical activity continues to be a masculine space. In addition to mainstream media, girls receive these messages from varied social discourses related to gender. The next section will
explore how gender roles and heteronormativity restrict adolescent girls' engagement with physical activity.

**Stereotypical gender roles and heterosexuality.** Reviewing the social influences related to physical activity reveals that girls face far more social obstacles than boys do. This trend suggests that gender norms are influencing adolescent girls’ lower rates of engagement in physical activity. Culp’s (1998) research reported gender role constraints linked to femininity to be a major barrier to adolescent girls’ engagement with physical activity. These constraints included notions around strength, competition, and appearance concerns. Dwyer and colleagues’ (2006) focus group study with 73 adolescent girls in Toronto reported “body-centered issues” to be a primary barrier linked to adolescent girls’ participation. The adolescent girls in this study discussed having to choose between being feminine and being active, as well as being self-conscious of their appearance in front of boys, not being able to wear make-up while active, and feeling uncomfortable participating while menstruating. Similarly, Whitehead and Biddle’s (2008) participants spoke about how being physically active negatively influenced their feminine image. Robbins and colleagues’ (2003) study reported that adolescent girls’ perceived barriers to physical activity included feeling self-conscious about their appearances when engaged in activity. Previous research has also documented that a primary deterrent to physical activity for many adolescent girls was related to their physical appearances such as messing up their hair and make-up (Leslie et al., 1999; Taylor et al., 2000). Along a similar line, adolescent girls have also identified tight, ill-fitting uniforms for either sports teams or physical education courses to be a major impediment to their participation in physical activities (Porter, 2002; Coackley & White, 1992; Orme, 1991).

It is important to note that while the majority of research highlights the conflict
between femininity and physical activity, some girls are contesting these barriers. Cockburn and Clarke (2002) conducted interviews with six British adolescent girls in grade nine. The participant’s ethnocultural/racial heritages, socioeconomic backgrounds, and family structures were not provided. Cockburn and Clarke reported that girls challenged stereotypes and were aware of violating expectations linked with femininity by participating in physical activity. Some examples the participants identified included sweating, exhibiting strength and skill, and having messy hair. The participants identified that having examples of other active girls and women made it easier to resist stereotypes related to femininity. However, they also identified consequences for disobeying the rules of femininity such as being labeled a “tomboy” and feeling socially isolated (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002). It would have been useful for Cockburn and Clarke to have identified the social locations their participants occupied in order to better understand the various social processes affecting their girls’ physical activity experiences. Similarly Shakib’s (2003) interviews with male and female high school basketball players could have been more comprehensive had the participants’ socioeconomic backgrounds and family structures been identified. Shakib reported finding that female basketball players identified being labeled a “tomboy” and homophobic teasing as a hurdle to participation. Many participants spoke about dropping out of sports at some point during puberty in order to contend with the contradiction between displaying male dominant sports performance and “heterosexual desire” (Shakib, 2003).

Likewise, Kumar’s (2004) research examining Indo-Canadian adolescent girls from middle class backgrounds reported avoiding social exclusion, harassment, and teasing by being heterosexually attractive, downplaying their abilities in sports, and choosing to ‘hang out and talk’ with girlfriends rather than participate in physical activity. These results reveal the tremendous influence gender norms and heterosexuality play in determining whether
adolescent girls engage in physical activities. In addition, to adhering to gender norms, other research projects illustrate institutional aspects that impede girls’ participation such as few opportunities for girls to play team sports in same-sexed peer recreational contexts (Shakib, 2003), and the lack of equity on school playgrounds with boys frequently using most of the space and not sharing equipment (Maea et al., 2006). While this research reveals that adolescent girls are aware of the restrictions that are inherent in a heteronormative society, the literature does not ask participants directly about why they decide to engage or not to engage in physical activity. Therefore, prospective research is needed to address the negotiations that girls make when continuing to be physically active and the struggles girls challenge or conform to when making these decisions. While it is important to identify barriers limiting adolescent girls’ participation in physical activities it is also important to understand why some girls in spite of gender role constraints continue to play. One possibility is that active adolescent girls continue to be intrinsically motivated despite encountering social barriers. The next section will discuss research-highlighting barriers that decrease girls’ motivation to engage in physical activities.

**Lack of motivation, competence and enjoyment.** Whitehead and Biddle’s (2008) reported that girls who were less active described reasons such as not enjoying participation, a lack of athletic ability, and feeling that “it’s not for me.” This finding also resonates with previous research illustrating that some adolescent girls identified disliking competition because they perceived the pressure to win as stressful and worried about their performance being judged (Dwyer, 2006). In addition, participants also described feeling discouraged when they tried out and failed to make a team (Ibid).

Similar research studies have reported comparable findings that a significant barrier to adolescent girls’ engagement in physical activity relates to a lack of confidence, low
motivation, and feelings of incompetence (Culp, 1998; Sleap & Wormald, 2001; Maea et al., 2006). Hills’ (2007) research also illustrated that participants found physical education courses to be intimidating. Even in girl only contexts, participants who had low perceptions of their skill worried about teasing from other students and being chosen last for teams.

**Priorities and identity.** The adolescent girls in Dwyer and colleagues’ (2006) research identified “lack of time” as a main barrier. The girls described homework, part-time employment, and family responsibilities. Other research studies examining adolescent girls’ barriers to physical activity have also identified time constraints related to homework, household chores, and part-time employment (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2003; Tappe et al., 1989; Maea et al., 2006). Similarly, Kimm and colleagues (2006) longitudinal study following a “biracial” cohort of over two thousand sedentary adolescent girls living in the United States across three years reported the most significant barriers to include lack of time, lack of interest, fatigue, no one to participate with, no place to participate, and lack of competency. Overwhelmingly over 60% of adolescent girls from both races identified a lack of time being their main barrier. Unfortunately, the authors did not ask what the participant’s lack of time was due to. Interestingly, similar research has reported that adolescent boys do not perceive family responsibilities or academic performance to be barriers to their engagement in physical activity.

In addition to time constraints, some of the literature has highlighted that adolescent girls would rather spend time in more sedentary activities such as talking on the telephone, or spending time on the internet, or watching television (Dwyer et al., 2006; Maea et al., 2006).

**Socioeconomic status & ethnocultural/racial heritage.** The Women’s Health Surveillance Report states that there is a gap in the physical activity literature that considers the ethnocultural/racial and socioeconomic statuses (SES) of women and girls in Canada
(Public Health Agency of Canada, 2003). Currently, there is little research examining how adolescent girls’ level of physical activity relates to her ethnocultural/racial group membership or socioeconomic status. As we have seen from the barriers mentioned above, it can be assumed that girls from less privileged backgrounds encounter even more obstacles. Both Culp (1998) and Dwyer and colleagues’ (2006) participants reported barriers to engagement with physical activity to be linked with financial expenses such as inaccessibility of recreation centers due to cost or transportation. Congruent with the literature, Gordon-Larsen and colleagues’ (2006) reported finding that higher SES areas in the United States had a significantly greater likelihood of having one or more physical activity facilities, whereas low SES and high minority areas were less likely to have access to facilities. Gordon-Larsen and colleagues’ (2004) research exploring barriers amongst African-Caribbean American mother-daughter and grandmother-granddaughter dyads reported that caregivers perceived most of the environmental barriers to engagement with physical activity. These included a lack of recreation-related neighborhood and household facilities, lack of safety such as no sidewalks on busy streets, dogs that were not properly restrained, neighbors who had been drinking alcohol, and vagrancy. Similarly, Maea and colleagues’ (2006) participants also identified several financial barriers to their engagement with physical activity. These included transportation, lack of safety in their neighborhoods, and a lack of accessibility and availability of programs at their schools. Many of these environmental barriers suggest that many of the participants lived in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods. In contrast, research examining high SES neighborhoods report that adolescent girls engage in less sedentary behaviours and have higher levels of physical activity (MacLeod et al., 2008).
Research examining barriers among newly immigrated families in the United States reported that parents lacked the time to transport their children to after school programs and could not afford the finances to pay for these programs (Liu et al., 2009). Likewise, newly immigrated families in Sallis and colleagues’ (2000) research reported similar financial obstacles preventing engagement with physical activity. Yu and colleagues’ (2003) research identified that immigrant parents were concerned that their child may be bullied or encounter language barriers if they were to participate in extra curricular sports. The research findings amongst newly immigrated families is relevant to the current investigation as Toronto continues to become an increasingly diverse city with almost fifty percent of the population being born outside of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2006). In order to create effective health promoting programs that meet the needs of newly immigrated adolescent girls, questions related to acculturation, ethnocultural/racial sensitivity, and accessibility will have to be answered.

Addressing the unique struggles that new Canadians face in order to engage in physical activity is essential in health promotion initiatives. In addition, initiatives also have to better understand the differential levels of physical activity among diverse ethnocultural/racial groups. Recent studies have reported that adolescent girls belonging to certain ethnocultural/racial heritages may be at a greater risk for reduced participation in physical activities. For example, researchers in the United States have reported that African-Caribbean American and Hispanic American girls consistently reported lower levels of physical activity and a greater decline in participation throughout adolescence compared Caucasian American girls (Kimm et al., 2002; Richmond et al., 2006).

In order to account for these differences some studies have examined the role of the school and neighborhood environments. Grieser and colleagues (2008) reported that
compared to Caucasian American girls, African-Caribbean and Hispanic American girls reported lower levels of support for physical activity and physical education within the school environment. Regarding neighborhood environments, Richmond and colleagues (2007) examined the role of neighborhoods to explain ethnocultural/racial differences in adolescent inactivity in the United States. Not surprisingly the authors found that that the rate of crime was associated with reduced physical activity. In addition, Caucasian girls and Hispanic girls living in the same neighborhood reported similar levels of physical activity, whereas African-Caribbean American girls reported lower levels of physical activity even when living in the same neighborhood as Caucasian girls. These research findings suggest that interventions targeting neighborhoods to eliminate disparities between ethnocultural/racial groups may be less effective and suggest that school-based programs may be more suitable for adolescent populations.

In Britain, similar differences in physical activity levels between ethnocultural/ racial groups have been identified. A five-year longitudinal study carried out by Brodersen and colleagues (2007) reported that Asian adolescents have the lowest level of physical activity compared to other ethnicities. Similarly, South Asian Europeans youths have also been reported to have lower levels of physical activity compared to Caucasian Europeans and African-Caribbean Europeans youth (Owen et al., 2009).

Regarding the Canadian context, there is a lack of research examining the relationship between ethnocultural/racial heritage and physical activity levels among adolescents. A review of the literature by Van Der Horst and colleagues (2007) reported that Caucasian youth consistently reported higher levels of physical activity compared with other ethnicities. While there is little data to understand the role of ethnocultural/racial heritage amongst youth, there is some research using adult samples. Bryan and colleagues (2006) examined the
relationship between ethnocultural/racial heritage and levels of self-reported physical activity amongst Canadian adults. The authors reported that South Asian, East/Southeast Asian, West Asian, and Arab women reported the lowest level of physical activity compared to other groups. One limitation of this study was the exclusion of Aboriginal individuals living on reserves. Similarly, Young and Katzmarzyk (2007) highlighted the necessity of further research in the area of physical activity and Aboriginal people living on reserves as most national surveys have excluded this at risk population.

As the literature suggests adolescents from varying ethnocultural/racial heritages report differences in their level of engagement in physical activity. There is a need for further research in order to identify the complex interplay between gender, SES, and ethnocultural heritage in order to better understand the nature of barriers facing girls from diverse backgrounds. The current investigation intended to uncover the varied social processes that disrupt adolescent girls from different backgrounds’ engagement with physical activity.

**Consequences of Barriers to Physical Activity**

As the research literature illustrates, adolescent girls face far more barriers than facilitators to engagement in physical activity. Through a brief review of the barriers such as social influences, lack of motivation, competence, and enjoyment, and priorities and identity, it is easy to see that social processes related to gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnocultural/racial heritage increasingly disrupt girls’ opportunity to engage in physical activity and sport. The multiple barriers to participation in physical activity results in reduced participation throughout adolescence and continued into adulthood.

**The Transition of Facilitators to Barriers in Physical Activity**

girls’ physical activity. Through in-depth interviews with twelve adolescent girls, the research investigated how various social domains such as the role of the family, school environment, peer relations and body-centered concerns influenced adolescent girls’ physical activity levels. Nagasawa’s research made several novel contributions to the field, such as its inclusion of girls from various ethnocultural/racial, socioeconomic, and geographical backgrounds, and uncovering the dynamic nature of facilitators and barriers to physical activity. To date, studies have predominantly focused separately either on the study of barriers, most often, or on the study of facilitators. The few studies that focused on both (Mason, 1995; Vu et al., 2006), did not report on transitions between facilitators and barriers, suggesting that these two dimensions were understood to be static in nature. Utilizing a prospective qualitative design, revealed that, in particular during adolescence, facilitators in all social systems gradually transformed into barriers. Specific factors in the social domains of the family, school environment, peer relations and body-centered constructions by self and others were found to begin as facilitators during childhood and increasingly transform into barriers as the girls entered adolescence. The study suggested that the social construction of femininity was reinforced through multiple social domains and the pressure to conform to gender roles increases, as girls get older.

In order to increase adolescents’ engagement in physical activity, health promotion initiatives have been developed to offset the multiple obstacles they face. The following section will discuss efforts to increase physical activity among youth.

**Efforts to Increase Physical Activity**

Health promotion initiatives have been developed internationally to address the rising level of physical inactivity amongst children and adolescents living in developed countries. This section highlights health promotion initiatives administered within school settings, as
the majority of youth regardless of social markers spend 6-8 hours a day there during most of the year. In addition, health promotion initiatives targeting either physical inactivity or obesity will be explored as both focus on a reduction in sedentary activities. The review of health promotion initiatives will focus primarily on programs for adolescent girls in North America.

Cook-Cottone and colleagues’ (2009) meta-analysis of over forty studies through 1997-2008 on school-based interventions to reduce obesity in children and adolescents in several countries such as the United States, Europe, and China reported several key features of successful programs. Success was based on objective measures such as skin fold thickness and body mass index (BMI) reductions. The features of successful obesity health promotion initiatives were that they were universally provided to all students regardless of weight or risk for obesity. Another feature was that they were implemented collaboratively amongst schoolteachers, nurses, and parents. The sessions occurred during or after school hours and had longer duration periods (35 weeks or longer). In addition the successful programs focused on nutritional change and increasing physical activity. Limitations of the studies reviewed were that most studies did not identify the socioeconomic backgrounds of their participants; in addition the programs did not target the emotional regulation aspects of overeating. The authors of the meta-analysis suggest future research should incorporate a more integrative body and mind approach to obesity prevention that would provide awareness to the cause of binge eating and disordered eating risk factors.

Sallis and colleagues (2010) examined the success of a health related elementary physical education program on children’s physical activity called “Sports, Play, Active Recreation for Kids” (SPARK) in the United States. Reported results revealed that the program increased physical activity during physical education courses with girls but failed to
promote physical activity outside of schools for both boys and girls. The authors speculate that physical activity was affected by parental safety concerns and children’s lack of control over their own schedules. Unfortunately the authors did not identify participants’ ethnocultural/racial heritage or socioeconomic backgrounds making it difficult to understand the nature of barriers during and after school hours.

Similar exclusions of participants’ ethnocultural/racial heritage or socioeconomic backgrounds were also evident in DeBate and colleagues (2009) survey study conducted in the United States. The authors examined the success of an intervention program developed to address the decline in physical activity in adolescent girls. The intervention was administrated through two age appropriate programs entitled “Girls on the Run” (grade 3-5) and “Girls on Track” (grades 6-8) in schools across the United States. The programs were delivered over a period of 12 weeks and met twice weekly for an hour and a half within a school setting. Trained volunteer coaches facilitated discussions and activities that promoted positive emotional, social, mental, and physical development. Topics that were covered included analyzing cultural and social messages sent from the media and the differences between inner and outer beauty. In addition to topic discussions the sessions also involved physical activities and stretching. At the end of the program the girls in both programs engaged in a 5km run/walk with their peers and coaches. DeBate and colleagues (2009) reported that participants who completed the program, experienced improvements in self-esteem, body satisfaction, and increased physical activity frequency and commitment. Limitations identified by the authors included that the girls were self-selected and the short-term duration of the intervention.

Neumark-Sztainer and colleagues (2010) evaluated “New Moves,” a school based program that prevents weight based problems in American adolescent girls. Seven hundred
fifty five participants took part in the program and the majority of them were girls from diverse ethnocultural/racial backgrounds as schools in low-income neighborhoods were purposely targeted. The initiative was implemented in all-girl physical education classes and used motivational interviewing, nutrition education, self-empowerment, individual sessions, lunch meetings, and parental outreach over a 16-week period. The authors used outcome measures such as percentage of body fat, BMI, physical activity, sedentary activity, dietary intake, unhealthy weight control behaviours, and body/self-image to determine program success. Overall, “New Moves” did not lead to significant changes in body fat or BMI but improvements were seen in sedentary activity, eating patterns, unhealthy weight control behaviours and body/self-image. A unique strength of the prevention program is that it incorporates principles from both obesity and eating disorder fields, therefore not focusing on weight-loss goals but rather on behavioural changes.

Boyd and Hrycaiko (1997) examined a school-based physical activity intervention on 181 pre-adolescent and adolescent girls in the United States. The package involved three components: physical activity, education and self-report. Results showed that girls with low self-esteem benefitted the most from the intervention. Similar to previous programs mentioned above, this program did not provide the participants’ socioeconomic status, ethnocultural/racial backgrounds and other relevant social markers that may indicate differences between girls with low and high self-esteem.

The “Go Girls!” program developed by Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada is an initiative designed to address the physical activity, healthy eating, and positive self-image needs of adolescent girls. The program consists of 7 sessions over a 7-10 week period with each session being 1.5-2 hours in length and held after school in a school classroom. The main goal is for adolescent girls to develop an appreciation of the benefits of an active,
healthy, lifestyle. Currently, there are no research results published to evaluate the effectiveness of this program.

The Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) created the “On the Move” program to increase physical activity among inactive adolescent girls. The program assists practitioners to increase girls’ physical activity through fun oriented, supportive, female-only, recreational sport and physical activity programs. The overall premise of the program is to work towards gender equity in sport and physical activity and provide girls with access to a range of opportunities and choices that meet their unique needs. Focus groups were conducted across several geographical locations in Canada in order to check for the effectiveness of the initiative and make any necessary revisions. The focus groups reconfirmed the importance of providing girls and young women with fun, female-only opportunities where they can try new experiences and build their skills in a fun and inclusive environment (CAAWS, 2009). Unfortunately, the research does not go into detail as to how the initiative increases the physical activity rates of adolescent girls and promotes gender equity.

The health promotion initiatives reviewed illustrate some success in increasing the physical activity levels of adolescent girls. However, further research is needed in order to better understand the effectiveness of these health promotion programs. For example, it will be important for future research to employ follow up measures to examine long-term effects. Insight into whether these programs result in lasting behavioural change will inform future programs as these initiatives currently are modeled as a course “add on” instead of completely being infused into the permanent curriculum. Unfortunately, the review of health promotion initiatives also illustrates considerable gaps in the current literature especially when it comes to girls from diverse social locations. Adolescent girls, especially those who
are less privileged socioeconomically or related to other social factors are consistently found to have the lowest physical activity levels (Sallis et al., 2000). In addition, the majority of the research examining the effects of prevention programs are situated in the United States and therefore do not address the unique differences of Canadian adolescent girls. As the literature currently stands, there is awareness to the unique needs of girls from different backgrounds but there is little, if anything, that is being done in prevention. None of the programs addressed concrete strategies used to dismantle barriers related to ethnocultural/racial issues, including discrimination, or the unique needs of new Canadians.

Furthermore, only CAAWS’ focus group study directly asked adolescent girls what changes need to be made in their health promotion initiative to reduce barriers to engagement with physical activity. However, no research examining the effectiveness of the “On the Move” program has been released to date. The majority of the health promotion programs gave little if any voice to the adolescent girls. This is of great concern as these initiatives may be losing valuable insights from the participants they aim to be helping.

Finally, in addition none of the health promotion programs targeted the intrinsic motivating factors to engagement in physical activity such as joy, passion, and immersion. The majority of programs highlighted the positive physiological association with physical activity such as weight loss, improved health, and stress release. It is important to engage adolescent girls intrinsically in order to prevent physical activity being viewed as another chore that must be completed in order to reduce feelings of guilt and shame.

**Rationale for the Current Study**

Reviewing the literature on embodiment, the social construction of sport and gender, the mental and physical health effects of physical activity on adolescent girls, the facilitators and barriers to adolescent girls’ engagement with physical activity, and health promotion
programs reveals the need for more research regarding the social processes that underlie diverse girls’ decisions about the level and choice of engagement in physical activity. The purpose of the current research was to develop a comprehensive picture of physical activity as it relates to adolescent girls. Unlike previous research, this study intended to examine the social processes that disrupt engagement with physical activity across time using a life history prospective approach. The data collected from the individual life history prospective interviews were used to inform several focus group discussions.

As previously discussed various focus group studies have illustrated the importance of asking adolescent girls directly what influences their level of engagement with physical activity and as a result added to the literature by identifying that adolescent girls perceives themselves to have a lack of time (Dwyer et al., 2006); desired more parental support (CAAWS, 2009), wanted to have fun (Whitehead & Biddle, 2008), and the necessity of incorporating inclusive practices that acknowledges the diverse range of girls’ experiences (Hill, 2007). The current study strived to add to this existing body of literature by identifying how gender, socioeconomic status, family structure, ethnocultural/racial background, and geographical location effect the social processes influencing girls’ decision and choice to engage in physical activity. Morgan and Krueger (1998) argue that the focus group method is considered particularly well suited for multi-method research questions. Focus groups were chosen to explore diversity among adolescent girls and gain more in-depth knowledge about the complexity of their choices and behaviours related to physical activity.

This study did not only seek to understand the ways in which adolescent girls negotiate multiple social processes in choosing certain levels and types of engagement in physical activity but also moved further by asking them for solutions and assistance in the creation of future health promotion programs. Consequently, the results of the current study
can be used to guide health promotions activities and raise awareness of health care professionals working with girls from diverse backgrounds.
CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

In order to examine how adolescent girls’ physical activity choices are shaped through complex social and relational contexts, research should strive to better understand girls’ lived experiences and girls’ own reflections about engagement in physical activities within their diverse social contexts. The chapter includes the following sections: 1) Theoretical Lens Informing the Research, a. Feminist Post-structuralist Theory, b) Foucault: Critical Social Theory and the Body; 2) Methodological Approaches: a) Feminist Informed Research, b) Life History, and Prospective Research, and c) Focus Group Research; 3) Situating the Researcher; 4) Research Participants, a. Study One: Interview Study, b. Study Two: Focus Group Study; 5) Research Process, a. Study One: Interview Study, b. Study Two: Focus Group Study; 6) Procedure, a. Study One: Interview Study, b. Study Two: Focus Group Study; 7. Data Analysis, a. Study One: Interview Study, b. Study Two: Focus Group Study; 8. Researcher’s Journal; and 9. Combining Study One and Study Two.

Theoretical Lens Informing the Research

a. Feminist Post-Structuralist Theory

In order to extend the literature on physical activity, feminist post-structuralism as a theoretical framework informed the current investigation. While the study followed the interpretive constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), feminist post-structuralist theory was one lens that informed the interpretive process. Post-structuralism refers to a collection of theoretical positions related to understanding the mechanisms of power through language, subjectivity, and knowledge production (Weedon, 1987, p. 10). Weedon (1987) maintains that post-structuralism offers a valuable framework for feminist research and describes feminist post-structuralism as “a mode of knowledge production
which uses post-structuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and
institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for
change” (p. 40-41).

Feminist post-structuralism offers a tool to disrupt or subvert dominant gender
discourses by presenting girls and women as active agents who negotiate and make choices
rather than passive objects that are acted upon by dominant discourses (Weedon, 1997).
Azzarito, Solomon, and Harrison (2006) argue “central to feminism and post-structuralism is
understanding how individuals negotiate gendered discourses contingent on specific
historical contexts by resisting or participating in those cultural practices. From this view,
girls and women are not passive or oppressed but active agents in negotiating gender and
racial power relations based on their lived experiences” (p. 224). In addition, Gavey (1989)
maintains, “for feminist post-structuralism, goals of scholarship would include developing
understanding or theories that are historically, socially, and culturally specific, and that are
explicitly related to changing oppressive gender relations. Rather than ‘discovering’ reality,
‘revealing’ truth, or ‘uncovering’ the facts, feminist post-structuralism would, instead, be
concerned with disrupting and displacing dominant (oppressive) knowledges” (p.463).

The current study examined dominant gender discourses related to physical activity
and how these discourses shape and control girls’ lived experiences in their bodies. Feminist
post-structuralist theory offered a way to examine how gender discourses are produced,
maintained, and internalized within the context of girls’ lived experiences (Adams & Bettis,
2003). Of particular interest, was better understanding how girls resist and conform to
dominant gender discourses in relation to physical activity.

There are few studies of girls’ engagement in physical activities that have utilized
feminist post-structural lens. For example, Wright’s (1995) analysis of language in physical
education classes used a feminist post-structuralist framework to explore how high school girls negotiate gender/power relationships in physical education classes. The study’s analysis on language revealed how dominant discourses related to sports contributed to maintaining and reproducing gender based power differentials. Wright’s use of a post-structuralist approach added to the literature by breaking away from previous research, which characterized girls as “oppressed and passive agents.” Areas in which Wright’s study could be extended is moving beyond a linguistic analysis of girls’ practices as well as understanding how race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status additionally influence high school girls’ experiences of physical education classes.

Similarly, Azzarito, Solmon, and Harrison’s (2006) study used a feminist post-structuralism to examine ways in which high school girls participated in or resisted physical education. Their study added to the literature as it depicted girls as active agents who viewed physical education classes as a contested space in which they advocated for equal opportunity despite perceived limitations related to gender norms. In addition, Azzarito and colleagues’ study also revealed how gender stereotypes and perceptions of gender influence girls’ level of participation in physical education. While the study highlighted the role of gender, there remains a lack of understanding of how socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity further contribute to girls’ physical activity choices.

Both of these studies support the usefulness of feminist post-structuralist framework in understanding girls’ physical activity experiences, but still much remains to be understood from the perspective of viewing girls as active agents. “By acknowledging the feminist/post-structuralist notion of agency, girls’ conflictual and multiplicitous negotiations of dominant gendered discourses, we can disrupt the still pervasive view of girls as passive and disempowered” (Azzarito, Solmon, & Harrison, 2006, p. 226).
A feminist post-structuralist theoretical perspective allows for a closer examination of complex social processes, specifically the intersections between gender, ethnocultural/racial heritage, socioeconomic status, and power relations in physical activity discourses (Weedon, 1997). In addition, a feminist post-structuralist perspective highlights the concept of oppression by recognizing how social processes and power relations influence adolescent girls’ level of physical activity. The use of a feminist post-structuralist perspective shaped all aspects of the research, including: 1. Having a diverse sample (in socioeconomic standing, ethnocultural/racial group membership, family situation, etc.); 2. Interviews/focus groups that emphasized and explored the impact of social institutions and social factors on personal experience, including the factors of gender, ethnocultural/racial heritage, and socioeconomic status that usually are not explicitly explored; 3. Interviews/focus groups that focused on girls’ lived experiences and encouraged their recommendations allowed participants to take an active role throughout the research process; and 4. Analysis conducted with the examination of the impact of social processes and dominant discourses as key aspects of the analysis.

b. Foucault: Critical Social Theory and the Body

Similar to feminist post-structuralism, critical social theory focuses on social and economic inequalities in order to promote social change by disrupting and challenging the status quo (Manias & Street, 1999). Critical social theory arose from various groups, theoreticians, and philosophers such Karl Marx, Kant’s critical philosophy, Max Horkheimer, Jurgen Habermas, and French philosopher Michel Foucault’s attempt to address the inequitable distribution of power in society (Piran, 2010). As a result of critical social theory’s varied origin, Manias and Street (1999) argue that critical social theory should be thought of as a “school of interdisciplinary thought” rather than one theory (p.51). A main
focus of critical social theory is the critique of positivistic forms of knowledge production and instead encourages the exploration of phenomena through contextual effects of power and knowledge (Fay, 1987). Another important aspect of critical social theory is its rejection of dualism such as the split between mind and body. Foucault criticizes dualistic thinking with much of his work offering an alternative to mainstream philosophical connection between subjectivity with consciousness (McLaren, 2002). Instead Foucault focuses on the body and illustrates the “body as the object and target of power” (Foucault, 1975, p. 136). In *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, Margaret McLaren (2002) points out that Foucault’s notion of the body and feminism have significant parallels: “both reject the mind/body dualism, both view the body as a site of political struggle, and both view the body as central to subjectivity and agency” (p. 82). While Foucault’s work has been criticized for his failure to take into account gender (Bartky, 1990; Fraser & Nicholson, 1990; Hartsock, 1990), many feminist theorists have found Foucault’s focus on the body as the “site of political struggle” to be incredibly useful (Bordo, 1993, p.16). Both Bartky (1990) and Bordo (1993) draw upon Foucault’s conceptualization of disciplinary power to highlight the role of gendered disciplinary practices (i.e. dieting, restriction of movement, and the maintenance of idealized feminine appearances) in women’s subordination. Bordo (1993) explains that Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary power has been “extremely helpful both to my analysis of the contemporary disciplines of diet and exercise and to my understanding of eating disorders as arising out of and reproducing normative feminine practices of our culture, practices which train the female body in docility and obedience to cultural demands while at the same time being experienced in terms of power and control” (p. 27).

For the current investigation, critical social theory, primarily related to Foucault’s conceptualization of the body was used to inform the research such that: 1. Dualistic thinking
was minimized and forms of dualistic thinking such as objectification were problematized in both the data collection and analysis; 2. Varied social processes influencing the girls’ embodied experiences were focused on throughout data collection and analysis; and 3. Body-based practices were examined in terms of how these practices influenced girls’ sense of self and agency in their social worlds.

**Methodological Approaches**

**a. Feminist Informed Research**

The present investigation was guided by several feminist research principles. These principles included (1) attentiveness to women’s lived experiences; (2) emphasis on empowerment of women through transformation of patriarchal social institutions; and (3) rejection of the subject/object relationship between researched and researcher.

The first principle in feminist research is the assumption that women’s lives and experiences are significant (Cole & Coultrap-McQuinn, 1992). Feminist methodologies do not deny women’s subjective experiences but rather aims to validate these private, emotional, internalized, and intimate experiences and view these experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge (Mac-Kinnon, 1982). Campbell and Wasco (2000) maintain “the overarching goal of feminist research is to capture women’s lived experiences in a respectful manner that legitimates women’s voices as sources of knowledge. In other words, the process of research is of as much importance as the outcome” (p.783).

A second principle central to feminist methodology is to highlight the oppressive social conditions women experience in order to create knowledge production that can act towards transforming patriarchy (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983). Hence, a major goal for feminist researchers is to change the status of women and other groups lacking in privilege through the promotion of social justice and political change (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007, 90.)
Reniharz, 1992). Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007) assert, “by documenting women’s lives, experiences, and concerns, illuminating gender-based stereotypes and biases, and unearthing women’s subjugated knowledge, feminist research challenges the basic structures and ideologies that oppress women” (p.4). Reinharz (1992) identifies the critical link between feminist scholarship and activism: “the purpose of feminist research must be to create new relationships, better laws, and improved institutions” (p.175). In order to do this she argues that research should empower the women involved by changing the actions of others and leading to political change. Reinharz (1992) claims that because feminist research is concerned with both improving the lives of women and knowledge production, feminist researchers often provide recommendations at the conclusion of their projects in order to assist in promoting change.

Finally a third feminist research principle is to decrease power differentials inherent in knowledge and research production through rejection of the researched and researcher separation. Sarantakos (2005) suggests that providing a space for research participants to speak about their lives from their own perspectives acts to decrease power differentials.

In examining the lived experiences of adolescent girls, the current research adhered to a critical feminist paradigm, a conceptual framework that rejects the notion that the world is simply “directly knowable” for two reasons (Willis, 1977, p.194; as cited in Bogdan & Biklen, 2006, p. 33). First, all social relations such as the lived experiences of individuals are shaped by power (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). Second, all research is grounded by the researcher’s theoretical and ideological understanding of human and social behaviour. For example, all researchers have differing ideas about gender or ethnocultural/racial heritage and these biases inevitably influence their research. Therefore, methodological processes cannot be objective (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006).
The current research was guided by feminist principles such that the analysis included: girls’ lived experiences (Harding, 1987), emotions and embodied experiences (McLaren, 2002), power relations within the girls’ immediate and larger contexts (Harvey, 1990), the intersections of gender, ethnocultural/racial heritage and socioeconomic backgrounds (Maguire, 1987), interviews that were collaborative with participants (Grossman et. al., 1997), an aspiration to reveal implications for social change (Worell, 1990), and finally the recognition that the researcher is part of the research process which will be discussed in further detail in the section entitled, *Situating the Researcher* (Lather, 1988).

**b. Life History and Prospective Research: Study One**

The first phase of the present study used a life history approach to explore adolescent girls’ attitudes, behaviours and feelings related to physical activity. The life history approach is appropriate for the current inquiry as it explores contextual information about the way in which past events and relationships have influenced the present and how individuals understand and make meaning of their lives (Haglund, 2004). The first guiding principle in life history research is that all human experience is context related. In order to understand an individual’s life, one must gain an in-depth comprehension of the context in which that individual’s life is situated. Coles and Knowles (2001) state, “it is about understanding the relationship, the complex interaction, between life and context, self and place. It is about comprehending the complexities of a person’s day-to-day decision making and the ultimate consequences that play out in that life so that insights into the broader, collective experience may be achieved” (p.11). A life history approach allowed for greater understanding into the “day-to-day decisions” adolescent girls make in regard to physical activity choices.
The second guiding principle of the life history approach is the inclusion of the participants as co-researchers. Participants are involved in the exploration, discovery and understanding of their experiences. The participant is seen as the ‘expert’ who has much to share about the process of putting their life into context (Haglund, 2004). Life history researchers recognize the importance of including participants in an ongoing dialogue of reflection and feedback about the information they have shared. Since life history researchers attempt to create a safe space in which the researcher and participant can discuss the phenomenon under study together, this approach minimizes power differentials in the “researcher-subject” hierarchy through participant engagement throughout the process of knowledge production. In addition to utilizing a life history approach, another strength of the current investigation is the exploration of the adolescent girls’ social contexts over time. The analysis of life history interviews prospectively helps to identify the multiple social processes affecting adolescent girls’ engagement with physical activity. This assisted in structuring the nature of questions that were discussed in the subsequent focus group discussions.

c. Focus Group Research: Study Two

Semi structured focus groups research comprised the second phase of the dissertation research and centered on the key themes derived from the prospective individual interviews in phase one. Feminist researchers are critical of traditional psychological methodologies as they deem these approaches to not only be artificial and decontextualized but also exploitative in nature due to the power differential between the researcher and researched (Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991; Reinharz, 1983). Wilkinson argues that focus groups “are relatively naturalistic and so avoid the charge of artificiality; they offer social contexts for meaning-making and so avoid the charge of decontextualization; and they shift the balance of power away from the researcher toward the research participants and so avoid the charge of
exploitation” (Wilkinson, 1999, p. 221). While focus groups are useful in minimizing power differentials between the researcher and research participants, there are some limitations. For instance, some participants may find the group dynamics intimidating and may have difficulty voicing alternative opinions from their peers (Whitehead and Biddle, 2008). As a result group process was constantly monitored in the current study, in order to create a safe environment for all focus group participants to be involved in knowledge process and production. As well at the beginning of each second focus group discussion, the participants were given the opportunity to examine and comment on the results of the analysis for the first focus group discussion.

Focus groups have been found to be an effective methodology when studying adolescent populations and have been used to explore adolescents’ high-risk sexual behaviours, substance abuse and perceptions of physical activity (Taylor, 2000; Whitehead & Biddle, 2008). In particular, it was hoped to use the focus groups study as a basis for designing health promotion interventions with girls (Piran, 2001). Rubin (2004) points out that “listening as participants share and compare their experiences is a way to illuminate dimensions of experience overlooked by previous theory and method (pg.28).

Situating the Researcher

Inescapably the researcher’s subjectivity influences qualitative inquiry as all researchers hold biases and assumptions based on their own social location (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Therefore, in order to be transparent about my own biases and limitations I both identify and explain my own research interests in the current investigation. I locate myself as a Euro-Asian Canadian feminist who occupies positions of privilege in the areas of socioeconomic status, education, geographical location, ability, and sexual orientation. My awareness of the adverse psychological effects associated with body dissatisfaction
developed from my experiences as a sexual assault crisis line worker, an eating disorder
centre’s public speaker, and my clinical work as a graduate psychology student at a
university counselling centre, a hospital’s eating disorder clinic for adolescents, and a
psychiatric hospital. My personal interest in physical activity has come from my own
struggles with body dissatisfaction and discovering physical activity as vehicle to
reconnection with my own body. Four of the intersecting domains that I have identified as
disrupting my embodied experiences in childhood were being of Euro-Asian heritage in a
mainly White neighborhood of a small rural town, being from a family that worked to
establish itself financially, being new to the town, and gender harassment. Engaging in
physical activities as a girl enhanced my sense of embodied agency. Both my personal and
clinical experiences have revealed the empowering nature of participation in physical
activities related to mental well-being.

My social location influenced the current investigation in several ways. First,
identifying as a woman of colour, it was important that the selected participants represented a
range of ethnocultural/racial heritages in order to better understand how these differences
influence physical activity. Second, my attunement to how gender, socioeconomic
background, and ethnocultural/racial heritages intersect assisted in the identification of subtle
social processes that influenced how the girls live in their bodies during both the data
collection and analysis. Finally, my own transformative relationship with physical activity
has made me passionate about understanding how dominant discourses influence girls’
involvement in physical activity.

Participants

a. Study One: Interview Study

A total of 27 participants were recruited from a different larger study, of those 11
were 9-12 years old (pre-puberty), and 16 were 13-15 years old (post-puberty) (Piran, 2003; Piran, 2007). The participants were interviewed up to four times over a four-year period (2004-2008). Participants were interviewed every eight to twelve months with the majority of participants completing four interviews. For the current investigation 7 participants’ narratives were followed to understand the pertinent relational and socio-cultural influences that affected their level of physical activity across time. These selected participants were chosen in order to limit the scope of data derived from Study One and resulted in the analysis of 23 prospective interviews. Participants were selected in order to represent a diverse sample related to geographical location, ethnocultural/racial heritage, socioeconomic background, age, activity level, and family structure. In addition, the 7 participants selected represented a diversity of physical activity experiences as well as maintained and discontinued engagement. The participants were between the ages of 9 and 15 years of age at the time of their first interview. Regarding age, 4 participants were ages 9-12 years old, and 3 were 13-15 years old. Regarding socioeconomic background, 4 were from working class families and 3 from middle class families. In terms of geographical locations, 1 from a rural geographical site, 4 from middle-sized urban centers, and 2 from large-sized urban centers. All 7 girls were born in Canada. Regarding ethnocultural/racial heritage, 2 were of Aboriginal heritage, 1 Métis heritage, 1 of African heritage, and 3 of White Anglo-European heritage. 4 of the participants’ parents were separated: 1 living with mother and her lesbian partner, 1 with a single parent, 2 with a parent and step parent. 3 girls were living with their mother and father.

**Participant summaries.** A depiction of the girls, their family make-up and social setting will follow in order for the reader to create a have a better picture of the girls’ sociocultural contexts.

**Alice.** Alice was ten years old and was in grade five at the time of her first interview.
She was born in Canada and identified as having Aboriginal-Euro-Canadian heritage. She lived with her parents in a midsize urban city. Her family’s socioeconomic status was middle class.

*Ashley.* Ashley was fifteen years old and was in grade ten at the time of her first interview. She was born in Canada and identified as having African-Canadian heritage. Ashley lived with her mother and two brothers in a midsize urban city. Her family’s socioeconomic status was working class.

*Bronwen.* Bronwen was twelve years old and was in grade seven at the time of her first interview. She was born in Canada and identified as having White Anglo-Canadian heritage. Bronwen lived with her parents and two brothers in a rural community. Her family’s socioeconomic status was middle class.

*Erica.* Erica was nine years old and was in grade three at the time of her first interview. She was born in Canada and identified as having White Anglo-Canadian heritage. Erica and her two brothers lived with their mother throughout the week and with their father on the weekends in a midsize urban city. Her family’s socioeconomic status was working class.

*Hazel.* Hazel was fifteen years old and was in grade eleven at the time of her first interview. She was born in Canada and identified as having Aboriginal-Muslim heritage. Hazel lived with her mother, father and three brothers in a midsize urban city. Her family’s socioeconomic status was working class.

*Jackie.* Jackie was eleven years old and was in grade five at the time of her first interview. She was born in Canada and identified as having Métis heritage. Jackie lived with her mother, her mother’s lesbian partner and her brother in an urban city and visited her father on weekends in an urban city. Her family’s socioeconomic status was working class.
**Lauren.** Lauren was fourteen years old and was in grade nine at the time of her first interview. She was born in Canada and identified as having White Anglo-Canadian heritage. She lived with her parents and two brothers in an urban city. Her family’s socioeconomic status was middle class.

**b. Study Two: Focus Group Study**

For the focus groups, a total of 13 girls were recruited for the focus group study, of those 1 was 12 years old, and 12 were 13 years old. Regarding socioeconomic background, 6 were from working class families, 6 from middle class families, and 1 from middle to upper class families. In terms of geographical locations, 2 were from rural areas and 11 from small sized urban centers. All of the participants were born in Canada. Regarding ethnocultural/racial heritage, 2 were of Aboriginal heritage, 1 of Asian heritage, and 10 from White Anglo-European heritage. With regards to family structure, 6 of the participants’ parents were separated: 1 living with a single parent, 1 living with relatives, 4 living with a parent and step parent. Seven girls reported living with both parents.

**Participant summaries.** A depiction of the girls, their family make-up and social setting will follow in order for the reader to create a have a better picture of the girls’ sociocultural contexts.

**Addison.** Addison was thirteen years old and was in grade eight at the time of the two focus group discussions. She was born in Canada and identified as having White Anglo-Canadian heritage. Addison lived with her parents and brother in a small urban city. Her family’s socioeconomic status was middle class.

**Cuddles.** Cuddles were thirteen years old and was in grade eight at the time of the two focus group discussions. She was born in Canada and identified as having White Anglo-Canadian heritage. Cuddles lived with her parents and three brothers in a rural community.
Her family’s socioeconomic status was working class.

**Freddles.** Freddles was thirteen years old and was in grade eight at the time of the two focus group discussions. She was born in Canada and identified as having Aboriginal heritage. Freddles lived with her mother in a small urban city. Her family’s socioeconomic status was working class.

**Jane.** Jane was twelve years old and was in grade eight at the time of the two focus group discussions. She was born in Canada and identified as having White Anglo-Canadian heritage. Jane lived with mother and visited her father on weekends in a small urban city. Her family’s socioeconomic status was working class.

**Lindsay.** Lindsay was thirteen years old and was in grade eight at the time of the two focus group discussions. She was born in Canada and identified as having White Anglo-Canadian heritage. Lindsay lived with her aunt and a grandparent in a small urban city. Her family’s socioeconomic status was working class.

**Mary.** Mary was thirteen years old and was in grade eight at the time of the two focus group discussions. She was born in Canada and identified as having White Anglo-Canadian heritage. Mary and her two brothers lived with her mother during the week and father on weekends in a small urban city. Her family’s socioeconomic status was middle class.

**Monica.** Monica was thirteen years old and was in grade eight at the time of the two focus group discussions. She was born in Canada and identified as having White Franco-Canadian heritage. Monica lived with her mother during the week and with her father on weekends in a small urban city. Her family’s socioeconomic status was working class.

**Queen.** Queen was thirteen years old and was in grade eight at the time of the two focus group discussions. She was born in Canada and identified as having White Anglo-
Canadian heritage. Queen lived with her parents and sisters in a small urban city. Her family’s socioeconomic status was high class.

**Rose.** Rose was thirteen years old and was in grade eight at the time of the two focus group discussions. She was born in Canada and identified as having White Anglo-Canadian heritage. Rose lived with her parents, brother, and sister in a rural community. Her family’s socioeconomic status was middle class.

**Sarah.** Sarah was thirteen years old and was in grade eight at the time of the two focus group discussions. She was born in Canada and identified as having White Anglo-Canadian heritage. Sarah lived with her parents and brother in a small urban city. Her family’s socioeconomic status was middle class.

**Scorch Willow.** Scorch Willow was thirteen years old and was in grade eight at the time of the two focus group discussions. She was born in Canada and identified as having Asian-Canadian heritage. Scorch Willow lived with her parents and two sisters in a small urban city. Her family’s socioeconomic status was middle to high class.

**Spiderwort.** Spiderwort was thirteen years old and was in grade eight at the time of the two focus group discussions. She was born in Canada and identified as having White Anglo-Canadian heritage. Spiderwort lived with her parents and sister in a small urban city. Her family’s socioeconomic status was middle class.

**Taylor.** Taylor was thirteen years old and was in grade eight at the time of the two focus group discussions. She was born in Canada and identified as having Aboriginal heritage. Taylor and her brothers lived with her mother and stepfather during the week and her father on weekends in a small urban city. Her family’s socioeconomic status was working class.
The Research Process

a. Study One: Interview Study

The analysis is based on 23 interviews conducted by 2 interviewers who completed the interviews as part of larger qualitative research study exploring girls’ body image development (Piran, 2003; Piran 2007). The interviews followed a guided, life history format focusing on the girls’ experiences across varied sociocultural contexts and were two to three hours in length (see Appendix E). Each girl was interviewed by the same interviewer over a four-year period. The study involved a process between one and four interviews with each participant, focusing both on the life history of each participant, as well as on their current experiences within their social context. The first interview focused on the participants’ current experiences as well as a life history inquiry. The second interview occurred eight months to one year following the first interview and included an opportunity for participants to review summaries of their first interview to ensure accuracy while also including an exploration of changes and current experiences. The third interview occurred approximately two years following the second interview and the fourth interview occurred approximately one year after the third interview. The interviews followed a life history approach (Cole & Knowles, 2001) focusing on the experience of embodiment chronologically throughout the participants’ lives.

b. Study Two: Focus Group Study

The focus groups discussions ranged in length from 60 to 90 minutes. Two focus groups met twice over a two-month period (2012-2013). In total, four focus group sessions were conducted. The focus groups discussions began with the researcher explaining the purpose of the current investigation and asking the participants what they perceive to be the major barriers and facilitators to physical activity. The participants’ experiences were then
explored in detail using broad, open-ended questions in order to encourage unanticipated stories to emerge, in line with the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). In addition to exploring each of the factors introduced by the participants in response to the central open-ended question of the study, the interview was guided through open-ended focus group questions (see Appendix N).

Key themes that emerged in study one, as shaping girls’ engagement in physical activity, were highlighted and used to direct focus group discussions, with a particular emphasis on girls’ reflections about the implications of this knowledge to health promotion interventions. In addition, the results of the first focus group discussions were shared with the girls and their feedback informed changes in the analysis and the reported results of the study.

Procedure

a. Study One: Interview Study

Participants were recruited through advertisements in three different cities: a large urban city in Central Eastern Canada, a rural town in Central Canada, and a mid-sized town in central Canada (specific locations chosen in relation to the accessibility of the interviewers involved in the research). Parents of girls interested in participating in a study exploring girls’ relationship with their bodies were asked to contact the researcher. Parental consent and child assent forms were reviewed and completed with all participants and their parent prior to beginning the interview. Requirements for participation in the study included age (either pre-pubescent, age 9-11; or post-pubescent, ages 12-14), participant’s assent, parental consent and attendance in a public or private school (see Appendix A-D). Participants were interviewed in their home or in a private neutral setting such as a room at a local community centre or in the interviewer’s research office. The interview process started
by sharing with participants the focus of the study: exploring girls’ self and body experiences. After the first interview, a detailed summary organized according to themes was prepared of each interview. The summaries were read and discussed with participants during the second and third interviews exploring for any inaccuracies, and new changes and current experiences. All interviews included an inquiry, which focused on participants’ experiences of physical activity, and the present study focuses on the narratives related to this inquiry. Participants were given $10 gift certificates to a local bookstore in appreciation for participation in the study. This study was approved by the Ethics Review Committee of the University of Toronto and complied with the ethical principles set out by the American Psychological Association.

b. Study Two: Focus Group Study

Participants were recruited through postings in schools in a small-sized urban city in East Central Canada, following approval by the relevant school boards (see Appendix O). Initially, it was anticipated to have additional focus groups in a large southern urban center located in Central Eastern Canada. Unfortunately, during the time of data collection, several school boards in Ontario closed their schools to researchers due to the controversial Bill 115, “Putting Students First Act” on August 28, 2012.

Requirements for participation in the study included principal’s consent, participant’s assent, parental/guardian’s consent and attendance in a public school at the grade eight level (see Appendix F-K). The participants were also asked to complete a personal information form which indicated their name, age, grade, contact information, geographical location, ethnocultural/racial heritage, family structure, country of origin, parent/guardian’s occupation, level of physical activity, and a preferred pseudonym name (see Appendix L). The focus groups were led by myself (the researcher) and were conducted over lunch hour
(60-90 minutes) and took place within the participants’ school in a private space, that was less publicly accessible (e.g. staff meeting room and parent’s consultation room). At the completion of the second focus group, participants received a gift certificate for $10 to either itunes music store or a local bookstore. This study was approved by the Ethics Review Committee of the University of Toronto, Near North District School Board Ethics Review Committee, and complied with the ethical principles set out by the American Psychological Association.

Data Analysis

a. Study One: Interview Study

The data analysis for the first phase of the study began after all of the 23 individual interviews had been conducted and transcribed. All the transcripts were reviewed in detail and initial coding was completed by assigning brief descriptive codes to small sections of the data, in line with the grounded theory method, as outlined by Charmaz (2006). This process allowed for the development of preliminary categories while remaining close to the data, in an attempt to capture all phenomena related to girls’ physical activity experiences. As the preliminary categories developed, the constant comparative method was used, in which data segments were compared to each other in search for similarities and differences in order to identify processes related to the emerging categories (Charmaz, 2006).

Rudestam and Newton (2001) indicate that grounded theory offers a unified procedure for developing categories of information and moving from these categories to construct a narrative and generate a set of theoretical propositions. The current study intended to create theoretical propositions that were informed by both critical social theory and Foucault’s conceptualization of disciplinary power. The approach favoured by Rudstam and Newton (2001) involves two essential sub processes of inductive analysis: unitizing and
categorizing. First, unitizing refers to the separation of information units from the text followed by the second process, categorizing which involves grouping the information units into categories on the basis of similarity in meaning (Rudestam & Newton, 2001). The researcher employed unitizing and categorizing in order to make sense of the data. Unitizing involved identifying and coding the parts of the interview experiences that pertained to physical activity. The categories “Physical Activity” and “Age” were major organizational variables. Physical activity was separated into two categories: “Facilitators to Physical Activity” and “Barriers to Physical Activity.” For the first phase of the investigation, the researcher was particularly interested in understanding how physical activity changed over time from childhood through to adolescence. In order to understand the evolution of facilitators and barriers, the data was divided based on grade level rather than biological age, as the school environment appeared to be most crucial in shaping the participants’ experiences and opportunities. Therefore, the data was categorized into four categories: “Preschool to Grade Three” (Childhood), “Grade Four to Grade Six” (Tweens), “Grade Seven to Grade Eight” (Early Adolescence), and “Grade Nine to Grade Twelve” (Adolescence).

Once the initial themes were created, they were reviewed and validated in consultation with my thesis supervisor. The next step utilized selective or focused coding (Charmaz, 2002), in which recurrent initial codes that cut across multiple interviews and were representative of repeated themes were used to sort through and synthesize larger segments of data. Rubin, Nemeroff, and Russo (2004) indicate, “theoretical saturation is reached when no new themes emerge from subsequent data, and themes already established from the data are repeated and confirmed (p. 29). As a result the two broad categories “Facilitators to Physical Activity” and “Barriers to Physical Activity” led to the development
of a hierarchical category structure comprised of underlying themes, which resulted in an eventual coding scheme. As mentioned previously, the final coding scheme devised had a hierarchical structure stemming from the two categories: “Facilitators to Physical Activity” and “Barriers to Physical Activity.” Subcategories under “Facilitators to Physical Activity” included: “Education,” “Socioeconomic Status, Family,” “Peers,” “Clothing,” “Community Centre,” “Connection to the Body,” and “Disconnection to the Body.” Similarly, subcategories under “Barriers to Physical Activity” included: “Education,” “Socioeconomic Status,” “Family,” “Peers,” “Community Centre,” “Clothing,” “Femininity,” and “Body.”

The interview transcripts were imported into QSR NUD*IST N6, a software program for managing, sorting, and analyzing qualitative data. The interviews were coded in the final coding scheme. Throughout this process, a researcher’s journal was maintained to take note of newly emerging relationships.

b. Study Two: Focus Group Study

As discussed previously, results of phase one were used to assist in structuring the nature of questions that were discussed in the focus group discussions. The data analysis for phase two began after each focus group session allowing close connection to the research material and the ability to inform subsequent focus group discussions. After the completion of each focus group discussion, the data was transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were imported into QSR NUD*IST N6. The final coding scheme for phase one was used to code the data with additional open codes to allow for flexibility and the development of new emergent themes. Throughout this process, a researcher’s journal was used to document emerging themes and critical reflections.
**Researcher’s Journal**

As discussed, a researcher’s journal was maintained and reflected upon throughout the process of data collection and analysis. The inquiry process, critical reflections, and poignant research moments were constantly documented. In *Constructing Grounded Theory*, Chamaz (2006) refers to a researcher’s journal as “memo-writing” and argues that it is a crucial step between data collection and writing as it allows the researcher to “stop and analyze your ideas about the codes in any-and every-way that occurs to you during the moment” (p.72). As a result the researcher’s journal or “memos” informed the grounded theory analysis through early examination of emerging categories and themes. For example, preliminary memos such as ‘weight gain,’ ‘appearance shame,’ and ‘sweat’ were helpful in developing the major category, ‘Body Objectification.’ Memos were also used for outlining the researcher’s assumptions, such as the assumption that participants did not engage in physical activities with their mothers. While it was often the case, making this assumption explicit was useful for noticing exceptions, such as mothers engaging in fitness related physical activities with their daughters and one instance in which a participant’s mother was able to engage in physical activity because her father completed the majority of household chores.

**Combining Study One: Interview Study and Study Two: Focus Group Study**

Following the initial coding of all data and careful reflection of the researcher’s journal, grounded theoretical sampling began. Charmaz (2006) indicates, “you conduct theoretical sampling by sampling to develop the properties of your category (ies) until no new properties emerge. Thus, you saturate your categories with data and subsequently sort/and or diagram them to integrate your emerging theory” (p.96-97). Throughout the process of theoretical sampling, saturation, and sorting the robust categories, it became apparent that the
higher-level themes delineated in the hierarchal coding structure for Physical Activity (Education, Socioeconomic Status, Family, Peers, Clothing, Community Centre, Connection to the Body, Disconnection to the Body, and Femininity) could map onto related social systems such as School, Family, Peers, and Embodied Experiences of Physicality. In order to capture the participants’ physical activity choices over time, the multiple social systems were further divided by specific age groups (i.e. Childhood, Tweens, Early Adolescence, and Adolescence).

The final structure and framework used to illustrate the research findings in the results’ section were outlined using each social system broken down by age group. ‘School Experiences’, ‘Family Experiences’, ‘Peer Experiences’, and ‘Embodied Experiences of Physicality’, were discussed chronologically through the age categories: Childhood (Preschool to Grade three), Tweens (Grade Four to Six), Early Adolescence (Grade Seven to Eight), and Adolescence (Grade Nine to Twelve).
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

The girls’ accounts documented throughout the individual interviews and focus group discussions demonstrated the important mediating role that various social systems played in influencing adolescent girls’ level of physical activity. The following chapters will focus on the girls’ narratives pertaining to the core categories of: ‘School Experiences’, ‘Family Experiences’, ‘Peer Experiences’, and ‘Embodied Experiences of Physicality’. Each core category was broken down into age categories (childhood, tweens, early adolescence, and adolescence) in order to document physical activity changes over time. Larger macro level systems such as gender, ethnocultural/racial heritage, and socioeconomic status will be highlighted throughout the analysis as these larger overarching structures influence how the girls experience their social systems.

School Experiences

‘School Experiences’ is the first of four core categories in girls’ engagement in physical activities. It referred to the school-based experiences in relation to physical activity. Quotes that were examined pertained to experiences during recess, physical education classes, extracurricular sports, in change rooms and school hallways, as well as other students and teachers’ behaviours or comments that influenced physical activity. The narratives included in ‘School Experiences’ were divided into two major thematic continuums: ‘Movement and Confidence to Restriction and Apprehension’ and ‘Enjoyment to Chore’. A continuum was used to illustrate the complex range of girls’ experiences throughout different life stages and to document how subtle shifts over time resulted in substantial movements along the continuum. One end of the spectrum related to facilitators to engagement with
physical activities while the opposite end was associated with barriers to girls engagement with physical activity.

The first thematic continuum, ‘Movement and Confidence to Restriction and Apprehension’ was characterized as girls having physical space to move, multiple physical activity opportunities, competence and comfort while at school versus confined physical space, limited physical activity opportunities, prejudice, lack of safety and exclusion. The second thematic continuum, ‘Enjoyment to Chore’ related to experiences in which girls’ described having fun during physical activity versus viewing physical activity as a chore.

Throughout the chapter, the two major thematic continuums were described separately for each of the four age groups (childhood, tweens, early adolescence, and adolescence) in order to illustrate the shifting nature of physical activity experiences during each life stage.

A diagram illustrating the core category and its major themes can be seen in Figure 1. Each major theme has several themes, which are described in the text.

Fig.1. Major Themes of School Experiences Core Category

**Childhood (Preschool to Grade Three)**

Movement and confidence to restriction and apprehension during childhood.
**Movement.** The majority of girls described engaging in various activities throughout their school playgrounds.

I liked to play lots of sports in the field and of course the swings, that was my favourite thing, to play on the swings and the play structures. I liked to play tether ball and four square and hopscotch and jump rope. (Ashley, Interview Study)

We’d go on the structure. We played tag and we would go in the tunnel and play hide and go seek...there’s the courtyard and there’s the field and everything. (Erica, Interview Study)

In addition they had the freedom to play with either gender.

All we wanted was for people to chase us. That was it. We liked being chased. We liked wrestling with people. And we wrestled with each other and people would join in with the roughest boys in school and we’d beat them. (Alice, Interview Study)

When you are little it is just like ‘yeah lets play,’ boys and girls just everybody! (Jane, Focus Group Study)

**Restriction and apprehension.** While many of the childhood narratives demonstrated the school environment as a facilitator to their engagement with physical activities, some also
described experiencing restriction. Two higher themes emerged related to: ‘Limited physical activity opportunities’ and ‘Restricted physical space.’

*Limited physical activity opportunities.* For example, two of the girls spoke about school sports teams being offered exclusively to older students.

You have to be in grade four to be in any clubs at my school, like the running club. (Erica, Interview Study)

I think sports should start earlier than grade four. Like the SKs and JKs want to do some physical activities but they can’t really do a lot because they are very young. (Spiderwort, Focus Group Study)

*Restricted physical space.* In addition a few girls described frustration when their physicality was restricted as a result of school rules or confined outdoor spaces.

(What do you remember doing at recess in kindergarten?) Well, we didn't really go outside at recess until the end of the year, like March or something. We'd go on the structure when it was our day, cause every grade had a different day on the structure. (Alice, Interview Study)

Each class had their own recess because we didn’t have a schoolyard, we had a little encaged area in the parking lot. (Jackie, Interview Study)
In addition, one girl described how she felt frustrated when she was no longer allowed to engage in a make-believe game during recess.

We used to play tag on the play structure. There was a game called “grounders” that you’d play on the structure but we weren’t allowed, cause some kindergarteners got hurt from falling off the structure. (Alice, Interview Study)

**Enjoyment to chore during childhood.** The second major thematic continuum revealed that throughout childhood there was an absence of linking physical activity with fitness; instead the girls described their motivation related to having fun, immersion in make-believe games, and socializing with their peers.

**Enjoyment.** In childhood, all of the girls recollected moments of fun and enjoyment while engaged in physical activities at school.

I remember gym classes when we were kids and we would just play games, have fun and let loose. (Taylor, Focus Group Study)

It's that game where you play on the structure and then there is lava man… Well it's like gravel is the lava, and then you try to stay, like the lava monster you have to go in the lava and get somewhere else and then up on the play structure you're safe…it's kind of like tag. (Bronwen, Interview Study)
I remember being young and playing tag and being faster than everybody...It felt good. I was nicknamed the human cheetah because I used to beat everybody. (Scorch Willow, Focus Group Study)

**School Experiences in Childhood Summary.** Overall, the girls’ childhood narratives revealed how the school environment was an important facilitator to their engagement with physical activities. ‘Movement and Confidence to Restriction and Apprehension’, revealed freedom to occupy multiple school spaces, to engage in various forms of physical activity, and to play with either boys or girls. The girls were also critical of constraints put on their physical activity such as age related barriers to sports teams, confined playground spaces, and safety rules. Regarding ‘Enjoyment to Chore’, the girls described engaging in physical activities for fun without any thoughts related to fitness.

**Tweens (Grade Four to Six)**

**Movement and confidence to restriction and apprehension during the tween phase.**

**Movement and confidence.** A few girls from a variety of backgrounds described opportunities to gain confidence as a result of engagement with physical activity. For example, Jackie and Erica described opportunities to hold leadership positions.

I wanted to be athletic rep and they voted for me...You coach all of the girls games, like you’re you choose who will be next and everything and you do practices after school and there’s different meetings after school. (Jackie, Interview Study)
In grade six I’m going to be a recess leader… they set up games…there’s bungee polo, toboggans, schlocky, last year there was tube riding (You like it better with recess leaders?) Well cause it gives you something to do…usually we’re just sitting around. (Erica, Interview Study)

In addition, Jackie also disclosed that her involvement with sports reduced her attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms in class and increased her concentration.

I started getting stronger and not bored. I felt that-cause [cause I had] ADHD so I felt that I was actually getting my energy out and I was able to concentrate on my work more because I was making all of the teams…you’d get up in the morning, go to school for an eight o’clock practice, so you’re getting all this energy out and then you have three hours of school and you’re concentration’s great and then you go for recess and you have a fifteen minute practice, you get more energy out, you concentrate great and then you can go after school practice and then you’re ready to do your homework and it’s great! (Jackie, Interview Study)

**Restriction and apprehension.** Three higher themes emerged related to: ‘Limited physical activity opportunities’, ‘Restricted physical space’, and ‘Gender insensitivity’.

*Limited physical activity opportunities.* Several of the girls described that they joined sports teams at other schools or at community centres as a result of their school offering limited physical activity opportunities.
Basketball was at a different school...cause my school didn’t have basketball...we played all over the place. (Erica, Interview Study)

First of all it was community clubs, because my school didn’t really offer any extracurricular sports...mostly I went to a community centre. (Ashley, Interview Study)

I think it was – like I was always not the sports type until – cause my old school never had sports and like there is like French...It’s never like gym it’s always French, like you have the whole morning French and then the whole afternoon is math, spelling and like math language umm half an hour of gym and that’s it. (Jackie, Interview Study)

*Restricted physical space.* While some of the girls described limited physical activity opportunities at their schools, several participants described infringements on their freedom to run around freely throughout the school playgrounds.

The guys liked to wrestle a lot, they liked play lots of contact where you go, you guys can go do your thing, we're going to stay over here. We're going to make like snow boards and things like that. And they'd be having snowball fights whereas we'd be making little homes and things like that. *(Why do you think, that girls and boys like to do different things?)* I don't know, maybe cause of even the toys that we had at home. (Ashley, Interview Study)
We didn’t play with the boys because they played too roughly. We would play on the swings instead. (Cuddles, Focus Group Study)

The boys would say that the girls couldn’t play soccer. So we didn’t play, we skipped [skip rope] instead. (Jane, Focus Group Study)

*Gender insensitivity.* A couple girls described how their schools did not provide suitable sanitary supplies during a time that most girls experienced menarche.

Yeah, we opened the tampon machine like we picked the lock. There’s no tampons in it. There’s nothing. They won’t refill it. So that’s why I brought my own...in my knapsack so I brought 4 or 5...Like that’s the only tampon machine there is...The only place that has a tampon machine is in the staff lounge and we’re not allowed in there. (Alice, Interview Study)

We had tampon machines but in grade six you don’t even use tampons. They are scary. (Cuddles, Focus Group Study)

In addition, another girl described differential treatment by teachers between boys and girls. Our gym teacher kind of likes the boys better than girls. He gives them nicknames that he calls them and he only...he doesn’t give us nicknames….And he makes jokes about our birthday. Like when it was my friend’s birthday, he was ‘OK, all the boys
like, come on, come on’...She was just standing there, she was silent because she
didn’t want any kisses. And then he was picking people to come up to and kiss her,
but no one really kissed her, It was a joke...He’s only joking. (Alice, Interview Study)

**Enjoyment to chore during the tween phase.** Throughout the tween years, the girls
continued to describe that they enjoyed physical activities at school.

*Enjoyment.* A few girls described enjoyment from learning new athletic skills during
physical education classes and noon hour intramurals.

Well, after my gym classes, before, since we were little kids we couldn't really have
organized sports and we're just like, okay, we'll play some tag and things like that, but
once we started getting older, we started learning the skills we needed to play
basketball, for instance, that's when I started getting interested in thinking, this is
something that I'd like to be doing outside of school, as well, because an hour every
two days is cool, but it's nice if you can really have a team that you belong to and
things like that. (Ashley, Interview Study)

Ashley’s described how her positive experiences learning basketball during physical
education translated to engagement with physical activities outside of school. In addition,
two other girls described enjoying the noon hour intramurals offered at their schools.
We do lots of sports at school like we do house league and that’s when each class plays against each other. (So do you do that at lunch hour?) Yeah. (Jackie, Interview Study)

My favourite kind of intramural is probably volleyball intramurals. Then there's soccer, there's ringuette, and it's really fun. (Alice, Interview Study)

Chore. While many girls described enjoying physical activities a few girls described confusion related to the provincially mandated twenty minutes of daily physical activity (DPA) in Ontario.

I thought it was weird when we would have to do jumping jacks in the middle of math class. (Jane, Focus Group Study)

At my old school in grade four we would run laps around the school but sometimes it was harder for some people...Teachers don’t tell us why we do it. The teachers just say you are going out to do DPA. (Ahh so shifting gears, why do you think it would be helpful if it was explained why we are doing this?)...So people could know how it effects them not necessary at school but throughout your life too. (Spiderwort, Focus Group Study)

Spiderwort described earlier in the focus group conversation how as a child she did not know why she would have to get up in the middle of math class and run laps. She believed that if her teachers had communicated the reasons behind DPA she might have
found the daily exercise more valuable. In addition, she suggested that girls be taught about the intention behind DPA in order to motivate them to continue to engage in physical activity throughout adolescence.

School Experiences during the Tweens Phase Summary. Overall the narratives revealed how school environment shifted towards increased experiences of physical restriction and discomfort. Regarding, ‘Movement and Confidence to Restriction and Apprehension’, a few girls described feeling increased confidence due to their engagement in physical activities. At the same time, the girls described reduced physical activity opportunities, boys’ domination of the school playground, gender insensitivity, and harassment by a teacher. Regarding the second thematic continuum, ‘Enjoyment to Chore’ the girls described learning new skills, enjoying intramural sports, and confusion related to DPA.

Early Adolescence (Grade Seven to Eight)

Movement and confidence to restriction and apprehension during early adolescence.

Movement and confidence. A couple girls continued to describe benefiting from their participation on extracurricular teams and spoke passionately about their involvement.

(Do you play any sports?) I did play volleyball, but volleyball season is over. I was... did play basketball, and I’m trying out for soccer (Oh, great. That’s all through school?) Yeah I love sports! (Erica, Interview Study)

I don’t know how to explain it but it is fun. I love it. I play on the volleyball team.

(Monica, Focus Group Study)
I was on every single team- we did have a few co-ed teams, we had a co-ed soccer team, I was on that, there was a co-ed volleyball team, but when I got to grade eight they stopped having it. (Lauren, Interview Study)

**Restriction and apprehension.** Throughout early adolescence there is a noticeable increase in disruptive experiences related to ‘Restriction’ while at school. Higher level themes included: ‘Reduced time devoted to physical activity’, ‘Limited physical activity opportunities’, ‘Restricted space’, ‘Gender insensitivity’ and ‘Harassment’.

**Reduced time devoted to physical activity.** One disruptive experience some of the girls identified was decreased institutional time devoted to physical activities. For example, several of the girls described that the number of their recesses were reduced and lunchtime intramural sports were discontinued.

*(Do you have recess in grade seven?)* Yeah we have one recess, like which was kind of weird because we'd been having like two recesses a day and like we don't have so much recess time I don't think now, so it's kind of changed. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

Lunch hour sports stopped...A lot of people were like a lot less active at lunch times and we didn’t have recess anymore, so lunch time was just more about socializing. (Lauren, Interview Study)
Limited physical activity opportunities. In addition, some described how limited physical activity opportunities resulted in many girls disengaging from sports all together. One form of reduced opportunities was not making the school team, as described, for example by Spiderwort and Jackie.

I found in grade seven. Like in grade six girls are at smaller schools so they are used to making the team but then you get to middle school and then they don’t make the team.... So then they don’t try out for sports anymore and they just give up... Like in grade seven like forty girls tried out for volleyball and then in grade eight there were only three, plus the girls that made the team last year. There were only three other girls. So for a lot of people it kind of killed their spirit. (Spiderwort, Focus Group Study)

I used to be on the basketball team. (So when did that stop?) Um, well, grade seven, I went to junior high and they were more into the trying out thing, and I didn't really make it, so I didn't try again. (So, the first time, in grade seven, you didn't make it, and then you didn't try again?) Yeah. And then, after I stopped playing sports…I’m scared if I try, I’ll be humiliated. (Jackie, Interview Study)

Finally, Lindsay described how the removal of extracurricular sports teams affected her.

I used to play volleyball but when the extracurriculars went bye bye. It just stopped. (So because of what is going on politically some schools do not have extracurricular
sports and I hear that is happening here? So people who just played school sports that must be really hard. So you played volleyball here?) Yeah and I played badminton but it is gone now. (So it is gone now and that is hard. It sounds like you are missing that?) Yeah. (Lindsay, Focus Group Study)

Restricted physical space. Several girls described experiences of exclusion during physical education classes. For example, several girls explained that their school ranged from grades seven through to twelve. As a result the school gymnasium allowed for multiple physical education classes to use the space simultaneously.

Um well it’s like sometimes we have gym class with the high schoolers. The guys’ high schoolers class is just when are gym class is scheduled in...But usually our teacher and the high school teacher are good friends so they usually do gym class together. And the high school class is all boys of different ages in high school. And there is not many girls in our class and there are lots of guys so it is kind of awkward doing the gym class around a whole bunch of high school boys who are gross and sweaty...And they are stronger and stuff too and we play dodge ball a lot…Our gym teacher gets us to go to the dance studio, all the girls because he doesn’t want us to get hurt. Right now we are making up a dance. It feels kind of weird because we can’t do gym class and we have to go somewhere else. (Rose, Focus Group Study)

The girls described their experiences of physical education with older boys to restrict their ability to move in physical education classes. They reported feeling “invisible”, “singled out”, and simply trying to “tolerate” the class.
We are all in the same class. They [older boys] make you feel like a mouse compared to a tiger. They are like when the ball whips at you and passes your face and we always get singled out in the corner and there usually is a competitive clash between the boys so we just end up standing there and it feels like pointless we are even there. It is like you are invisible. You are just standing there. (Taylor, Focus Group Study)

I find it is weird when older people are in your class. It kind of is an invasion of your classroom. It’s like okay no we are in grade eight, we are not in high school yet.

(Jane, Focus Group Study)

*Gender insensitivity.* A few girls spoke about a lack of privacy in school change rooms. Spiderwort’s experience demonstrated the institutional insensitivity into the layout of students’ change rooms.

So if someone is changing on the bench and a person opens the door from the gym then people can see in. That happened to my friend and me last year. It is not the smartest idea to have a door and then the changing bench right behind it. Also there is a door to the hallway and you can see in from the hallway to one part.... the door that goes to the gym we were changing in front of it. One of the teachers opened the door and was talking to someone and just kept the door open so we had to run from where we were. (Spiderwort, Focus Group Study)
A couple participants described feeling frustrated that there was an absence of privacy in the girls’ change rooms.

I’m kind of shy getting changed in front of the other girls…. we don’t change in front of the boys. They separate change rooms. Boys on one side, girls on the other. The only thing we don’t like though is our teacher gives us tours of what the change room looks like, and what happens is the boys have a shower curtain in their showers, and that isn’t fair because we don’t…So we get pretty mad because even if we take showers we can’t have privacy. (Alice, Interview Study)

I guess like we change in like not a communal but like all the girls change like in the change room together…I don’t know like it's funny because like you can see sometimes like girls are just going to the washroom to change their shorts…I don’t think I am used to it. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

*Harassment.* Insensitivity towards’ girls bodies was further experienced by weekly body violations on the part of their male peers. Girls from different regions within Canada described a similar experience in which boys physically hit girls that were evaluated to be “hot.” Girls described the weekly assaults to be “annoying,” “inappropriate,” and “creepy.”

Actually at our school last year they had slap a butt day but they used a different word…. So they had that day and I thought it was kind of inappropriate but…they would go around hitting people in the butt... I don’t know, it was just something that...well I don’t want to call them popular but the more popular kids started
because they were bored and wanted to do something... *(So the boys would be hitting the girls butts?)* Yeah they would go around doing that and it didn’t actually happen to us it was more of the other kids. *(Spiderwort, Focus Group ‘Study)*

Alice who lived in a different province explained a similar phenomenon at her school.

I don’t know who made it up, but I kind of get uncomfortable with it. They call it ‘Slap Ass Fridays’... Oh sorry I shouldn’t swear. Guys get to go around they slap the girls asses and its weird cause your walking down the hall and they all of sudden, like all these guys, like, you thought would never do that, just sort of like doing that... on Fridays you see, like, perverts come out of them... And it’s creepy... like they’re slapping really hard... like really hard. Especially when you are outside and it’s cold outside... like they just laugh at you and you’re just like, ‘ow.’... Like if they think a girl is hot, they’re like... if they think you have a nice ass then they’ll slap you... we’re the most, we’re the girls in the school who gets slapped, like the most. *(Alice, Interview Study)*

In addition, to experiencing weekly assaults by their male peers, several girls further described that they experienced insensitive comments by their male physical education teacher.

Our gym teacher is really sexist too. Especially if you do something and you do something wrong he will laugh at you or single you out. He will make fun of you...
Yeah. I know some people, I don’t take it the wrong way because I know that is how he is but some girls it really does hurt their feelings...There are some girls who are really insecure and that would really really hurt their feelings and then others of us are like, ‘whatever.’ I am used to it so I am like whatever. (Mary, Focus Group Study)

Mary described how her physical education class was not perceived to be a place in which girls felt free to test out their skills without judgment. In addition, Monica reported experiencing negative experiences with the same male physical education teacher, leading her to feel “very uncomfortable.”

Yeah sometimes he (teacher) will make rude comments like just if a girl asks to go to the bathroom he will say, ‘Oh did you get your period?’ And we are like, ‘No I have to go to the bathroom.’ Yeah and then the guys laugh and make fun of you... Yeah and the guys laugh at you and they are staring at you and then you turn red cause you are put on the spot. Why me...Many of the girls in our class are insecure and they would take it the wrong way... It is very uncomfortable. (Monica, Focus Group Study)

These narratives of assault and harassment appeared during middle school when girls are at the first phase of pubertal development and also illustrated how girls increasingly felt less comfortable while at school.
Enjoyment to chore during early adolescence. Throughout early adolescence, the girls’ school-based experiences shifted towards the ‘Chore’ side of the spectrum but with some girls reporting positive experiences in their physical education classes.

Enjoyment. Some girls described that while their physical education classes primarily focused on traditional sports, their teachers tried to incorporate a range of physical activities.

It is fun sometimes when we go to the dance studio and make up our own dance and listen to music. (Addison, Focus Group Study)

Well in gym class last year we were doing dodgeball, basketball, volleyball, soccer, and all the regular sports but they did one part with dance and another was Pilates. So for the dance unit you had to go into a group and come up with a dance and that was fun…we do a lot more common sports than those things of dance and stuff. (Spiderwort, Focus Group Study)

I don’t like dance or yoga. I like soccer, basketball, and that kind of stuff. My favourite thing to do in gym class is capture the flag because I am really fast. (Scorch Willow, Focus Group Study)

Chore. Throughout early adolescence the girls described a shift towards viewing physical activity as a chore while at school. Two higher-level themes emerged and included: ‘Focus on fitness over enjoyment’ and ‘Daily physical activity’
**Focus on fitness over enjoyment.** Overall throughout early adolescence, the majority of girls described that they no longer perceived physical education classes to be “fun” as class time primarily focused on exercise. Jane and Monica described this, for example.

I also find that gym class is getting almost weird. Because when we had gym class we were like, ‘oh we are going to play dodge ball or we are going to play a game’ … now it is weird because we are doing actual workouts but we are in gym class to have fun and have physical activity not join a gym...All the teachers have iPads and they have work out apps because there are so many of them. So you’ll do an Ab work out. It’s like ‘what?’...It is not very fun. It is kind of boring, just doing a bunch of exercises over and over again. (Jane, Focus Group Study)

I like gym class...you can just forget about everything but at the same time it is harder...Now we have to do a fifteen minute running workout and we have to run and run and run. And then you have to do circuits instead of just playing games so you are working out and it is not fun at all. (Monica, Focus Group Study)

In addition to a focus on exercise, a participant described endurance training in their physical education classes in which they had to run intervals.

All we do in gym are beep tests. (What is a beep test?) It’s a run where you start and run back and forth before the beep but over time, there are different levels. The beeps over time increase in speed so you have to run faster. (Ah I see, is that fun?)
No...More games instead of fitness and beep tests. (Scorch Willow, Focus Group Study)

Another participant described feeling unsupported by her physical education teacher and advocated for there to be more alternatives given to students.

The gym teachers and stuff they pat the people that do really good in sports and stuff but the people who are awkward with sports they act as if they are nothing and it’s very degrading cause they act as if we are nothing and we cannot excel in sports...
There should be alternatives and stuff that include physical fitness but something with certain levels.... And that it is not that you are better because you are in a higher level but you do things differently. (Freddles, Focus Group Study)

Daily physical activity. While all girls living in Ontario were familiar with the daily routine, many indicated that their schools no longer practiced in it and others reported the exercise to be completely “random.”

(And I didn’t ask you last time about DPA. Do you guys still do that?) No. We used to, we used to run on the track. (Okay so you don’t do that anymore?) Yeah we haven’t done that in like four years. I don’t even know what it means so I don’t think we are doing it. (Addison, Focus Group Study)
I don’t like it [DPA], we had to dance once and it was stupid. (Scorch Willow, Focus Group Study)

(So I am hearing a lot of things happen during DPA. How could it be better?)

Instead of just getting up and doing random exercises it would be more fun to play a game. Like capture the flag. (Queen, Focus Group Study)

The girls’ accounts reveal uncertainty whether they were engaging in DPA and also an opinion that DPA could be more enjoyable if students were encouraged to play a game rather than engage in “random” exercises. Queen’s recommendation revealed that teaching staff might have greater success implementing the provincially mandated activity if they were to incorporate students’ input.

**School Experiences in Early Adolescence Summary.** Overall, the narratives revealed pervasive and intensified disruption to girls’ sense of movement, enjoyment of physical activities, and confidence in their bodies. With respect to ‘Movement and Confidence to Restriction and Apprehension,’ the early adolescent experiences indicated reduced institutional time devoted to physical activity, termination of intramural sports, a lack of physical activity opportunities when school sports teams were not an option, restricted physical space as a result of exclusion during their physical education classes, gender insensitivity, assault, and harassment. Regarding ‘Enjoyment to Chore’, while some of the girls described that they were provided a range of activities during their physical education classes; many identified a shift towards fitness and exercise.

**Adolescence (Grade Nine to Grade Twelve)**
**Movement and confidence to restriction and apprehension during adolescence.**

**Movement.** During adolescence, a couple girls involved in school sports described engagement in physically activity while at school.

Right now nothing outside of school, but in school I'm very active. I play... I was on the swim team for two years, so I do swimming in school. Soccer, volleyball, basketball, track, field hockey, everything. I joined all the teams. (Lauren, Interview Study)

I was rowing, I was…you know, I had track, I had everything…I had a rowing regatta and also training for track in there and it was just nuts. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

**Restriction and apprehension.** During adolescence, a few girls described instances in which their engagement with physical activity was restricted. Two higher-level themes emerged related to: ‘Reduced time devoted to physical activity’ and ‘Gender insensitivity’.

**Reduced time devoted to physical activity.** At the same time, many of the girls identified increased academic pressures and described abstaining from extracurricular physical activities in order to prioritize their schoolwork.

I couldn’t fit everything in, like with my time, So I had to prioritize, cause grades were becoming more important as well…I like soccer but not enough to really devote getting better. Because as the ages are going up it was getting more competitive, and so you really need to stay on top of it, so because of my timetable I didn’t really need
to stay on top it, so because I was trying to balance school and volunteering and doing my other sports. (Ashley, Interview Study)

I’m concentrating more on my studies because I found that when I was on all of those teams I had like practice after practice...so it was really hard, it was tiring. (Jackie, Girls’ Study)

At the same time, Lauren described her disappointment when her hockey team was cancelled due to lack of girls trying out for the team.

And then um, it was actually kind of sad, our school didn't have enough girls to make an ice hockey team this year, so we didn't get to play hockey, which was kind of upsetting... Yeah, this is our first year not playing hockey. So that was kind of sad.... Well it's weird, because normally I just go from sport to sport to sport ...at the same time, which is kind of hectic, but there was no long period of not having any sort of physical, well I mean, I have gym, but... nothing that really kind of drives you or moves you, I guess.... So, that was different. (Lauren, Interview Study)

**Gender insensitivity.** A few of the girls described increased self-consciousness related to physical appearance when engaged in physical activity in front of their male peers.

Last year I had gym first period in the morning...And on days I would be hanging out with a guy I liked... you wouldn't want to be all sweaty and gross and that kind of
thing. And then it would kind of inhibit you because in gym you might not necessarily be trying to perspire as much...You might spend more time trying to, I don't know, look better...But if I've like straightened my hair, and it's all nice, I don't really wanna put it up so that it gets in this crinkly...I mean I'll do it because I honestly, you know, would rather, I can't run with my hair in my face, but then I think, I know that I think about it, like I'm like ‘oh man’...I have to put my hair up and I'm like why do I have gym first period. (Lauren, Interview Study)

In addition, Hazel described her experiences of increased self-consciousness during her physical education class as a result of her different ethnocultural attire. Being the “only Muslim” in her co-ed class, disrupted her ability to participate without feeling self-conscious.

I just don’t like exercising with the boys and girls. You know? …And I’m not at the height of physical prowess there, so obviously you just feel self-conscious, I guess...Especially being the only Muslim in class…my bright red scarf. They’re like ‘let’s watch her,’ you know. (Hazel, Interview Study)

Both Lauren and Hazel’s account revealed examples in which they felt uncomfortable engaging in physical activity at school as a result of scheduling and mixed gender class composition.

**Enjoyment to chore during adolescence.** Throughout adolescence, the girls’ school-based experiences continued to be perceived to be a chore.
Chore. The narratives described their health education classes to focus on fitness and weight loss rather than enjoyment in physical activities.

Health classes basically…I don’t think it’s actually balanced all that well, like it is a gym class, like it is more physical activity, that’s what they center it about, so like physical activity is like the hugest part … I think there’s a lot of pressure for people to well to be fit and to be physically active… it was more concentrated towards like fitness and food because now most people are getting into dieting. (Ashley, Interview Study)

Yeah, it kind of sucky, I’m like, ‘yeah, I am a fat pig’…because you know, I was like because I just biked for a week. My biology teacher says it will take me about 6 weeks before my body gets used to the physiology changes… In my health class, she [teacher] is like, ‘you really need to get active now, so when you’re older it won’t be so hard’… I don’t want to get so inactive that I become morbidly obese. (Hazel, Interview Study)

In addition, Bronwen described a lack of education related to healthy eating.

I don’t think I get nearly enough education, like- and for me I like I am pretty into eating vitamins and stuff like that too, like even varying the whole weight factor…I think coaches worry that if you do talk about that kind of thing that people will become obsessed with it, but they don’t realize the fact that we already are. (Bronwen, Interview Study)
School Experiences in Adolescence Summary. Overall, the girls’ narratives revealed how school progressively became less of a facilitator to their engagement with physical activities, as they got older. Regarding ‘Movement to Restriction’, a couple girls involved in school sports described continued engagement with physical activities, while at the same time a few girls described not having enough girls to form a sports team, pressure to perform well academically, and feeling self-conscious when physically active at school. Relating to ‘Enjoyment to Chore’, the girls described the focus in health class on physical activity as a means to be “fit” or to lose or maintain weight rather than a pleasurable activity.

School Experiences Chapter Summary

The chapter examined ‘School Experiences’ in relation to physical activity and was divided into two major thematic continuums: ‘Movement and Confidence to Restriction and Apprehension’ and ‘Enjoyment to Chore’, documented across age groups (childhood, tweens, early adolescence, and adolescence).

Childhood. Overall, the girls’ lived experiences revealed the opportunity to occupy multiple spaces throughout their schools, engagement with diverse physical activities, self-assurance in their bodies, as well as freedom to engage in mixed gender play (‘Movement and Confidence’). Also physical activities were characterized as “fun” without any relationship to fitness or exercise (‘Enjoyment’).

Tweens. During this age period some of the girls continued to enjoy organized physical activities while at school (‘Movement and Confidence’), while at the same time many described a lack of school-based physical activity opportunities, reduced physical space as a
result of boys’ dominating the playgrounds, gender insensitivity, and inappropriate behaviour by a teacher (‘Restriction and Apprehension’). In addition, several girls described positive experiences related to athletic skill development and intramural sports (‘Enjoyment’) and a few girls recollected confusion related to DPA (‘Chore’). Overall, the tween girls’ accounts suggest that the school environment shifted to a barrier to engagement with physical activities.

**Early Adolescence.** Throughout early adolescence, the girls’ descriptions indicated pervasive and intensified disruption to girls’ sense of movement, enjoyment of physical activities, and confidence in their bodies. Overall, the girls’ lived experiences revealed reduced institutional time devoted to physical activity, reduced physical activity opportunities, reduced physical space as result of boys’ dominating the physical education classes, gender insensitivity, assault by male peers, and harassment by teachers (‘Restriction and Apprehension’) and increased focus on fitness and exercise (‘Chore’).

**Adolescence.** Throughout adolescence the girls described continued disruptive experiences in relation to physical activity and connection to their bodies. Overall, the girls’ experiences throughout adolescence revealed limited physical activity opportunities, increased pressure to focus on academic achievement and increased preoccupation with appearance during physical education classes (‘Restriction and Apprehension’), and increased focus on physical activity as a means to become ‘fit” or for weight maintenance (‘Chore’).
CHAPTER FIVE

Family Experiences

‘Family Experiences’ is the second of four core categories in relation to girls’ engagement in physical activities. It referred to the group of people that the girls lived with such as parents/guardians, siblings and extended family. The ‘Family Experiences’ category referred to narratives related to family members’ physical activity behaviours, attitudes, and comments that promoted or discouraged physical activity. The narratives included in the core category ‘Family Experiences’ were divided into two thematic continuums: ‘Social and Economic Support to Lack of Social and Economic Support’ and ‘Cherishing the Body to Disciplining the Body.’

The first thematic continuum, ‘Social and Economic Support to Lack of Social and Economic Support’ related to experiences of family members’ provision of social supports such as shared family physical activities as well as the financial means to participate in organized club and league sports versus lack of family support, an absence of shared family physical activities, inability to afford organized club and league sports, and transportation difficulties. The second thematic continuum, ‘Cherishing the Body to Disciplining the Body’ related to experiences in which family members were sensitive to the girls’ needs such as promotion of body acceptance, provision of comfortable clothing and education on pubertal changes, versus appearance based criticism, encouragement to engage in body disciplining practices (i.e. dieting), and lack of support related to pubertal changes.

Throughout the chapter, the two major thematic continuums were described separately for each of four age groups (childhood, tweens, early adolescence, and adolescence) in order to document changes across time.
A diagram illustrating the core category and its major themes can be seen in Figure 2. Each major theme has several sub-themes, which are described in the text.

![Diagram]

Fig.2. Major themes of the ‘Family Experiences’ Core Category

**Childhood (Preschool to Grade Three)**

**Social and economic support to lack of social and economic support during childhood.** Throughout childhood, the girls’ families provided various supports to facilitate engagement in physical activities.

**Social and economic support.** The girls’ narratives revealed the emergence of three higher-level themes which included, ‘Parental encouragement,’ ‘Male members more active’ and ‘Access to safe spaces.’

**Parental encouragement.** Most of the girls who were enrolled in lessons (i.e. horseback riding, swimming, and dance) and sports leagues (i.e. soccer and baseball) by their parents were from privileged economic backgrounds.

It’s just like your parents organize your sports so you had a whole variety of sports so you could pick which one you liked the most and later on in life you can improve at it and go somewhere in it. I think that is what my parents did. (Rose, Focus Group)
I was just going to say my parents have been really supportive and involved since I could walk pretty much. So it has been really good. They both are very active... Both have been very involved. (Sarah, Focus Group Study)

My parents put me in – I was in baseball and I was in soccer. (Lauren, Interview Study)

These girls described having the support and encouragement to participate in organized sports from a young age.

Male family members more active. Many girls from a variety of backgrounds described that they predominantly engaged in physical activity with their male family members throughout their childhoods. There was a noticeable absence of girls talking about being active with female family members.

My earliest memories would be about four. I'm not sure, but I can remember, playing with my dad who used to be the pig or whatever and you know trying to buck me off. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

I love swimming...Yeah my grandpa would take me...Called me his mermaid...I did lessons. I was almost a lifeguard. (Hazel, Interview Study)

My brother used to call me tomboy when I was a little bit younger because I'd always be playing street hockey with him and his friends and then other girls wouldn't.
I liked playing with my brother and I sort of found a companion in him. So it was really
great... so like I was able to play with him a lot more. (Ashley, Interview Study)

Access to safe spaces. In childhood, several girls from privileged economic
backgrounds described that they felt safe to occupy multiple public spaces surrounding their
homes, which included their backyards, public parks, and streets.

Like there was not many girls in my neighborhood so I used to play with a bunch of
guys I knew. We would always go to the park and play manhunt...It was fun…. We
used to go to the park all the time. (Spiderwort, Focus Group Study)

A lot of times in the summer, we’d just swim in the pool the entire day and we’d wait
for the ice cream…play tag, we were always outside, we would play basketball cause
we had a basketball net…we used to play basketball, like hockey on the street too, stuff
like that, we just ran around. We’d bike down to because there’s a park in between our
houses. (Lauren, Interview Study)

(It sounds like then you guys spent a lot of time outside winter, summer, were you
aware of you know anything about your body at that time?) I don't think so. I think like
- I think I ran around naked all the time I think so, with rubber boots on. Oh yeah. It
was exactly the same with my brother. (Bronwen, Interview Study)
Lack of social and economic support. The girls’ narratives related to ‘Lack of Social and Economic Support’ revealed one higher-level theme related to economic challenges: ‘Lack of safe spaces.’

Lack of safe spaces. A few girls from less privileged economic backgrounds described reduced physical space to engage in physical activities. For example, Ashley described running around her apartment building instead of engaging in outdoor physical activities.

We were always running around the hallways and none of the parents would mind it cause they all had kids of their own. (Ashley, Interview Study)

Yeah, and then we move to their [Jackie’s mother and partner’s] apartment for the summer…and we’ve been living here for four years…. it’s hard to leave your house to go see your dad and then you’re only there for like four days…we had this great jungle gym. (Jackie, Interview Study)

Jackie described that after her parents’ separation, she had to leave her favourite jungle gym at her father’s home. In addition, Erica described that she was threatened while riding her bike in her neighbourhood.

Me and my friends were at this hockey rink but no one was there and so we were riding our bikes there. When we started to leave, this guy comes up…I tried to turn around my bike but he was threatening me with a hockey stick and he started to hit my bike…I felt
mad but then kind of sad and scared…he was the same person who beat up this other kid. (Erica, Interview Study)

**Cherishing the body to disciplining the body during childhood.** None of the girls recalled instances when family members were attuned to their bodies’ needs throughout childhood.

**Disciplining the body.** Two participants described instances of body based disciplining practices related to weight and hair. Monica described how her father’s weight-based criticism continued to haunt her.

So this is probably not good but my dad used to tell me I was fat too and like so ever since I was young I thought that and I am really self-conscious and she [Monica’s friend] knows that. I say it all the time. Yeah and it is burned into my brain that I am no matter what anyone else tells me cause I was told so much as a kid. Like when your own parent tells you that you are fat and stuff it is really hard so... cause it is burned into my brain. (Monica, Focus Group Study)

In addition, Lauren described having to sit while her mother brushed her hair.

I used to hate my hair, it would be there it would be annoying and I was like ah and my mom would be like come on let’s brush your hair… sitting there for ten minutes was hard so I was like the boys are running around outside, I wanna go and play. (Lauren, Interview Study)
Family Experiences in Childhood Summary. Family experiences throughout childhood depicted a time when physical play was encouraged and supported by the families. With respect to ‘Social and Economic Support to Lack of Social and Economic Support’ the girls described multiple social and economic supports which included encouragement to participate in extracurricular activities, engaging in physical activities with male family members, and access to safe spaces. At the same time, a few participants from less privileged economic backgrounds identified reduced access to public spaces to engage in physical activities. Regarding the second thematic continuum, ‘Cherishing the Body to Disciplining the Body’ a couple girls described instances related to weight criticism and hair maintenance practices.

Tweens (Grade Five to Six).

Social and economic support to lack of social and economic support during the tween phase.

Social and economic support. Throughout tweens, several girls from privileged economic backgrounds described that they experienced social and financial support to engage in physical activities.

They [Alice’s parents] encourage me to play soccer because I love soccer…soccer and swimming, yeah I love soccer. Swimming, I love…Community club…I’m a Rookie Ranger. (Alice, Interview Study)

Horse camp…it was fun…and my parents both worked so we had to do something in the summer …the bus would take you and then you’d get dropped off at the YMCA at
five thirty so my parents that’s when they finished work so they’d come and pick us up and it worked out perfectly and that was a lot of fun for me and my brother. (Lauren, Interview Study)

My mom signed me up for cross-country skiing because that is what my sisters did. (Queen, Focus Group Study)

**Lack of social and economic support.** A few girls from a variety of backgrounds, described instances in which they did not feel supported. Freddles for instance, described that her father pressuring her to excel caused her to disengage from activities.

I was always pressured to do lots of stuff by my dad…When I was ten or eleven I was in hockey for five years and I quit hockey, but then he made me go into a bunch of stuff…so I went into cadets and then he pressured me to join everything in cadets so I quit that (laugh). Now I don’t see him anymore so I don’t do anything. (Freddles, Focus Group Study)

In addition, a couple participants described inequitable distribution of domestic chores.

*(So do you have different chores than your brothers?) I have a lot more responsibility than them ever since I was in grade five. I clean up ten times more than they do. *(Ahh are you older or younger?)* I am a middle child…. I just think guys are a bit lazy…most of them. (Cuddles, Focus, Group Study)
When my mom goes away it’s me who has to clean the house, like he [Bronwen’s father] makes the meals, but I just refuse to make meals…It’s kind of me that kind of takes responsibility the guys are up sitting on the couch watching television…Like when my mom is away I just take over, like I clean the house kind of thing…It’s just so sexist, affecting so much like that’s just one thing that makes me really mad... Like I’m a lot like my mom actually, but she hates it…she does everything, but because you know my dad and my brother they’re the cool big masculine guys. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

Bronwen described how she felt resentful that both she and her mother were expected to complete the majority of the household chores. As a result later on in the interview, she disclosed that she used her school recess breaks to complete her homework as she was too busy completing chores when at home.

Cherishing the body to disciplining the body during the tween phase.

Cherishing the body. During tweens a few of the girls from a variety of backgrounds described experiences in which their bodies were valued and cared for by their mothers. For example Erica’s mother encouraged her creative movement.

(When do you feel good about your body?) When I am dancing and singing...I like moving around and stuff...my mom always tells me that I’m a good singer and stuff like that so I just feel really good about myself...I feel really happy and really joyful and stuff like that. (Erica, Interview Study)
My mom and I walked through the mall for so long; I didn’t like shopping either that was not fun … I just bought boys’ pants and boys’ shorts too because also that’s when shorts started getting really short so I’d feel weird… I had shorts that I really liked and my mom made them like she cut my pants off, took the bottoms out and those were really comfortable… That was the way I ran around. (Lauren, Interview Study)

I just remember going bra shopping with my mom but it wasn't like it was huge deal or anything. It was at that point it was something that everyone was doing, even just things like buying deodorant and things like that for gym class. Those are the things that everyone was doing, and that's what I remember doing. (Ashley, Interview Study)

Both Lauren and Ashley’s mothers purchased or made items in order for them to feel comfortable in their bodies when engaged in physical activities.

**Disciplining the body.** Two girls, from less privileged economic backgrounds described disruptive body-based criticisms that influenced their level of engagement with physical activities.

The hair on my legs. They look like a forest. My stepsister she always says, ‘Gee don’t you shave?’ ‘No. I’m waiting until my mom can teach me how to wax so I never have to worry about it again. I don’t care if it hurts’… I love skirts but I can’t wear them because I have big, huge hairy legs… I like shorter skirts because you can actually run in them. (Jackie, Interview Study)

Jackie described how her stepsister’s comments related to her leg hair resulted in her
feeling a need to remove it with her mother’s supervision.

My mom and dad they are a little overweight themselves and they were telling me that I was overweight too and yet they were not getting out and doing stuff with me. (And how did it make you feel when they were criticizing you and your body?) Sort of sad and I was so self-conscious and sensitize. So I would hide in my room all the time and do nothing. (Lindsay, Focus Group Study)

Lindsay revealed how her parents’ weight based criticisms made her self-conscious, but also frustrated as they did little to help her to become more physically active.

**Family Experiences during the Tween Phase Summary.** With respect to ‘Social and Economic Support to Lack of Social and Economic Support’ several girls from privileged economic backgrounds described how their parents continued to support their engagement in organized sports and physical activities. At the same time, a couple girls from less privileged economic backgrounds described a lack of support related to pressure to excel in activities and inequitable distribution of household chores. ‘Cherishing the Body to Disciplining the Body’ revealed that a few girls from a variety of backgrounds were cared for by their mother through praise, support to wear comfortable clothing, and provision of age appropriate items (i.e. such as bras and deodorant). A couple girls from less privileged economic backgrounds described increased body based criticism throughout their tweens such as family members’ comments related to body hair and weight.
Early Adolescence (Grade Seven to Eight)

Social and economic support to lack of social and economic support during early adolescence. During early adolescence several girls from privileged economic backgrounds described that they continued to feel supported to engage in physical activities.

Social and economic support. The girls described that their parents supported their participation in physical activities in different ways which were represented through two higher-level themes: ‘Caregiving practices’ and ‘Performance and play.’

Caregiving practices. Many of the girls described that their mothers supported their involvement in physical activities through caregiving practices such as the organization of their schedule, arrangement of team and club sports, meal preparation, transportation, as well as praise and encouragement.

My mom always takes me to practice…she always comes to my practices all the time, like almost so much that I don’t want her there…. My mom always comes and will ask me if I had a good practice I find my mom to be a bit more supportive than my dad. (Rose, Focus Group Study)

My mom is not a sporty person she is a beautician and a girly girl…after I race she is more like, ‘you did good!’ (Taylor, Focus Group Study)

I find not just with my parents but people I know. The mom does more of the cooking, cleaning, and driving and the dad does everything else. So he [Spiderwort’s father] will do all the sports and stuff like that. (Spiderwort, Focus Group Study)
Spiderwort revealed her awareness that there are gender differences between the
distribution of chores. Out of all of the girls in the study, Scorch Willow was the only one to
describe traditional gender role reversal at her home.

My dad does a lot of the cooking and driving us around and stuff… It is interesting
because my dad cooks and my sister and I do the cleaning and my mom works… I
usually don’t have time for chores cause I play rep hockey which is the highest level
for my age group. (Scorch Willow, Focus Group Study)

Other than Scorch Willow, the majority of girls reported that they predominantly
received emotional and logistical support from their mothers.

Performance and play. The girls described that their fathers supported their
participation with physical activities through constructive criticism, coaching, and shared
play. Both Rose and Taylor described how their fathers’ focus on their athletic performance
motivated them.

I find my dad pushes me more than my mom does where my dad who might come to
the odd practice and will ask why I fell so much. He criticizes me, which pushes me to
go further (Rose, Focus Group Study).

I find my dad supports me after I race he will give me criticism like not bad criticism,
but what I should do next time… he is fit and he expects me to be like super perfect
champion every time… I know he is doing that to make me better but sometimes it
feels like he can’t be proud of me. I know he is but he always pressures me to do better.
At the same time, Taylor described how her father’s expectations have also led her to feel like a disappointment at times. A couple girls described that they engaged in physical activity with their fathers.

For me I still play with my dad because he coaches me in the summer. So me and my friend when she comes over we play soccer in the basement because usually my dad is home more than my mom. (Spiderwort, Focus Group Study)

Spiderwort described how her father coached and practiced with her. Similarly, Erica described that she would play with her father but at the same time recognized that he was “gentler” with her compared to her brothers.

He’s gentler with me...and he’s more protective like he’ll play rough with my brothers or stuff like that and then like with me he’s gentler. (Erica, Interview Study)

Only one out of all of the participants described engaging in physical activity with their mother during early adolescence. It should also be noted that Scorch Willow also was the only girl to report that her father performed the majority of household chores.

Well my mom is away a lot … I go play hockey with my mom on Sundays. (Scorch Willow, Focus Group Study)
Lack of social and economic support. Girls that described reduced support to engage in physical activities came from a variety of backgrounds. Their experiences fell into two higher-level themes, which included: ‘Fathers’ lack of attention’ and ‘Socioeconomic barriers.’

Fathers’ lack of attention. Many of the girls described that their fathers were more involved in their brothers’ athletic development.

My dad is, my brother is in triple A hockey and my dad always goes to his games and...he never comes to my [figure skating] practices and he is on the board of hockey and stuff, he does all this stuff for hockey and he is a coach too. (Rose, Focus Group Study)

I have two brothers and they play hockey so most of the time my dad is at the arena watching cause he coaches my brothers. So he is always there but he tries to come to some of my [volleyball] games and practices. (Mary, Focus Group Study)

In addition, Bronwen described how her father mainly played with her brother. As a young woman, her narrative revealed a sense of rejection from her father after she entered early adolescence.

But he doesn't know how to be a good father to me...like he kind of treats me different than my brother, but just like, I think like with the kind of when I began to change or I don't know...Maybe he didn’t have as much energy to be playing...he didn’t play with me as much...if he did play he played with my brother...When I am with him I’m not
as self-confident… he’s the one who is like oh you should be careful …and so I think that has really kind of hurt me. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

Similarly, Freddles reported hurt feelings when her father expressed a lack of interest and encouragement.

(Do you have any suggestions? How can families be supportive?) Like my dad often times I wouldn’t want to go to my hockey games and my dad would say, ‘I don’t like going to watch you, I don’t even like hockey. I only go because you are there.’ I would say don’t do that cause than you don’t want to go even more…I asked him if I did good and he would say, ‘What do you think?’ And he would shun me if I didn’t try my hardest at the hockey games when it is supposed to be for fun. (Freddles, Focus Group Study)

Socioeconomic barriers. In addition to a lack of support by their fathers, girls from less privileged economic backgrounds described how family conflict arose from financial barriers related to extracurricular sports. Lindsay described frustration as a result of her family’s limited finances such as an inability to pay for her participation in a competitive volleyball league and transportation challenges.

(What about at home. Do you find families help you to be active, parents, siblings?) No, not at all. (Okay Lindsay do you feel comfortable sharing?) My family is sort of low income. We don’t have the money to get myself into rep volleyball. (Right so that is hard when it is a league out of school. So that is hard and frustrating.) But even
when I was in school sports nobody came to my games. I was always here alone and having to walk home… *(What would help you, cause many girls have a similar experience?)* If people got off their butts and found a ride to get to the games. Take a cab or something or carpool with the other volleyball moms or something. (Lindsay, Focus Group Study)

Similarly, Taylor, a girl from a less privileged economic background described disappointment when her mother’s work schedule conflicted with her weekend swimming competitions.

Well I have swimming every day and I know my mom can’t watch all my practices all the time but when she misses one of my competitions it feels like, well you should have been there you know. (Taylor, Focus Group Study)

Finally, Spiderwort a girl from a privileged economic background expressed consideration towards her peers who could not afford similar physical activity opportunities.

But like some people don’t have the money to go out and do the sports and I think that is a big factor for kids cause some people I know don’t have a lot of money so they can’t actually do sports and that makes me sad knowing that someone doesn’t have enough money to be physically active. It is really hard. (Spiderwort, Focus Group Study)

**Cherishing the body to disciplining the body during early adolescence.**
Cherishing the body. A few girls described that their mothers helped support them through conversations related to pubertal changes, celebrating menarche and providing body acceptance advocacy. Both Lauren and Bronwen described instances in which they felt their mothers were attune and supportive throughout puberty.

Puberty… if all my friends happened to be on vacation or something, then I'd go to my mom. I don't mind talking to her about stuff. I don't mind talking to my mom, but yeah, it's a bit embarrassing. (Lauren, Interview Study)

Bronwen described that she felt “special” when her mother, neighbour, and minister planned a ceremony to welcome her into womanhood.

Well my neighbour, she had had this idea when I was little that she wondered when I had my period she wanted to have like a ceremony…she talked to my mom so just to welcome me into womanhood and whatever, and so, and then our minister…So the three of them took me out, we went to this really nice locks…and it was a beautiful place. And so they each talked to me about being a woman and whatever, and then they each gave me something, and it was really interesting because it was something that had been given to them by another woman…It made me feel really special… My mom was saying in different cultures people do more for that kind of getting your period, kind of growing up whatever, for girls, but our culture doesn’t really recognize that…but I think it’s really important to recognize that, because it’s a big moment. (Bronwen, Interview Study)
In addition, Ashley described that her mom similarly supported her acceptance of her body through encouragement to reduce her body-based comparisons with others.

You know what mom, it's not fair, she eats whatever she wants and whenever she wants and she doesn't gain a pound…then my mom said to me she said, ‘You know what, some people have different types of bodies…So you need to realize that and you can't always be comparing yourself to other people. You can only compare yourself to what's healthy for you.’ So that was a really important lesson for me.

(Ashley, Interview Study)

Disciplining the body. Several of the girls from variety of backgrounds described an awareness that their families engaged in weight loss and dieting practices. Spiderwort described confusion as to the reason her father desired to lose weight.

My dad is trying to get more active and he told me and my sister that if he didn’t lose a certain amount of weight he will owe us $100…. my dad is not even obese or fat so we don’t know why he wants to lose weight. (Spiderwort, Focus Group Study)

In addition, several girls described how their mothers’ relationship to food and exercise influenced their own.

She [Erica’s mother]… sometimes and it’s not like, oh, I’m just too big I need to lose
weight… she used to go to the gym a lot… (How does it make you feel about your body when you hear mom say that?) Sometimes I just feel like… nothing bad, just think of it, sometimes like maybe I should go exercise some more. (Erica, Interview Study)

Another participant disclosed that she used the same weight loss pills as her mother.

I lost a little bit of weight but it wasn't unhealthy. It was more, I've been taking these pills that, well, they're not like diet pills. They're um, like a pill that makes your hunger less sharp… my mom used to take them. She said that they didn't, they made you hungry but only like near the times you're supposed to eat, so you're not eating through the whole day. (Jackie, Interview Study)

In addition, Ashley described how her mother supported her to eat more “healthy” despite her previous encouragement that Ashley to accept her body’s natural weight and shape.

Well, I tried to go on a couple of diets, it was like … my mom, we're going to eat healthy in this house and lots and lots of vegetables and fruits and things like that. But I found that eating less than before, I don't know, it was hard for me. (Ashley, Interview Study)

**Family Experiences in Early Adolescence Summary.** Family experiences throughout early adolescence years, revealed how a girl’s socioeconomic background influenced her engagement with physical activity. With respect to ‘Social and Economic Support to Lack of
Social and Economic Support’, the girls from privileged economic backgrounds perceived more support to engage in physical activities and described providing different forms of support from their mothers and fathers. At the same time, many girls recognized that they received reduced attention from their fathers and that their fathers promoted their brothers’ athletic development. A couple of girls from less privileged economic families reported tensions as a result of reduced physical activity opportunities. ‘Cherishing the Body to Disciplining the Body’ revealed that a few girls from a variety of backgrounds experienced support from their mothers through conversations related to pubertal changes, celebrating the passage into womanhood, and body acceptance. However, several of the girls also recognized that their parents’ comments related to weight loss affected how they felt in their bodies with some girls’ parents assisting them to lose weight.

**Adolescence (Grade Nine to Twelve)**

**Social and economic support to lack of social and economic support during adolescence.**

*Social and economic support.* Throughout adolescence, several of the girls from a variety of backgrounds described that they began to engage in fitness related physical activities with their mothers.

Now I’m in Curves…she [Lauren’s mother] signed up and I was like okay we’ll do this cause I don’t want her doing-like by yourself it’s not- she wouldn’t be driven. (Lauren, Interview Study)

Me, my mom and my aunt every week…It’s an hour. Half an hour at the weight
machines and half an hour of cardio…yah my mom drives me there…we do classes

(Do you ever feel being Muslim interferes or interrupts or makes it difficult to exercise or do certain forms of exercise?) Not really cause we go to that girls’ gym. And there are no boys there, we always take off our scarves anyways. (Hazel, Interview Study)

For Hazel, in particular, having access to an all-women’s gym made it possible for her to exercise considering her religious heritage. In addition, Ashley described how her mother role modeled healthy lifestyle choices.

Well, I think that like my mom has always told me to eat healthy and stay active. So if she's going for a walk she'd say oh, do you want to come for a walk too, it's really good for you. (Ashley, Interview Study)

Lack social and economic support. At the same time, several girls from less privileged economic backgrounds identified reduced support to engage in physical activities as a result of increased academic pressure, part-time employment, and transportation challenges.

I couldn’t fit everything in, like with my time. So I had to prioritize, cause grades were becoming more important as well…so my mom said you have to cut down on some things and you have to figure out what you want to do the most…so that’s when I started cutting down on some of the sports. (Ashley, Interview Study)
Saturday and Sunday early in the morning are the only times I’m able to work out because of school and after school I work. I have been working five nights a week so I can afford my computer. (Hazel, Interview Study)

I got my license-That’s when me and mom started fighting a lot about it…I’m not exactly sure but it’s more that she wants me to bike to work…I want to go rowing, I want to go to my friends’ house and I don’t want to bike to work…so, we fight about it pretty much every day that she makes me go. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

**Cherishing the body to disciplining the body during adolescence.** Throughout adolescence, the participants did not describe instances in which their families cared for them.

**Disciplining the body.** In adolescence, several girls from a variety of backgrounds described witnessing their mother’s body dissatisfaction and dieting practices making it more difficult for them to feel positive towards their own bodies.

She doesn’t like her body, I don’t know if she thinks she’s too thin or what …she’ll make comments like, ‘really I am feeling very fat’ and I’m like mom come on, you’re ten pounds lighter than me, just, shut up you know. (*How does it make you feel about your own body when your mom says, after eating...oh I’m so full?*) It makes me feel horribly disgustingly fatter than her. (Bronwen, Interview Study)
She has always been like I need some kind of weight loss program...talks about how she’s gonna go and lose weight... we bought my mom... an exercise bike. So that’s now in the basement, and we're always just like, 'go work out! ya!’ We kinda all use it. Like its pretty good. Its like a family thing....But, ya definitely, she's always like, ‘ah, I'm overweight.’ (Do you think it affects you at all? Like in any ways of like worrying?) Ya! Its just like after I have kids, I'm gonna look like that. (Lauren, Interview Study)

Additionally, Ashley described how her mother’s health challenges influenced her own exercise and eating choices.

My mom has a lot of health problems related to her weight. So she's always really been pushing me towards being really healthy and things like that, cause she knows the consequences of that and she's like, ‘I'm an example of what can happen if you don't take care of your body.’ (Ashley, Interview Study)

**Family Experiences in Adolescence Summary.** Family experiences throughout adolescence revealed how girls from less privileged economic backgrounds faced greater challenges to engage in physical activities. With respect to ‘Social and Economic Support to Lack of Social and Economic Support,’ girls from a variety of backgrounds described engagement in fitness related physical activities with their mothers. At the same time girls from less privileged economic backgrounds described socioeconomic barriers to engagement with physical activities such as increased pressure to prioritize academics, part-time employment, and transportation challenges. ‘Cherishing the Body to Disciplining the Body’ revealed an
absence of support suggesting that families did not discuss self-care practices during this developmental time. At the same time, adolescent girls recognized that their mothers’ body practices related to dieting or a lack of self-care affected their own connection to their bodies.

**Family Experiences Chapter Summary**

The following chapter examined the girls’ ‘Family Experiences’ in relation to physical activity and was divided into two major thematic continuums: ‘Social and Economic Support to Lack of Social and Economic Support’ and ‘Cherishing the Body to Disciplining the Body’ documented across age groups (childhood, tweens, early adolescence, and adolescence).

**Childhood.** Overall the girls’ lived experiences revealed that their families supported their engagement with physical activity. Girls from privileged economic backgrounds had more physical activity opportunities and access to safe public spaces (‘Social and Economic Support’). At the same time a few girls from less privileged economic backgrounds described reduced access to public spaces (‘Lack of Social and Economic Support’). Additionally, a couple participants described instances related to weight criticism and hair maintenance (‘Body Disciplining’).

**Tweens.** The girls’ tween experiences revealed that girls from privileged economic backgrounds continued to experience support to engage in physical activities (‘Social and Economic Support’). A couple girls from less privileged backgrounds described lack of support though pressure to excel and inequitable distribution of chores (‘Lack of Social and Economic Support’). In addition, a few girls from a variety of backgrounds identified their
mothers as supporting them through pubertal changes (‘Cherishing the Body’). At the same time a couple girls from less privileged economic backgrounds described body-based criticisms (‘Body Disciplining’).

**Early Adolescence.** Throughout early adolescence, the descriptions revealed how girls from privileged economic backgrounds continued to have access to physical activity opportunities and that parents provided different forms of support (‘Social and Economic Support’). At the same time, girls recognized that their fathers prioritized their brother’s athletic improvement and girls from less privileged economic backgrounds identified financial barriers to their engagement in physical activities (‘Lack of Social and Economic Support’). A few girls from a variety of backgrounds described instances when their mother supported their pubertal changes (‘Cherishing the Body’), at the same time, some parents’ comments and body practices related to weight dissatisfaction affected how the girls felt in their own bodies (‘Disciplining the Body’).

**Adolescence.** Throughout adolescence several girls from a variety of backgrounds described that they began to engage in fitness related physical activities with their mothers (‘Social and Economic Support’). Several girls from less privileged economic backgrounds identified increased pressure to excel academically, part-time employment, and transportation challenges to be barriers to their engagement with physical activity (‘Lack of Social and Economic Support’). Finally, none of the adolescent girls described instances in which their bodies were cared for during adolescence. Instead, a few girls described how their mother’s weight and shape preoccupations made it difficult for them to feel positive towards their own bodies (‘Disciplining the Body’).
CHAPTER SIX

Peer Experiences

‘Peer Experiences’ is the third of four core categories in relation to girls’ engagement in physical activities. It referred to peers’ attitudes, comments and behaviours encouraging or discouraging participation with physical activities and sports. The narratives included in the core category ‘Peer Experiences’ were divided into two major thematic continuums: ‘Acceptance of Different Social Positions to Rejection of Different Social Positions’ and ‘Physical Activity to Sedentary Activity.’

The first thematic continuum, ‘Acceptance of Different Social Positions to Rejection of Different Social Positions’ related to experiences of acceptance regardless of their social location (i.e. gender, socioeconomic background, or ethnocultural/ racial heritage) versus rejection related to social location or pressure to comply to dominant discourses in order to gain social approval. The second thematic continuum, ‘Physical Activity to Sedentary Activity’, related to engagement in high-energy activities involving sports, make-believe games, team games, explorations indoors and outside, during and after school hours, and organized or spontaneous forms of play versus stationary activities such as sitting and talking, watching movies, and television.

Throughout the chapter, the two thematic continuums are described separately for each of the four age groups (childhood, tweens, early adolescence, and adolescence) in order to document changes across time.

A diagram illustrating the core category and its major themes can be seen in Figure 3. Each major theme has several subthemes, which are described in the text.
Childhood (Preschool to Grade Three)

Acceptance of different social positions to rejection of different social positions in childhood.

Acceptance of different social positions. Throughout childhood, girls from a variety of backgrounds described the freedom to play with both genders as well as participate in numerous physical activities. The majority of girls described that as children they enjoyed physical activities with both genders.

I was always just like, ‘Ugh. Tag. Fun.’ I didn't care. When you're little, you don't care about boys and girls. It's not different. It's just whatever you feeling like doing you do. (Lauren, Interview Study)

There was not many girls in my neighborhood so I used to play with a bunch of guys I knew. We would always go to the park and play manhunt and they still do that. It was fun! (Spiderwort, Focus Group Study)
We [Erica’s male and female friends] played with play dough, we drove the fox, we’d go on the structure. We played tag. (Erica, Interview Study)

In addition to enjoying the freedom to play with both genders, Ashley described how the sense of community and goal setting was also an important motivating factor.

I like the feel of community, like that was in it, like you had your group of friends who were all rooting for you and you were all there for the same reason, and you’re all reaching a certain goal. So I really liked that aspect. As well as just the way it made me feel when I accomplished something really great! (Ashley, Girls’ Study)

**Rejection of different social positions.** Two higher-level themes emerged which included: ‘Restrictive gender norms’ and ‘Social stigma.’

*Restrictive gender norms.* Both Alice and Bronwen described the recognition of male privilege as children. For example, Alice recollected how some girls began to objectify their bodies in order to gain boys’ approval and attention.

All I know is that some girls would put water balloons up their shirt to pretend they have breasts or something. And then the teacher would make them pop them and take them out...They wanted boys to like them…cause they see lots of boys who have girlfriends who are older that have breasts, so maybe they think the boys who are older will like them if they have breasts. (*What did you think of that?*) Ah, I didn't
really care. I was too busy with more important stuff. *(What kinds of stuff were you busy with?)* We were busy with our Christmas concert songs. (Alice, Interview Study)

In addition, Bronwen described concealing her gender while playing with boys.

O.K. so it's not like a huge thing or whatever but I remember it was pretty cold up there so we had like...so like the boys thought that I was a boy too, and I didn't bother telling them otherwise. *(What was it like to have boys think that you were a boy?)* I liked it... I just liked that they I just know that they didn't judge me like for my sex or whatever *(Do you think they would have treated you differently if they thought you were a girl?)* They might have...They were really nice kids, but I was seven, so I really don't remember that much like they were a lot older than me I think. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

Other than Alice and Bronwen it was rare for girls to describe awareness to gender differences throughout their childhood years.

*Social stigma.* Two girls, Hazel and Ashley from non-White ethnocultural backgrounds (i.e. Aboriginal-Muslim and African-Canadian) described that they experienced exclusion and teasing.

Actually, for a long time I was in this really awkward phase where I had no friends…the majority of people didn’t like me for some reason…I didn’t fit in … like a social stigma…one of those woosie suck up kids. (Hazel, Interview Study)
I can't even remember the details, but I know there was one point in elementary and someone commented on like my colour of being skin as being related to like poo or something….It was like, kind of made me feel bad (Ashley, Interview Study).

Physical activity to sedentary activity during childhood.

Physical activity. Throughout childhood, all of the girls described partaking in spontaneous non-organized forms of play with their peers either at school, home, and throughout their neighborhoods. Physical activities included wrestling, tag, hide and seek, chasing, make-believe games, and gymnastics.

Play tag, we were always outside, we would play basketball…hockey on the street too, stuff like that, we just ran around. Biking we were big into biking. (Lauren, Interview Study)

Sailor Moon was pretty big when I was a kid, so we played Sailor Moon...And I’d play with my next-door neighbor and my little brother. And we’d be super heroes and we would save the world one day at a time basically. (Hazel, Interview Study)

The girls described how “everyone” was included in physical activities and spoke about the importance of developing social bonds through play. Another defining feature of physical activity throughout childhood was the variety and range of activities.

When I was little, I played more a variety of sports than I do now. I used to play a ton of sports with my friends. (Taylor, Focus Group Study)
**Sedentary activity.** Lauren recognized different forms of social interactions between the genders from a young age. In particular she described how her female peers primarily engaged in sedentary activities during recess.

They’d sit around, sit around and talk and I’m like you’re boring (laughter). They’d sit on the jungle gym or climb the monkey bars...only certain people stayed for lunch... a lot of the boys went home...so I would be like okay there aren’t enough people to play tag and then I’ll just sit with the girls. (Lauren, Interview Study)

**Peer Experiences in Childhood Summary.** Peer experiences throughout childhood depicted a time when physical play was the centre of social bonding. ‘Acceptance of Different Social Positions to Rejection of Different Social Positions’ revealed that the girls enjoyed social connectedness with both genders. At the same time there were a couple girls from non-White ethnocultural heritages that described teasing and social isolation and a couple girls described the recognition of male privilege. Regarding the second thematic continuum, ‘Physical Activity to Sedentary Activity’, most girls’ accounts revealed the freedom to participate and join various physical activities both at school and in their neighborhoods. However at the same time one girl recognized that her female peers engaged in more stationary activities compared to her male peers. Overall, participants described peers to have played an essential role in their level of physical activity. Most notable during this time period was the participants’ freedom to interact and play with both genders and the variety of activities they engaged in.
Tweens (Grade Four to Six)

Acceptance of different social positions to rejection of different social positions during tweens.

Acceptance of different social positions. Throughout the tween years, there was a shift towards gender-segregated play. Despite this, a few self-identified athletic girls from a variety of backgrounds spoke about the ability to move between male or female peer groups depending on their social needs.

I used to hang out with the boys, and what happened was when me and my (girl) friends got into a fight, I go and hang around with them until we’re out of a fight, and then what happens is when we’re out of a fight I’d go back to play with them. (Alice, Interview Study)

I like playing basketball and other sports with them [the boys] because the girls they’re fun for a rainy day because they don’t do anything really. They’re like couch potatoes; they just stand there and talk. But the boys if you’re hyper then just go play soccer or something else. (Jackie, Interview Study)

Lauren, described that she continued to play with her male peers despite recognition that most girls were no longer participating.

(Did you ever notice at a certain age that all of a sudden the boys were treating you differently because you were a girl?) I think grade five or grade six. A lot of times too I played with older people because of my brother so I played with him and his friends
but still it would be the boys because the girls in their grade wouldn’t want to play either right so and then my friends [boys] would play with C [Lauren’s brother] and his friends in his grade… but I don’t know if they really treated me differently, grade five or grade six I guess was more when the whole boy likes girl type of thing, like oh you like him. (Lauren Interview Study)

**Rejection of different social positions.** Throughout the tween years, two higher-level themes emerged which included: ‘Restrictive gender norms’ and ‘Social stigma.’

**Restrictive gender norms.** All of the girls who continued to play with boys did so despite experiencing negative social consequences. This theme is exemplified by the quotations of Lauren and Spiderwort.

That sucked. In grade six, again, a lot of things happened in grade six. There were a bunch of girls…kind of weird, a bunch of girls that were kind of more girly and I was kind of…I was always playing tag and hockey a lot, like foot hockey outside. These girls didn’t like that so they had this club, and I didn’t know what they did but it was girly stuff, so I was just like, ‘can I be in your club?’, ‘No.’ I was like, ‘Fine.’ So I was excluded…But I didn’t care too much. I just went off and played with the boys and I was fine. (Lauren, Interview Study)

Similarly, Spiderwort also described that she encountered social repercussions for socializing with boys.
That happened to me in grade six, I was friends with a guy because one of the girls at our school was bullying me so I was always hanging out with him cause I wanted to be with someone who I knew I could trust. I was always with my friends, who were guys and I was always told, ‘oh you guys are dating.’...I was friends with two to three boys in the neighborhood. We were really good friends. We used to go to the park all the time. We still go to the park but not that often. I don’t know if it is because we are busy or don’t have time or if we don’t feel comfortable because people may tease us. (Spiderwort, Focus Group Study)

In addition, Jackie described frustration with the restrictive ways that popular girls were expected to live in their bodies.

You had to be perfect, you slip up once and you’re out. Like you get one strike and you’re out…you can’t like run or anything, you have to walk, you have to wear high heels. I liked wearing – I didn’t wear high heels…You just couldn’t be athletic and I’ve always wanted to just get up and run umm you couldn’t do that, you had to sit around and talk during recess. (Jackie, Interview Study)

*Social stigma.* A few girls described that girls who did not conform to gender norms were socially stigmatized. For example, Bronwen described how girls who did not adhere to feminine appearance ideals were given the social label “butch.”

Like a butch or something. Someone who doesn’t care about what they wear or look like, or play sports and stuff. Just more like who kind of relates to guys who relates to
other people like a guy does.... A girl who wears comfortable clothes and hangs out with guys and plays sports and stuff. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

In addition, Monica and Taylor described that most girls disengage from physical activities during grade six because it was perceived to be “uncool” or immature.

Cause girls don’t think it is cool anymore to run around and play and stuff. It is more like as you get older you want to hang out with your friends and not run around and play. (Monica, Focus Group Study)

I think it [physical activity] no longer becomes your first priority, as you get older. More stuff evolves and you see the younger kids doing it and then you think you are more mature. (Taylor, Focus Group Study)

**Physical activity to sedentary activity during tweens.** Throughout the tween years, gender norms became a major influence in girls’ physical activity choices.

*Physical activity.* There was a noticeable decrease in girls’ engagement in physical activities with their peers. A couple girls described continued engagement in physical activities with male peers. Both Jackie and Lauren recognized that they were often in the minority.

I am the only girl, except E and M [female friends] to actually be brave enough to walk up to the guys and say, ‘Hey do you want to play some basketball?’ (Jackie, Interview Study)
There was one girl…and she would be athletic like I am…when it came to like playing tag and stuff, it was always like me and her and the boys. (Lauren, Interview Study)

In addition, Erica described that her continued engagement with physical activities was contingent on her female peers.

Well if some of my friends join the running club than I’ll probably do it. (Erica, Interview Study)

\textit{Sedentary activity.} For the most part, the girls’ experiences shifted towards sedentary activities such as sitting and talking. For example, Ashley described that as she got older she noticed that engagement in physical activity was something that was done primarily by “younger kids.”

\textit{(Were there ever times throughout elementary at recess where you might decide, today at recess I want to sit and talk with my friends instead of playing sports?) I don’t even know if it was a conscious decision, but it was just like that’s what everyone else was kind of doing... it was just everything that everyone was doing. I'm interested in this stuff too, so it wasn't like I was being forced or anything or anyone else was, like maybe in a subconscious kind of way. (Ashley, Interview Study)}
In addition both Bronwen and Erica were unable to recollect the reason for the transition from physical activity to sedentary activity throughout their tween years.

I’m not sure... Yeah things just kind of change. Like it’s not even...and it’s kind of like when you look back at something you realize, but when you’re at the time it’s just...(That’s so interesting hey. So grade five, you know you’re going out you played soccer in the soccer field and somehow in grade six you come back from summer vacation, it just seems so natural to just hang out and chat.) I think kind of half and half I think, like some kids just hated playing soccer kind of, there are some girls who just hated playing soccer so they don’t play soccer...Well they just didn’t like sports I guess. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

(What kinds of things do you guys do at recess now?) Well we usually talk mostly, and plus that really all we do...we don’t play much on the play structure anymore...some of my other friends like it, but I don’t really like anymore, I don’t know why. (Erica, Interview Study)

**Peer Experiences During the Tweens Summary.** Peer experiences throughout the tween years depicted a time when peer pressure intensified resulting in many girls disengaging from physical activities. With respect to ‘Acceptance of Different Social Positions to Rejection of Different Social Positions’, there were a few participants that described socializing with both male and female peer groups. At the same time, girls who continued to play with male peers faced social consequences and many girls described management of their behaviours in order to gain social approval. ‘Physical Activity to Sedentary Activity’, revealed that girls who
continued to engage in physical activities noticed that many of their female peers were no longer playing with many girls choosing more stationary activities. Overall, participants described that intensified social processes resulted in reduced engagement in physical activities.

**Early Adolescence (Grade Seven and Eight)**

*Acceptance of different social positions to rejection of different social positions during early adolescence.* Throughout early adolescence, a few girls from a variety of backgrounds described a sense of belonging with female peers through shared physical activities.

*Acceptance of different social positions.* The girls that continued to participate on organized sports teams described that they enjoyed being active with their female peers.

Me and H [female friend] like we're competitive - like we work together…At lunch we'll do chin-ups on the monkey bars. (Jackie, Interview Study)

A bunch of my friends and I we play street hockey a lot, and me and my best friend who's the girl, we play, but a lot of girls, they don't. They just don't feel athletic or something. (Lauren, Interview Study)

I had this best friend. We’re like sisters…We walk to school together and we walk home together…I can talk to her about anything…We’re inseparable at school, like you’ll never see us without one another at school…we’d walk up and down the hallway…singing or skipping, or dancing down the hallways. (Alice, Interview Study)
Rejection of different social positions. During early adolescence, two higher-level themes emerged related to ‘Restrictive gender norms’ and ‘Ethnocultural/racial heritage restrictions.’

Restrictive gender norms. Many of the girls from a variety of backgrounds described how restrictive ideals of femininity influenced their engagement in physical activities. For example, Jackie and Bronwen perceived that girls could not simultaneously occupy positions of athleticism and femininity.

Only guys can be popular when they're athletic. Girls are the ones that are like, ‘I'm not running, I'm walking, these high heels don't let me run.’ Because girls, they try to be more like porcelain, like ‘I'm a porcelain doll, I'm just gonna sit here and be perfect.’ (Jackie, Interview Study)

In grade 7 or 8 like you couldn’t play sports if you were girly. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

In addition, Taylor described frustration with gender stereotypes that limited her potential.

I think it is stereotypical that the boys think the girls meant to be in the kitchen, do the art, the girls are meant to clean, the girls do all that stuff. The boys are meant to cut the wood and start the fire….Yeah they just group you….It is completely wrong. It is like they think they know who you are because of all these stereotypes. They don’t
really give you a chance to just show what you can actually do just because of that. Everyone assumes too fast, they are too quick to conclusions. (Taylor, Focus Group Study)

*Ethnocultural/racial heritage restrictions.* In addition, two girls from non-White ethnocultural backgrounds described instances in which discrimination disrupted their engagement in physical activities.

I was with our friend…at this water park, and so they asked my friend to start playing a game with them right? But then they didn’t ask me or anything like that, and it wasn’t a big deal or anything…but like then after ten minutes later, I was like, ‘oh guys can I join?’ And they were like, ‘okay.’ Like they were really really surprised because there’s a lot of segregation there [in the United States] kind of. I don’t think like intentionally like black people don’t play with white people, I think it’s just that people stick to people that are their own, they just thought it was weird that we knew each other. (Ashley, Interview Study)

While Ashley was able to assertively ask to participate, her experience revealed the subtle way in which discrimination can influence engagement in physical activities. In addition, Hazel described experiencing ridicule for wearing additional clothing in order to continue to swim at her community pool.

I started wearing the hijab...so I would wear a t-shirt, and some, like tights, right? So I would be a little more modest and stuff. And I was in the changing room and, uh,
these girls were talking about me...And they were saying, 'you know she must wear that cause she’s fat’... and they really really hurt my feelings. (Hazel, Interview Study)

**Physical activity to sedentary activity during early adolescence.**

*Physical activity.* In early adolescence, the participants from privileged economic backgrounds described continued engagement with physical activities. One higher-level theme emerged related to ‘Girls’ reduced involvement.’

*Girls’ reduced involvement.* The girls from privileged economic backgrounds described that they continued to engage in physical activities and felt mixed about their female peers’ decreased involvement in physical activities.

In my cross-country ski team it is just me and two other girls. It is mostly boys and there are ten or fifteen. Sometimes the other two girls don’t come so I am the only one there... I don’t mind it that much because the other two girls are not as involved and they don’t like the challenges involved in it so it is more fun to compete against the boys because they try harder. (Queen, Focus Group Study)

While Queen maintained that competing against boys was more challenging, both Spiderwort and Scorch Willow felt mixed.

*(So how is that for you if other girls are less active than you?)* Sometimes it's easy but sometimes it is hard. It’s harder cause you don’t have people to play soccer against or throw a football with but it is easier because if you try out for a soccer team and you
don’t think you are going to make it. If you feel self-conscious and more people drop out then it works to your advantage. (Spiderwort, Focus Group Study)

(Kind of like everyone makes the team?) Yeah but if the good people drop out then you don’t have as good of a team and stuff. Or if you are the best on team than you can be captain and that is what happened to me last year. (Scorch Willow, Focus Group Study)

Sedentary activity. Several of the girls from a variety of backgrounds described an aversion to increased competitiveness.

Being too competitive doesn’t make anything fun especially cause it is gym class and you’re not going to win a big trophy...It turns gym class into something that is unenjoyable like you can take competitiveness to a certain level and then after that it goes downhill. It can make you feel bad about how well you do. (Rose, Focus Group Study)

When I was little I used to figure skate, dance, and gymnastics and stuff but I quit all that. I don’t really play sports anymore... Many of my friends are in sports and it has become way more competitive. (Addison, Focus Group Study)

I find competitive can be fun for some people or people can hate it. It either makes you do really well or really bad.... I think that the competition puts so much pressure
on you. You tend to fail, you tend to do worse because you are nervous. (Taylor, Focus Group Study)

**Peer Experiences During Early Adolescence Summary.** With respect to ‘Acceptance of Different Social Positions to Rejection of Different Social Positions’, a few girls described that they enjoyed engaging in physical activities with their female peers. At the same time, several girls described how notions of femininity as well as ethnocultural/racial insensitivity led to increased feelings of discomfort, judgment, and exclusion which disrupted their engagement in physical activities. Regarding the second major theme, ‘Physical Activity to Sedentary Activity’, girls who remained engaged in physical activities reported mixed feelings towards other girls’ reduced involvement in sports. At the same time, sports increased competitiveness was found to reduce girls’ participation. Overall, the narratives described that social processes primarily related to gender resulted in disengagement from physical activities during early adolescence.

**Adolescence (Grade Nine to Twelve)**

*Acceptance of different social positions to rejection of different social positions during adolescence.*

*Acceptance of different social positions.* Throughout adolescence a few girls from a variety of backgrounds described reduced appearance related concerns when engaged in physical activities with their female peers.

I guess you don’t need to worry. I never worried how I looked or anything cause there would just be a bunch of girls there. (Lauren, Interview Study)
It’s actually kind of gross because I sweat unbelievably when I am working out…When I am working out I pour and so that’s something that a bit embarrassing but I mean it’s funny because-I know it sounds weird but I don’t care as much what I look like in front of girls as I do in front of guys. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

(Do feel different in your body when you engage in physical activity or sports and it's just girls versus when it's girls and boys?) I think so, umm, hmm, I think so, just like being more self-conscious, like, when it's just girls maybe you won’t care as much. (Ashley, Interview Study)

**Rejection of different social positions.** Many adolescent girls described reduced engagement in physical activities with two higher-level themes that emerged related to: ‘Restrictive gender norms’ and ‘Ethnocultural/racial restrictions.’

*Restrictive gender norms.* Several of the girls who continued to engage in physical activities described that they felt self-conscious in front of their peers. In particular girls described pressure to conform to societal ideals linked with feminine appearance. For example, Lauren described that how wearing a skirt was linked with heterosexual desirability.

Guys prefer for girls to wear tighter clothes…I used to be completely against skirts because I didn’t feel comfortable in them at all. I always felt like if I would walk they would like completely ride up…Now I wear skirts a lot in the summer…not so much
when I am doing active things … just to sit on the dock…I wear skirts to school now. (Lauren, Interview Study)

In addition, Hazel described how girls who do not conform to feminine ideals related to appearance (i.e. tight revealing clothing, thin, and petite) are socially isolated.

There is this one girl who I’ve noticed dresses like a boy-kind of has long hair still but dresses like a boy. She even looks like a boy…I feel kinda bad for her actually, because people aren’t very nice to her. She’s very tomboyish. (Hazel, Interview Study)

Lauren further described that nonconforming girls were considered sexually undesirable to heterosexual males.

Um, I think butch…its just kinda like a...more in a high school, people that I knew called a butch…but like a 'beast' or like a 'tank'....That girl is...just saying that she's masculine. They [Lauren’s male peers] don't find her as attractive because she's like...she's just more physical than a girl. I don't know, maybe they feel intimidated, maybe not. Maybe they're just...I don't know....But its just not the traditional girl that they find themselves attracted to or whatever. (Lauren, Interview Study)

**Ethnocultural/racial restrictions.** Several girls from non-White ethnocultural groups described encountering prejudicial stereotypes. For example, Jackie described experiencing a racial slur related to her mixed racial heritage.
Just the darker skin and everything. People always ask what my background is and I always say 'Métis’ but then they're like, 'what's that?’...I've been called a 'half breed' before which really bugged me... she [Jackie’s female peer] was like, ‘I don't want to hang out with the half breed anymore.’ (Jackie, Interview Study)

In addition, Hazel described how stereotypes limit individuals’ range of interests and talents.

If you’re a darker skinned girl you are expected to like hip hop. And if you are Asian you are expected to be at the top of your class kind of thing. I don’t know what they expect of Muslims-they usually expect you to be good at math or something. I don’t know. (Hazel, Interview Study)

Similarly, Ashley also described how racial stereotypes caused her peers to be “surprised” that she was interested in sports.

I’m not gangster…Everyone’s like ‘you’re the whitest black person I know’, kind of things like that… I don’t know if that’s a compliment or whether they’re dising me…they’re really surprised at like who I am and things [sports] like that…you’re not the stereotypical black person...It's so boxed in. Like I know so many people that are like wow, I'm so surprised that you're not like what we see on TV and it's interesting, cause what you see on TV sometimes can be a really inadequate reflection on society. (Ashley, Interview Study)
Physical activity to sedentary activity during adolescence.

Physical activity. Throughout adolescence, a few girls from a variety of backgrounds described that they participated in more leisure based physical activities with their friends such as shopping and swimming.

I think it’s changed more. Like, I like shopping…I don’t like shopping by myself, I like shopping with my friends. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

Fridays usually I go down to my friend’s house and we just hang out with a bunch of people... We’ll go swimming because she has a pool. (Lauren, Interview Study)

In addition, Ashley described that she engaged in fitness related physical activities with her friends.

I go with my friends to workout at the gym, so, go on the treadmill and stuff, but I normally like to participate in group activities where I can just hang out with my friends and then exercising doesn't become a chore really, it's just something that you enjoy doing. (Ashley, Interview Study)

Sedentary activity. Several of the girls from a variety of backgrounds described engagement in sedentary activities with their friends such as watching movies and getting together at friends’ homes.
You have more freedom as you get older, so we can go to the mall and go to the movies and stuff like that...When you’re little you just play tag, you don’t do that much. (Lauren, Interview Study)

Before it was like the girl goes out to play sports with the guys kind of thing or whatever, but now, like, I will hang out with guys and like talk or watch movies and stuff. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

My friends will go out at night or something and… just a few parties...like, just little things like going to the karaoke place or something. (Hazel, Interview Study)

**Peer Experiences in Adolescence Summary.** Peer experiences throughout adolescence revealed increased feelings of judgment and reduced comfort. With respect to the first theme, ‘Acceptance of Different Social Positions to Rejection of Different Social Positions’, a few girls described decreased appearance related concerns when engaged in physical activities with their female peers. However at the same time, many of the adolescent girls reported how gender ideals linked with feminine appearance and prejudicial stereotypes were disruptive. Regarding the second major theme, ‘Physical Activity to Sedentary Activity’, the girls described that they were engaged in more leisure-based activities or fitness related activities with peers. At the same time many girls described increased engagement in more sedentary activities such as watching movies and socializing. Overall, participants described that gender norms related to appearance, disrupted girls’ ability to engage in physical activities.
Peer Experiences Chapter Summary

The core category ‘Peer Experiences’ included two thematic continuum categories, ‘Acceptance of Different Social Positions to Rejection of Different Social Positions’ and ‘Physical Activity to Sedentary Activity’ depicting facilitators to barriers to engagement with physical activities. In addition, these thematic categories were documented across age groups (childhood, tweens, early adolescence, and adolescence).

Childhood. The girls’ childhood narratives revealed that the majority of girls had the freedom to play with both genders (‘Acceptance of Different Social Positions’). However there were some rare instances in which some girls from non-White ethnocultural groups reported experiences of exclusion and teasing and a couple girls recognized male privilege (‘Rejection of Different Social Positions’). In addition, most girls reported engagement with diverse physical activities (‘Physical Activity’), with one girl reporting that her female peers engaged in more sedentary activities (‘Sedentary Activity’).

Tweens. The girls during this age depicted a time of increased peer pressure related to normative gender roles and a shift towards the barrier side of the spectrum. Generally, girls who remained physically active faced social consequences and other girls described increased management of their behaviours in order to gain social approval (‘Rejection of Different Social Positions’). In addition, many girls described a shift towards more sedentary activities such as sitting and talking amongst their female peer groups (‘Sedentary Activity’).

Early Adolescence. Throughout early adolescence the girls’ experiences continued to remain on the barrier side of the spectrum. The early adolescent responses revealed social barriers to
include restrictive gender norms and ethnocultural/racial insensitivity (‘Rejection of Different Social Positions’). In addition, some girls reported mixed feelings towards girls’ reduced involvement in sports (‘Physical Activity’). At the same time, many girls described an aversion to increased competitiveness in sports and physical activities (‘Sedentary Activity’).

**Adolescence.** Throughout adolescence the girls described disruptive peer related experiences influencing their engagement with physical activities. The girls’ descriptions revealed how gender ideals and prejudicial stereotypes were disruptive (‘Rejection of Different Social Positions’). In addition, many of the girls described that they engaged in more leisure-based or fitness related activities with peers (‘Physical Activity’) but spent the majority of their time involved in sedentary activities (‘Sedentary Activity’).
CHAPTER SEVEN

Embodied Experiences of Physicality

‘Embodied Experiences of Physicality’ is the fourth of four core categories in girls’ engagement in physical activities. It referred to the girls’ experience of living in and through their bodies in relation to physical activity. ‘Embodied Experiences of Physicality’ included participants’ statements about how they felt about their bodies in relation to physicality, the degree to which they were concerned about their physical appearances while active, statements about their sense of self in relation to being active, and their descriptions of differential treatment based on social markers such as gender, ethnocultural/racial heritage and socioeconomic background. The narratives included in the core category ‘Embodied Experiences of Physicality’ were divided into two major thematic continuums: ‘Body Immersion and Empowerment to Body Objectification’ and ‘Comfort to Beauty.’

The first thematic continuum, ‘Body Immersion and Empowerment to Body Objectification’ related to the girls’ physical activity experiences characterized by cognitive processes such as positive emotion versus a focus on the body’s external appearance. The second thematic continuum, ‘Comfort to Beauty’ related the girls’ body based practices such as dressing for comfort and minimal management of their physical appearance versus body based practices that impede movement such as wearing restrictive clothing or disproportionate focus on physical appearance.

Throughout the chapter, the two major thematic continuums were described separately for each of the four age groups (childhood, tweens, early adolescence, and adolescence) in order to document changes across time.

A diagram illustrating the core category and its major themes can be seen in Figure 4. Each major theme has several themes, which are described in the text.
Fig. 4. Major themes of the Embodied Experiences of Physicality Core Category

**Childhood (Preschool to Grade Three)**

**Body immersion and empowerment to body objectification during childhood.**

The first major theme depicted a time when physical engagement was characterized as spontaneous, creative, and fun.

**Body immersion and empowerment.** Girls from a variety of backgrounds described that they did not care about what they looked like but rather focused on what they were doing. Many of the accounts portrayed passionate immersion and engagement through unorganized spontaneous forms of play.

*(Okay, so would you describe at that age that you didn’t really think about your body?)* I didn’t care (laughter). I used to wear mismatching socks like I didn’t care what I looked like, anything like that I was like oh let’s play tag, only tag, I didn’t care. (Lauren, Interview Study)
(It sounds like then you guys spent a lot of time outside winter, summer, were you aware of you know anything about your body at that time?) I don’t think so. I think like - I think I ran around naked all the time I think so, with rubber boots on ...I don’t know just kind of wild. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

I remember being young and playing tag and being faster than everybody. (Ahh so how did that make you feel to be faster than everybody?) It felt good. (Scorch Willow, Focus Group Study)

You’re just throwing the ball around or playing tag and it is kind of all just fun. (Jane, Focus Group Study)

**Body objectification.** At the same time a few girls from a variety of backgrounds described feeling self-conscious. For example, Hazel described that she experienced weight-based teasing as a child.

I was always teased a little bit because I was chubbier than most...sometimes it really hurts... And I was like, ‘ouch, guys. I could say things about you but I’m not’...You know it hurt when somebody talks about you behind their back. (Hazel, Interview Study)

In addition, Erica described a desire to be covered for her own level of comfort while engaged in physical activities.
When I do cartwheels and flips and stuff I go upside down, I tuck my shirt so it doesn’t go flying up...yeah I wish I had a tight shirt on when I do gymnastics. (Erica, Interview Study)

Alice described an unpleasant experience of witnessing her friend’s body being violated by their male peers and the discomfort that she felt.

What happened was my friend she had a hole in her underpants and she didn’t know it and she was wearing a dress...And then the boys started going like this under [the monkey bars] and it was icky. (Alice, Interview Study)

**Comfort to beauty during childhood.** The majority of girls from a variety of backgrounds described freedom to get messy and dirty while immersed in physical play.

**Comfort.** During childhood all of the participants described a time when their clothing filled a utilitarian purpose rather than an aesthetic role. The clothes they wore were comfortable and allowed for physical movement.

You know I’m not that old but when I look at it now, little girls are more sexed up than they used to be...at my age I was wearing grotesque things...like the 80s okay? But I didn’t care because I was having fun playing...in the dirt...I just wore whatever I found in my closet that was clean, go to school, play with friends...everything was so simple. (Hazel, Interview Study)
Hazel is critical of the sexualization of young girls as she described how she was given the opportunity to have fun and get dirty versus worrying about her physical appearance. Other participants such as Scorch Willow and Lauren described having similar freedom in their bodies.

I just wore whatever I wanted. Sometimes I wore my pajamas. (Scorch Willow, Focus Group Study)

I was always very hard on my clothes...the knees were always worn out (laughter) patches on the knees...there you are falling on the grass, getting up there’d be grass stains and everything, all over everything. I wear my brother’s clothes a lot, I wear his stuff, I wear his baggy t-shirts and stuff I don’t know I just like to be comfortable, I didn’t care. (Lauren, Interview Study)

**Beauty.** While all of the girls reported the freedom to wear comfortable clothing, a few described that they had to negotiate their clothing choices with their mothers in order to have a greater sense of agency and control.

I didn’t like to wear dresses as much just cause we’d be running around and I’d be a lot more active, so it was more cumbersome, but things like pants and shorts, those were a little bit better for playing outside...Like we’d [Ashley and her mother] pick out clothes the night before and so she’d say okay, well this is what I laid out for you. Do you want to wear it? I’d be like okay, well I know tomorrow we have gym class. (Ashley, Interview Study)
My mom dressed me till grade one and she made me wear dresses and I hated it, we had a jungle gym right so you’re playing tag and then you know you’d be running up the stairs and stuff and it was a pain cause you’re wearing a dress and it’s difficult to run in and I used to fight with my mom in the morning, ‘no I’m not wearing it.’ I remember that very well cause in grade one it was like two days of the week I got to pick what I wore (laughter) and then after that-that only went on for about a month and then after that I got to pick what I wore but my mom had to approve it and I guess no more dresses. (Lauren, Interview Study)

Ashley and Lauren’s narratives are important to highlight because they revealed the essential role their mothers played in supporting them to remain physically active.

**Embodied Experiences of Physicality in Childhood Summary.** With respect to the first major theme, ‘Body Immersion and Empowerment to Body Objectification,’ the girls described physical activity to be fun with only a few participants alluding to experiences of objectification related to weight and exposure. Regarding the second major theme, ‘Comfort to Beauty’ the girls’ experiences revealed their resistance against wearing restrictive clothing and their ability to negotiate clothing choices that allowed them to feel comfortable when active.

**Tweens (Grade Four to Six)**

*Body immersion and empowerment to body objectification during the tweens’ phase.*
**Body immersion and empowerment.** All of the participants who engaged in organized sports through league and school teams described experiences of feeling “happy”, “confident”, and “strong” when they engaged in physical activities.

*(How do you feel in your body when you’re playing sports?)* Good. I feel like I can, my body knows what it’s doing sort of...I feel very confident...I like that I like sports...I don’t know how people can live without sports...cause if I didn’t have sports like what would I do? (Erica, Interview Study)

I like being strong because you can do more soccer games, You can scare the guys because the guys are always the strong ones…I feel that the guys think they have a better role in life but you should try-if you’re a girl you should try to prove them wrong on that. (Jackie, Interview Study)

These narratives revealed how sports provided girls with a sense of agency in their bodies as well as the confidence to criticize dominant gender norms. In addition, several girls from diverse backgrounds also described a sense of pride and functionality in their bodies.

When I got my first goal...I remember running up and the goalie went that way and then my friend tripped her and I kicked it in. I was so happy...I felt really good. Like I felt I something right. It was really good. It was the winning goal. (Alice, Interview Study)
A couple of years ago, grade five my team won provincials and I was really happy. *(And if your body could talk what would it say?)* This is awesome! (Scorch Willow, Focus Group Study)

**Body objectification.** At the same time, most of the girls’ accounts described increased objectification. As a result these experiences were broken down into the following higher order themes: ‘Self-consciousness related to pubertal changes’, ‘Self-consciousness related to the body’, and ‘Weight and shape preoccupation.’

*Self-consciousness related to pubertal changes.* A few girls from a variety of backgrounds described increased insecurities related to puberty such as awareness of chest movement, perspiration, and comparing one’s development to their peers.

It’s hard when you’re running. When you bash into someone you get really hurt from your chest because it bashes, plus when you’re running they move, like it just moves a lot so it’s kind of hard. That’s why you have to wear a sports bra so they won’t move. (Alice, Interview Study)

I feel that I sweat more than I did when I was little… I do use deodorant cause I’m more sweaty and I do sweat. Unlike the other girls where they just stand around and they don’t sweat, they smile all day. (Jackie, Interview Study)

I wasn’t very developed or anything … as I got older I was kind of like ‘oh I wish that it would happen’ but I never really thought about it too much just I wasn’t that developed, I didn’t have the pretty image, I like to run around so I’d sweat or gross or
play in the mud or something, I didn’t care, like those girls didn’t do that they always looked perfect. (Lauren, Interview Study)

While Lauren and Jackie stayed active, they also observed that many girls disengaged from physical activity during the tween years.

*Self-consciousness related to the body.* The tween narratives revealed increased feelings of shame related to physical appearance. All but one of the girls who described feeling embarrassed by their body hair belonged to non-White ethnocultural groups (i.e. Aboriginal and Métis heritages) and perceived their dark hair to be “gross” and “dirty.”

People notice it a lot and say things that you don’t like, like, ‘god you’re hairy, are you an ape?’ *(What do you think your body is saying when you’ve been teased? Like when you were being teased for having hair on your legs what would your body have been saying then?)* I should have never got hair on my leg. I should have waited. Darn me, I’m now gonna cover up the legs...should have worn pants. (Alice, Interview Study)

The hair on my legs…they look like a forest…my stepsister, she always says to me, ‘gee don’t you shave.’ No I’m waiting until my mom can teach me how to wax so I never have to worry about it again. I don’t care how much it hurts. (Jackie, Interview Study)

I think when people say that stuff it does burn into your brain and you cannot get it out. One kid in grade six said I had a unibrow on the first day and I became really
self-conscious ever since then. It is like on repeat all the time. (Addison, Focus Group Study)

Many of the girls described increased shame related to body-based teasing by their peers. Both Jackie and Alice’s narratives revealed a degree of self-blame and as a consequence they describe getting rid of their hair whether it be through covering of their legs or engaging in painful hair removal practices. In addition, Addison’s response revealed the pervasive nature of body-based criticism as she described internalizing her peer’s negative statement.

*Weight and shape preoccupation.* Throughout tweens, another theme emerged related to the girls’ increased weight and shape preoccupations. Two girls both from non-White ethnocultural backgrounds (i.e. African-Canadian and Aboriginal heritages) described that they engaged in food restriction and exercise in order to be “skinny.”

When I was getting a little bit older and I was doing gymnastics, because like when you’re doing gymnastics it’s really important that you’re light and things like that...so I bring myself down if I’m not the proper weight, if I’m not the proper muscle versus fat composition...so I’d have smaller things, not so I’m starving or anything like that but just knowing when to eat and what to eat and things like that. (Ashley, Interview Study)

For many girls in elite lean sports there is increased pressure as their bodies begin to develop. Ashley’s narratives revealed how she began to monitor and restrict her food intake instead of listening to internal cues of satiety.
In addition, Jackie described experiences of food restriction in order to fit into her “favourite” pants suggesting that her less privileged economic background resulted in her inability to afford a new pair of pants that would accommodate her changing body.

(What didn’t you like about your body?) I was chubby, really chubby...People would tease me...They always talked behind my back and say how fat I was and stuff… I couldn’t fit into one of my favourite pairs of pants. That was when I was ten so now I’m not eating as much. So I eat less. It took me about four months to go from 110 pound to 92. (So that was important to you to lose weight?) Yeah because it was the pair of pants and I had a dance and it was like, and then it like oh God, I have to fit into these pants. (Jackie, Interview Study)

Like many of the girls, Erica also disclosed her fear of gaining weight as she gets older and admitted that it is “scary” to consider how she plans to engage in multiple body disciplining practices (i.e. excessive exercise and food restriction).

(Do you worry about if, what would happen if your body gained weight when you got older... what came to your head?) I saw myself really, trying to be very, very skinny. (And what did you see yourself doing?) A lot of exercising... Eating celery...Kinda scary. (Erica, Interview Study)

**Comfort to beauty during the tweens’ phase.** Throughout the tweens, many girls from a variety of backgrounds described continuing to wear nonrestrictive clothing.
Comfort. The girls described choosing comfort over fashion and wearing clothing that encouraged their engagement with physical activity whether it was pants, shorts, or a sports bra.

I bought boys’ pants and shorts because shorts started getting really short…I don’t like my butt sticking out of the side. (Lauren, Interview Study)

I’m in net and I have to dive for the ball and it really hurts my chest with a sports bra it doesn’t hurt that much. (Alice, Interview Study)

(How do you think girls should dress?) Well I think they should dress the way they want to um, I personally say something that they can, so they can spread their legs apart, like pants, shorts, capris or something that doesn’t show that much skin, well other than long skirts...Yeah climb without people...you can go on the monkey bars and you can slide down without having to put your legs together, you could sit more comfortably. (Erica, Interview Study)

Beauty. While most of the girls described wearing comfortable loose clothing, two girls both from non-White ethnocultural groups described wearing clothing that was ill fitting and encouragement to engage in hair removal practices.

When I’m playing in the water sometimes my bathing suit when I dive in goes down because it’s really small on me plus I’m changing a lot so it hard for it to stay up…and then my friends would laugh... We do dives in the water and I’m
wearing a bikini, my bathing suit bottom would almost come off, and my top would always come off so it got hard. (Alice, Interview Study)

Jackie a girl from Métis heritage described encouragement from her father to engage in hair removing practices.

I love skirts but I can’t wear them because I have big, huge hairy legs…And my dad tries to get me to shave them like because he got me a shaver, like a razor and put it in my stocking and I gave it to my step sister. (How come he wants you to shave them?) I don’t know. He’s just weird. (Jackie, Interview Study)

**Embodied Experiences of Physicality in Tweens Summary.** Tweens depicted a time of increased social pressures related to physical appearance causing disruption to many of the girls’ positive connection to their bodies. With respect to ‘Body Immersion and Empowerment to Body Objectification’, the narratives revealed that active girls experienced empowerment and reassurance in their bodies. At the same time all of the girls described increased self-consciousness related to pubertal changes, the body, or weight and shape preoccupations. ‘Comfort to Beauty’ revealed that the majority of girls continued to wear clothes that allowed them to engage in physical activities. However one girl from a non-White ethnocultural background described encouragement to engage in hair removal practices.
Early Adolescence (Grade Seven to Eight)

**Body immersion and empowerment to body objectification in early adolescence.**

Throughout early adolescence, all but one of the girls that described positive experiences while engaged in physical activities came from privileged economic backgrounds.

**Body immersion and empowerment.** All of the girls that described positive experiences were involved in organized competitive physical activities.

Well it is still fun but there is a little more pressure which make it fun cause I don’t know how to explain it but it is fun. I love it! I play on the rep volleyball team.  
(Monica, Focus Group Study)

Well I am a figure skater and I started skating when I was eight and I like that sport and I do well. So I just have been skating a lot than usual which is good…. it is just fun. It is still fun but more competitive. (Rose, Focus Group Study)

Yes, I used weightlifting in the summer. I was like Monday, Wednesday and Thursday we would lift for like an hour and a half. We did snatches and dead lifts, squats and stuff. It was great cause I feel strong. (Scorch Willow, Focus Group Study)

**Body objectification.** At the same time the majority of the girls described increased objectification. Three higher-level themes emerged and included: ‘Self-consciousness related to pubertal changes’, ‘Self-consciousness related to the body’ and ‘Weight and shape preoccupation.’
Self-consciousness related to pubertal changes. In early adolescence, many of the girls from a variety of backgrounds described how they perceived pubertal changes to affect their ability to engage in physical activities.

Swimming for a while, cause I was like I don’t want to go there with a tampon, so for a while it was just like do you want to go to the pool? Not today. Let’s see three, four more days and then we can talk about it, things like that. But with all my other activities it wasn’t really a big deal. (Ashley, Interview Study)

Like many girls, Ashley described a fear of swimming when menstruating, a common myth that could be easily dispelled with proper education and support. For Lauren, the onset of menarche was experienced as an extremely disruptive experience as she felt that it restricted her freedom in the world.

Umm, getting my period sucked, it sucked…. It hurt sports and stuff cause then it’d be like if you’re having a bad day, you’re not feeling so well, it’s like huh I have a soccer game, huh hockey or something so you have that really stop that, I hate that…. cause before it’d have been I can do what I want when I want to there was nothing really restrict me in that way but now – but then after it happened I was like huh, I hate it, I hate it. I use to cry sometimes cause I felt bad and stuff. (Lauren, Interview Study)

Hazel’s narrative revealed how her public pools’ lack of cultural sensitivity caused disruption in her ability to enjoy her loved activity.
I haven’t gone to swim in a while because I can’t really take this [hijab] off in a public pool... So, um, right now the community’s working on women’s only swimming... So I’m hoping... So, yeah. I used to swim a lot. I love swimming actually. (Hazel, Interview Study)

In addition, perspiration was identified as another pubertal change that resulted in reduced engagement with physical activities. The majority of girls described how sweating disrupted their ability to be physically active and described perspiration to be “smelly,” “gross,” and “disgusting.”

I don’t think in our gym class. We don’t do anything or really work to sweat... No one likes sweating. (Mary, Focus Group Study)

A lot of times in gym when we’re like doing running ... I worry about sweating, cause like I absolutely hate sweating. I think it’s so gross... And boys they’re like meant to sweat.... boys are more like sports players and then they get like sweaty... I sweat, and I try to avoid it... But if it’s in the matter of grade, lowered grades, then I worry about it after... boys, they look like they’re having so much fun, like, they don’t care what they look like.... And then, when girls, they wanna play or something, and it’s, like... they look so stiff trying not to try as hard, stuff like that... If I didn’t sweat, I’d be playing sports, like, every day... I love sports! (Erica, Girl’s Study)
Erica’s narrative is important because it showed how gender socialization related to perspiration resulted in her decreased participation in physical education class. She later went on to explain that there is a double standard in which there are more images of boys sweating and playing sports than girls. As a result she believed that only boys are afforded the freedom to sweat, have fun, and not worry about their appearances.

*Self-consciousness related to the body.* Several of the girls from privileged racial backgrounds (i.e. White Anglo-Canadian heritage) described increased self-consciousness related to their physical appearances. For example, Lauren expressed her anger with the many limitations she attributed to being a girl.

*(How did it make you feel about being a girl?)* I wanted to be a boy more than I have ever in my entire life... I thought that I was, I wish I was a boy then I wouldn’t have hair you know I wish I was a boy cause then I could wear what I want to, that was when I was like, I want to be a boy. That was the biggest thing...Where I thought you know, just then I wouldn’t have to deal with my hair, something like - still, yes but then that was the big part where I was like I wish I was not me (laughter).

*(Absolutely, you were crying about it when you thought that... how does that make you feel about your body?)* I hated it! (Lauren, Interview Study)

Lauren’s narrative demonstrated how gender based norms can cause girls to feel limited and helpless in the face of dominant feminine ideals related to hair and clothing. At the same time, Spiderwort resisted external pressures to change her body.
Some people may not want to be more muscular because sometimes if you are more muscular it will show and you can see that there is more strength in your arms and then some people will say, ‘oh you’re too muscular,’ but if you are not very strong people will say, ‘oh you’re weak.’ So I think it is okay to be whatever you are and you get to decide who you want to be. You get to live your life the way you want to live it and people shouldn’t be controlling you or calling you stuff because it makes you feel not so good about yourself. (Spiderwort, Focus Group Study)

While Spiderwort recognized that others’ might try to control her behaviour she felt the freedom to do what feels right for her. In addition, Bronwen described how she recognized a difference in her state of embodiment depending on her emotional experience. Here she linked depressed mood with increased self-consciousness and sensitivity towards others’ judgments.

I don’t care about like what I look like and my body or whatever. When I’m feeling really when I’m really happy, but when I’m kind of sad or whatever I do care...I feel self-conscious and I’m worried about what other people are going to think about me. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

*Weight and shape preoccupation.* Throughout early adolescence, many of the girls from diverse backgrounds reported increased concerns related to their weight and shape. Notably three girls from Aboriginal and Métis heritages described how criticisms from their peers negatively affected their connection to their bodies. For example, Jackie who was teased in her tweens continued to describe weight and shape preoccupation.
(How come it was scary?) It was just like girls aren’t supposed to have bigger abs like guys; like you see guys with six packs but you see girls very rarely that has abs at all...But I still have a little bit of a two pack...I liked having a lot of muscles just not those kind...I still do sit-ups and stuff when I’m alone, make sure I don’t gain weight. (Jackie, Interview Study)

In addition, both Taylor and Alice described instances of weight and shape based teasing by peers.

I am embarrassed to say but most of the comments boys make are on your butt and chest area like the parts they don’t have. They will like tease you kind of. They will look there and laugh and you feel awkward or they will make stupid comments. (Taylor, Focus Group Study)

My best friend she says, ‘You have the biggest butt in the world. Seriously, like save some room in the hallway for me, like, really...like, seriously, your boobs have to shrink just a little bit.’ (Alice, Interview Study)

Similarly, Addison, a girl from a privileged racial and economic background encountered weight-based teasing from a friend.

He said I was anorexic and I am not. It really hurt my feelings and I just pretended I wasn’t hurt. No one has the right to go up to someone just cause they are skinny and
call them anorexic. When my friend said I look anorexic I remember hiding my stomach and I remember pretending it was funny but it wasn’t funny at all. When people say that kind of thing you just feel like you want to leave and it just pauses the whole world.... I think when people say that stuff it does burn into your brain and you cannot get it out. (Addison, Focus Group Study)

**Comfort to beauty during early adolescence.**

*Comfort.* A few self-identified athletic girls from privilege economic backgrounds described freedom to prioritize comfortable clothing over stylish clothing.

I usually wear what I want to wear depending on whether it is comfy...I never wear make-up and I don’t do anything to my hair. It is always in a ponytail. I don’t wear dresses or skirts and haven’t for like six years. (Scorch Willow, Focus Group Study)

In contrast to many of her peers, Scorch Willow described a freedom to continue to wear comfortable clothing and reported her non-adherence to feminine ideals with a level of pride.

I think some people say on picture day. We had gym right before our pictures and some of the girls didn’t play because they didn’t want to mess up their hair. So they wouldn’t do gym because of that. I honestly didn’t care because I don’t care how my hair looks. I don’t wear make-up or anything. (Spiderwort, Focus Group Study)
While Spiderwort recognized that her peers disengaged from physical activity in order to conform to feminine appearance norms for picture day, she did not feel the need to restrict her own body.

When I play sports I pin my hair, I don’t care, cause that’s when I turn into look my jock mode. (Alice, Interview Study)

The small group of the girls that resisted pressures to conform to feminine appearance ideals all came from privileged economic backgrounds and participated in numerous physical activities suggesting that their privilege and level of engagement with physical activities may have provided some level of protection against restrictive gender norms.

**Beauty.** Higher level themes that emerged included: ‘Balancing comfort with fashion’ and ‘Body-based practices.’

*Balancing comfort with fashion.* Many girls from a variety of backgrounds described how they balanced the social pressure to “look good” and their desire to feel comfortable by combining “tighter” clothing with more “comfortable” clothing.

I usually wear like jeans and sweats and sometimes like tights. (*How about for your feet, what kinds of shoes do you like to wear?*) Runners or flats...Umm usually when I wear high heels it feels weird...it hurts my feet. (*Ah are there ever times that you dress uncomfortably at school, like you’re kind of at school and you’re like, ‘oh, I*
Erica described how she consciously managed the constraints between “looking good” and the desire to be comfortable by selecting one piece of clothing for comfort and another piece that was fashionable. Similarly, Lauren described a transition between “baggy” to “tighter” clothing.

I must have changed a little the summer of between grade six and seven was more when I started wearing tight clothes and looking after my hair...I was definitely self-conscious... it wasn’t like a sudden thing like one day I just wore tight clothes it was like a thing that kind of happened like I’d wear tight shirt and my baggy shorts and its just kind of, I don’t know it happened gradually and at a level and no one ever really said anything to me about it. (Lauren, Interview Study)

Lauren described the gradual shift towards tighter clothing. Unfortunately from her narrative it is unclear the reason behind her transition to wear tighter clothing. In addition, Alice revealed how peer criticism was one reason girls relinquish their right to wear comfortable clothing.

I made the mistake once and my friend's just like, ‘oh my God, go change now. It's like you're wearing runners, that's totally geeky.’ I'm just like oh my God, so I had to
run back to my locker and put on my boots. And that was the fashion too, like wearing jeans with high boots. (Alice, Interview Study)

*Body-based practices.* In addition to increased focus on tight and fashionable clothing, a few girls with from privileged racial backgrounds (i.e. White Anglo-Canadian heritage) described encouragement to engage in body disciplining practices related to make-up and hair styling.

I remember it because the end of grade eight was again you’re graduating again so you’re going to high school so it’s a big thing and for like the ceremony we had – my mom said okay I’m gonna put make up on you and I remember saying oh they’re coming at me with the mascara and I was like I couldn’t hold my eyes open, it was terrible. It took them like an hour to get the stuff on me because I kept blinking and going like that backing away and even though I tried not I feel like oh it was so bad and I don’t know I just started putting eyeliner on myself. (Lauren, Interview Study)

Interestingly, despite Lauren’s “terrible” introduction to make up, shortly afterward she adopted the practice independently. Similarly Bronwen is encouraged to cover her fair skin by her father.

But, what really bothers me is that his [Bronwen’s father’s] sister had fair skin too, but it was always the thing where she would wear makeup, like it’s in the whole family kind of suggesting that, and so he does that, and that really irritates me that he
would tell me that I should wear makeup or something because my skin is fair.

(Bronwen, Interview Study)

Finally, Erica disclosed that she was “obsessive” about her hair and speculated that she learned that her hair had to be “perfect” from her mother.

I’m so obsessive about it [hair] it has to be perfect…. when I have sports and I’m playing sports, its usually like I pin it up and then wear a headband…I think I’d learned it from my mom because her hair is always perfect, always looks good.

(Erica, Interview Study)

**Embodied Experiences of Physicality in Early Adolescence Summary.** Early adolescence depicted a time of pervasive and intensified disruption to the girls’ sense of connection to their bodies. ‘Body Immersion and Empowerment to Body Objectification,’ revealed that girls involved in organized activities continued to experience immersion and empowerment.

At the same time, most of the girls described increased self-consciousness related to pubertal changes, their bodies’ appearance, as well as increased weight and shape preoccupations. Regarding, ‘Comfort to Beauty’ the girls from privileged economic backgrounds described their ability to continue to dress for comfort. Alternatively the majority of the girls described a balancing act between tight and looser fitting clothing as well as beginning to wear make-up and style their hair.
Adolescence (Grade Nine to Twelve)

Body immersion and empowerment to body objectification during adolescence. Similar to early adolescence, few girls described instances of empowerment and immersion.

Body immersion and empowerment. Throughout adolescence, girls who self-identified as athletic and were from privileged economic backgrounds reported experiences of immersion and passion while engaged in organized sports.

I love the feeling of being fit. Like that’s amazing. And I love running.... like when you’re fit you feel like you’re...like you’re able to kind of take on the world...you’re just-you’re able to cope with everything. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

Bronwen explained that being “fit” allowed her not only to feel good about herself but also was a powerful tool to cope with stress.

When I was not doing sports or something I felt it in my body, like I was always tired and I felt lazy and I didn’t have any energy to do anything at all, and I didn’t feel good about myself in general. And when I was active I was like you know what, I can take on the world. And I had lots of energy. So I think that is something that is fun to do at the same time it’s really good for me so. (Ashley, Interview Study)

Ashley describes experiencing increased energy and increased self-confidence. Whereas, Lauren described full immersion and a sense of competence when she played soccer.
Anytime I play soccer I’m happy because soccer is something that I’m pretty good at so then you’re confident of course and it’s just easy and you’re not really thinking about anything else because your focus is on where the ball is that’s how it goes, you’re running and you’re not really thinking about anything else. (Lauren, Interview Study)

**Body Objectification.** Throughout adolescence the majority of girls’ narratives related to weight and shape concerns.

*Weight and shape preoccupation.* Many of the girls from a variety of backgrounds described continued preoccupation with their weight and shape.

You can run faster when you are thinner, like That’s just—and rowing—there is like the weight categories for that, so That’s something too—that’s always in the back of your mind… (*What do you think you might be doing if you weren’t spending that energy and time thinking about weight or calories?*) Enjoying it more…. like enjoying rowing, enjoying food more… I am embarrassed by the fact that it bothers me I think grade nine- I think I gained like 20 pounds in a space of a like a month or two or something ridiculous and I totally, totally flipped out…that was probably one of the darkest moments in my life because I barely ate anything for like a month and I lost 20 pounds… I was starving all the time… I get really hard on myself. (Long sigh) I am so obsessive. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

Bronwen described how she believed her weight to impact her athletic performance and felt “embarrassed” that her weight was a concern to her. Additionally, Lauren
normalized the objectification of her stomach and disclosed that her motivation to engage in physical activities related to weight maintenance.

Everyone has something I think that they don’t like about their body. Like I know I have a little of like, flab, like right around my stomach, and like I know it’s there and I have tried sit ups galore, like I can do sit ups like nobody’s business and I have done them and it has not done anything...like part of my motivation to take sports and to play them is to lose, like, or not lose weight necessarily, but maintain weight. (Lauren, Interview Study)

A few other participants described feeling uncomfortable in their bodies after gaining weight.

I was going back to school in a couple of weeks, it was like oh I don’t want to go back to school looking like this. You know I feel so grubby and things like that. I just feel like I haven’t been doing anything. I’m not active at all. So it’s like you know what, I should probably being doing some activities or watching what I’m eating. So I tried that and realized that you can’t really lose a ton of weight in like a week period. (Ashley, Interview Study)

Right now when I look at myself, I mean, I have my ups and downs...because I have been exercising a lot lately cause; you know health and stuff mainly. But you know, I look at myself and it like, ‘ah I feel chubby today.’ (Hazel, Interview Study)
Comfort to beauty during adolescence. Throughout adolescence the girls’ accounts revealed a focus on beauty.

Comfort. Bronwen, an athletic girl from privileged economic and ethnocultural/racial background pointed the “sexist” double standard of clothing expectations between girls and boys. She described that she felt that she looked “good” wearing her school uniform.

I think, like, if you stop and analyze it, I guess clothes are kind of sexist. You know, that it’s acceptable for guys to wear baggy clothes, and girls to wear tight clothes... But I don’t normally stop and analyze that. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

Beauty. Several girls from a variety of backgrounds described that they prioritized beauty over comfort. For example, Ashley described how girls eventually “embrace” feminine appearance norms.

It’s just a natural change occurs. And so, I think people get tired of trying to fight with it and they just like embrace it... At this point every like all girls are pretty much like a girly girl, I don’t see a lot of “tomboys” I can’t even off the top of my head think of a girl that dresses like a guy that much in my grade, I can’t think of one. (Ashley, Interview Study)

Similarly, both Bronwen and Lauren described feeling more “comfortable” wearing tighter clothing.
(Do you feel comfortable now in tighter clothes?) (Laughs) Yeah. (And that’s a change, isn’t it?) Yeah (Bronwen, Interview Study)

Now, like I'll wear tight jeans or whatever but I can't wear still, tight shirts, like, this is loose…but I do wear tighter clothes, like occasionally…I guess I'm a little more comfortable with that now…. (And why do you think it is that, um, girls are pressured to dress in tight clothes whereas boys it stays baggy?) Hmm, I don't know. Um, girls' bodies are objectified and guys' aren't 'cause girls don't care about that half as much (Laughs). (Lauren, Interview Study)

In addition Bronwen, Lauren, and Jackie described that they wore make-up and felt “exposed” when they did not wear it.

If I was going to school without make-up I would feel very exposed because I-like this sounds horribly cocky but I know that people think I’m pretty-I think I’ve heard that, it’s just something I hear so you know, me being-not having make up, I guess it kind of feels like, almost, that is what I present to the world. Which, it sounds extraordinarily unhealthy and it probably is, but it doesn’t bother me a whole lot. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

Similarly, Lauren and Jackie described experiencing discomfort when not wearing make-up.
I went through a phase with makeup…I went through a phase where I would wear like eyeliner every day, and that was like Grade ten, I think where I did start wearing eyeliner and then it, you became like, if I didn't wear it one day, you wouldn't, you'd look like you were, I don't know, sick or something. (Lauren, Interview Study)

*(Do you feel differently if you're not wearing makeup?)* Yeah! I feel terrible about myself when I'm not. It's like, 'oh no!' *(What's different for you?)* I don't know, I just don't feel as comfortable, like, I feel like it's a part of me now, I guess. I always wear makeup. (Jackie, Interview Study)

In addition, a couple girls spoke about hair removal practices. Hazel described removing her facial hair and explained how Canadian and Islamic cultures both view female bodily hair as either unattractive or unhygienic.

She [Hazel’s mother] sugars my lip and then it starts getting hairy cause I have such dark hair…Yah it's awful, cause it's dark and it shows a little bit. On my arms not so much, but everywhere else it's terrible. It angers me…Islam is very focused on cleanliness, so having everything you know, sugared up or shaved off and everything it's better for you hygienically, so that's why we're supposed to do that. But the other aspect, the Canadian aspect it's just like, you'll look better without all your hair. Go for a bikini wax… but personally I do it mostly for hygiene cause who wants to be all gross and hairy. (Hazel, Interview Study)

Bronwen also described a preference for her legs to be hairless.
I like it when my legs are smooth. *(And how do you feel when they're not smooth?)* Ah, well, it just- it’s prickly and irritating and….Yeah, it’s funny ‘cause I mean it’s one of those things that you do just ‘cause everyone else does it, but then it becomes something that even if no one else did it, that you’d probably still do it. (Bronwen, Interview Study)

**Embodied Experiences of Physicality in Adolescence Summary.** Adolescence depicted a time when the girls continued to experience disruptive experiences related to positive connection to their bodies. ‘Body Immersion and Empowerment to Body Objectification,’ revealed only a few athletic girls reported positive experiences related to physical activity. At the same time several girls described increased experiences of weight and shape preoccupation. Regarding the second major theme, ‘Comfort to Beauty’, and several girls described wearing tighter clothing and engagement with body disciplining practices such as wearing make-up and hair removal practices.

**Embodied Experiences of Physicality Chapter Summary**

This chapter examined the girls’ experiences of living in and through their bodies in relation to physical activity. ‘Embodied Experiences of Physicality’ was divided into two major thematic continuums: ‘Body Immersion and Empowerment to Body Objectification’ and ‘Comfort to Beauty’ depicting facilitators to engagement with physical activities to barriers to engagement. In addition, these thematic continuums were documented across age groups (childhood, tweens, early adolescence, and adolescence).
**Childhood.** The childhood narratives portrayed passionate engagement with various forms of physical activities (‘Body Immersion and Empowerment’), and the freedom to get messy and dirty in their loose comfortable clothing (‘Comfort’).

**Tweens.** The responses depicted a time of increased social pressures related to physical appearance. The tween narratives revealed that girls who participated in organized sports continued to experience moments of empowerment and reassurance in their bodies (‘Body Immersion and Empowerment’). At the same time the majority of girls described increased self-consciousness related to pubertal changes, the body, or weight and shape preoccupations (‘Body Objectification’). In addition, the girls’ accounts revealed that most of them wore comfortable clothing (‘Comfort’), while two girls from non-White ethnocultural backgrounds described wearing clothing that was ill fitting and encouragement to remove leg hair (Beauty). Overall the girls’ tweens accounts suggested a shift from agency towards objectification of their bodies.

**Early Adolescence.** Generally, early adolescence depicted a time of pervasive and intensified disruption to the girls’ sense of connection to their bodies. Overall the girls described increased self-consciousness related to pubertal changes, their bodies’ appearance, and weight and shape preoccupations (‘Body Objectification’). In addition, a few girls from privileged economic backgrounds continued to wear comfortable clothing (‘Comfort’). Alternatively, the majority of girls described that they balanced between tight and looser fitting clothing as well as beginning to wear make-up and styling their hair (‘Beauty’).


**Adolescence.** Similar to early adolescence, the girls described continued disruptive experiences related to positive connection to their bodies. Self-identified athletic girls reported positive experiences related to physical activities (‘Body Immersion and Empowerment’). At the same time several girls described experiences of weight and shape preoccupation (‘Body Objectification’). One girl criticized the clothing expectations for girls and boys (‘Comfort’), while several girls described wearing tighter clothing, make-up and hair removal practices (‘Beauty’).
DISCUSSION

FROM FACILITATORS TO BARRIERS

The present study sought to investigate the ways in which girls’ physical activity is restricted across time and the complex social and relational contexts that effect this change. The study focused on gaining an understanding of how 20 girls (ages 9–18) have experienced the social forces that work to encourage or restrict their engagement in physical activities and how these relational and sociocultural influences have changed as they grew older.

The girls’ accounts documented through 23 individual interviews and 4 focus group discussions demonstrate the important mediating role that various social systems play in adolescent girls’ engagement in physical activity. Analysis of the participants’ experiences uncovered four core categories relating to the diverse social worlds they occupied and the different ways in which these contexts influenced their level of physical activity: “School Experiences,” “Family Experiences,” “Peer Experiences,” and “Embodied Experiences of Physicality.” The categories revealed how the girls’ immediate environments affected their level of physical activity. In addition to the identification of social contexts that played a key role in girls’ physical activity, the analysis of the girls’ narratives across time (childhood, tweens, early adolescence, and adolescence) further revealed that the barriers and facilitators to girls’ engagement in physical activity within each of these social systems shifted across time from the preponderance of facilitating factors to that of barriers. To date there has been no research that has utilized both a prospective design and focus group discussions to critically examine physical activity in different social domains with a particular focus on the intersection of gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnocultural/racial heritage. The study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the multiple social factors that affect girls’ level of physical activity, in particular its decline. The current study found that there is a
general movement from facilitating factors to barriers over time. To date, the majority of studies have focused either on the study of barriers or on the study of facilitators at a particular point in time. None of the small number of studies that have focused on both (Mason, 1995; Mulvhill et al., 2000; Tuxworth, 1995; Vu et al., 2006) have reported transitions between facilitators and barriers, suggesting that these two dimensions were understood to be static in nature. Consistent with Nagasawa’s (2009) master’s thesis, this study documented the changing nature of both facilitators and barriers. The current study found that the majority of facilitators in all social contexts gradually transformed into barriers and examined points of transformation using a critical lens. A strength of the current study is that it documented social processes across time in four different social domains, which allowed for the identification of a variety of facilitators and barriers. The girls’ narratives revealed how their lives were embedded in the social worlds of school, family, peers, and embodied experiences of physicality, all of which influenced their level of engagement in physical activity and revealed the value of contextualizing their experiences within the larger social context.

The four core categories are discussed in the next four sections with an emphasis on how each social domain changed from facilitator to barrier across time. It is believed that an understanding of this shift could be used to guide health initiatives.

**School Experiences**

The study found that the school environment was, at first, a facilitator of engagement in physical activities for children and increasingly became a barrier starting in the tween years and through to adolescence. The transition from facilitator to barrier can be described along two continuums: “Movement and Confidence to Restriction and Apprehension” and
“Enjoyment to Chore.”

**Movement and Confidence to Restriction and Apprehension**

Examination of the first thematic continuum across time revealed two categories: “Movement and confidence” and “Restriction and apprehension.”

**Movement and confidence.** Positive experiences linked with physical activity at school included having access to schoolyard space, learning new skills in physical education, taking on leadership roles, and participating in team sports. Similarly, Hills’ (2007) research with adolescent girls in the United Kingdom further revealed that acquiring new skills and developing competence through the school environment provided girls with positive experiences of physical activity. Barr-Anderson and colleagues (2008) and Rhea (1998) suggested that schools provide enjoyable activities, skill-enhancing opportunities to build mastery and confidence, and a reinforcing environment that encourages and support adolescent girls’ engagement in physical activities.

The study found that in childhood, the majority of girls were encouraged to engage in physical activities during recess and physical education classes. Unlike previous research, which reported boys to engage in more vigorous physical activity (VPA) than girls across all grade levels through the use of activity monitoring devices (Trost et al., 1999; Sallo et al., 1997), the girls in the current study perceived no differences in their physical activity levels. Trost and colleagues (2001) indicate that there is a minimal gender gap related to girls’ and boys’ moderate vigorous physical activity (MVPA) compared to VPA in childhood. As such the authors claim that previous research may have inflated gender differences related to physical activity levels by focusing on VPA and neglecting to consider MVPA levels between girls and boys.
While the majority of the participants identified changes in their school environments that acted to restrict their engagement in physical activities in early adolescence, there was a minority that continued to experience confidence in their bodies as a result of their continued participation in school-sponsored team sports. Numerous studies have found that adolescent girls who participate in team sports experience increased confidence, feelings of personal fulfillment (Haverly & Davison, 2005; Whitehead & Biddle, 2008; CAAWS, 2009), enhanced academic achievement (Sibley & Etnier, 2003), and are more likely to have positive body image (Miller et al., 2000). However at the same time the research has documented that more than half of adolescent girls do not play team sports (Biddle, et al., 2005). One reason for this is that the majority of adolescent girls prefer non-competitive and non-structured forms of activity (CFLRI, 2004). These findings indicate that existing extracurricular programming is neglecting the preferences of most adolescent girls and as a result an opportunity to foster resilience in a large percentage of youth is being missed.

**Restriction and apprehension.** While the current study found that some girls were able to experience confidence and success through their continued involvement in team sports, the majority of girls in early adolescence described increased experiences of restriction and feelings of apprehension around physical activity at school. Prospective design enabled tracking of the girls’ physical activity experiences over time, which helped to uncover how systemic changes in the school environment shaped their gradual reduction in physical activity as they aged. The experiences of restriction were of several types: “Reduced time devoted to physical activity,” “Restricted physical space,” “Limited opportunities for physical activity,” “Gender insensitivity,” and “Harassment and assault.”

**Reduced time devoted to physical activity.** The study revealed that as girls aged their schools gradually reduced the time devoted to physical activity. The most notable change
occurred during early adolescence: several of the participants reported that at this time lunch hour intramural sports were eliminated and recess time was reduced.

Despite the importance of integrating physical activity throughout the school day, there remains a constant tension between competing academic interests and limited time (MacQuarrie, 2008). Many of the girls recognized that as they aged there was increased academic pressure, which left little free time to engage in physical activities. Research examining the role of school schedules related to physical activity levels amongst students found that less frequent recess breaks negatively affects adolescent girls’ level of physical activity (Kraft, 1989; Myers et al., 1996; Barnett et al., 2006). The current study found that girls from less privileged economic backgrounds were particularly affected by reductions in institutional time devoted to physical activity as they had more limited opportunities to engage in physical activities outside of school. Intramural programs held at lunch hour were especially well suited to meet the girls’ needs as these did not conflict with after-school responsibilities or require additional transportation. A few studies have found that elementary and secondary schools that prioritize physical activity by providing regularly scheduled breaks and structured physical activity programs see improved academic achievement amongst their students (Hartmann, 2008; Stevenson, 2007). This suggests that the development of a school culture that prioritizes physical activity has the potential to increase adolescent girls’ engagement with physical activity and their academic achievement.

**Restricted physical space.** The study found that during the tween years and early adolescence, the girls’ physical space was restricted as a result of boys’ dominance in both the schoolyard and physical education classes. Both the physical space of the schoolyard and physical education classes are important for the current investigation, as these are the two main spaces in which girls engage in physical activity while at school. First, at the tween
level, the girls reported that the boys began to dominate the schoolyard, resulting in little room for the girls to engage in their own physical activities. The transition from equitable sharing to boys’ taking up more of the schoolyard at the onset of puberty was a unique finding made possible by the prospective design of the study. Previous research has reported that boys monopolize schoolyard space but has not specified whether the use of schoolyard space changed over time (Blatchford & Sharp, 1994; Sadker, Sadker & Zittleman, 2009).

The second instance in which physical space was restricted was in early adolescence, described by girls who attended grade seven to twelve schools. Some of these girls reported that their physical education classes were scheduled at the same time as the high school boys’ and on occasion their classes would engage in physical activities together. The girls reported feeling excluded and unsafe as a result of sharing the space with older students. They described sharing the gymnasium as an “invasion,” depicting an environment that was neither equitable nor conducive to learning. These findings are consistent with previous research that indicates that even when adolescents are the same age, boys’ control over the environment in physical education classes results in a decreased level of participation among girls (Humbert, 1995; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001). Furthermore, there is overwhelming evidence that girls receive inequitable treatment in mixed gender physical education courses from teachers, which was also found in the current study (Griffin, 1983; Chepyator-Thomson, 1997; Derry & Phillips, 2002). The study found that the girls’ physical education classes were spaces in which “masculine hegemony” was both defined and maintained, and as a result the girls’ right to engage in physical activities was disregarded (Marquis, 2005). Consequently, the girls were taught to not trust the physical capacity of their bodies and, instead, internalized the notion that the female engendered body is both fragile and weak.

Girls’ reduced access to physical space, both on the schoolyard and in physical
education classes coupled with the absence of advocacy for equitable use of school space reinforces gender hierarchies that prioritize the masculine over the feminine and contributes to changes in girls’ relationships to their bodies. Girls’ transition from running around at recess to more stationary activities such as sitting and talking is not a “natural process” but rather is the consequence of gender socialization that encourages girls to disengage from physical activities. When Simone de Beauvoir (1949) claims, “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman,” she is arguing that women’s subordinate position in society is not natural but rather a result of the socialization that forces girls into restrictive ideals of femininity. Through the internalization of gender discourse, boys learn that they are entitled to actively occupy space whereas girls learn to restrict their activities and limit their movements in response to limited access and opportunities. As a result of inequitable practices at their schools, girls’ physicality is restricted resulting in the often observed transition to more sedentary activities during adolescence.

These findings alongside previous research highlight the necessity for gender sensitivity in schools and for the creation of environments that are more equitable and conducive to girls’ engagement in physical activities. For example, scheduling all girls’ physical education classes at the same time would be one solution so that girls would not have to share space with older male students. Physical education has the unique potential to influence how girls live in their bodies and to disrupt restrictive gender discourse related to femininity and masculinity.

Many researchers have documented that participation in physical activities empowers girls by providing them with increased confidence, development of skill and strength, and the agency to criticize oppressive gender stereotypes (Theberge, 1985; Deem & Gilroy, 1998; Gorely et al., 2003).
Limited physical activity opportunities. The study found that the girls had fewer opportunities for physical activity as they aged. In particular a major barrier identified was schools not offering sports teams for girls or girls being unsuccessful in securing a position on the team when it was offered. In these instances girls from less privileged economic backgrounds were the most negatively affected as many of them could not afford to enrol in league or club sports and as a result were denied the opportunity to practice and develop their athletic skills. Both the current study and previous research has found that financial barriers related to fees and transportation impede girls’ ability to engage in extracurricular activities (Culp, 1998; Dwyer et al., 2006; Maea et al., 2006; Anderson et al., 2007). In addition to financial barriers, girls who failed to make a school team also described embarrassment and reluctance to try out for subsequent teams. The phenomenon of girls opting out of sports after a failure to make a sports team was also found in CAAW’s (2009) research, which documented adolescent girls increased experiences of shame. Adolescence is a time of heightened desire for social approval and the public nature of the failure coupled with limited opportunities to regain confidence through physical activity is particularly problematic. As such the consistent finding of adolescent girls decreased participation in physical activities (Sallis, 2000; Kimm et al., 2002), makes sense as there are few opportunities for them to learn new skills and develop physical competence outside of competitive team sports. In the current study, the only extracurricular physical activity offered to the girls in their schools was participating in competitive team sports; consequently, the physical activity needs of a large proportion of girls were neglected. If schools were to offer varied options to participation in physical activities, then girls who were not on teams could continue to engage in physical activities instead of opting out altogether. The findings from this study, in conjunction with previous research, highlight the need for schools to provide extracurricular
programs that offer a variety of competitive and recreational activities in order to support adolescent girls’ sustained engagement in physical activities (MacQuarrie, et al., 2008; Anderson, et al., 2007).

**Gender insensitivity.** The study documented that schools displayed marked insensitivity towards girls’ changing bodies throughout the tween years and into adolescence. It was reported, for example, that there was a lack of accessible feminine hygiene products and a lack of privacy for changing for physical education courses. A lack of an adequate supply of feminine hygiene products in schools may indirectly disrupt girls’ ability to engage in physical activities. They may, for example, not be comfortable being physically active if they are unable to adequately meet their needs in this area. Dwyer and colleagues (2006) report that the adolescent girls in their study identified menstruation and a concern about “leaking” as factors that inhibited them from being physically active. It is important to highlight that inadequate access to feminine hygiene products is both a barrier to physical activity and a reflection of the school environment’s insensitivity to girls’ needs.

In addition to a lack of feminine hygiene products at their schools, the study also found that the girls experienced increased self-consciousness as a result of having to change in front of others for physical education classes and as a result of perspiring during class. First, a number of girls said that they felt embarrassed changing in front of their peers in their tweens and early adolescence. Similarly, Dwyer and colleagues’ (2006) focus group study found that “body-centred issues” were a primary barrier to adolescent girls’ participation in physical activities. Physical education that requires changing in front of others may intensify girls’ body-centred anxieties with the result that physical education classes are perceived to be unsafe and embarrassing, both factors consistently identified as barriers to adolescent girls’ involvement in physical activities (Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute,
2001; Humbert, 1995). In addition, Flintoff and Scanton (2001) argue that the public nature of physical education creates an uncomfortable environment for young women, especially when young men are present. In the current study, many girls indicated a preference for single gender physical education classes as a result of concerns over their appearance. Several other studies have found that girls are more comfortable and have increased participation rates in single gender physical education classes (Ishee’s, 2005; Mackenzie, et al., 2004; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010). Second, the study revealed that girls reduce their level of engagement in physical education classes as a result of appearance-related concerns such as the effect of physical activity on their hair and makeup. Lauren, a self-identified athletic girl, described disliking her first period physical education class because she felt “sweaty and gross” for the rest of the school day. If more consideration were put into the timetabling of girls’ physical education classes, such as scheduling classes at the end of the day or before lunch, then this would give girls more time to shower and deal with other appearance-related concerns both during and after physical education classes.

The present investigation highlights the necessity for further sensitivity in the planning of physical education classes so that girls would have more positive experiences. The lack of attunement to girls’ needs during physical education classes robs them of the opportunity to develop physical competence and to experience success tied to physicality.

Harassment and assault. In the current study, another notable barrier that was described was harassment from teachers and assault by male peers. In the study there were a few incidents described in which male physical education teachers behaved in a way and made comments that could be defined as sexual harassment. Larkin defines sexual harassment as “unwelcome and intrusive behaviour of a sexual nature” (1994, p. 21). There were two examples of sexual harassment that took place in physical education classes
reported in the current investigation. In one example a teacher invited boys to kiss a girl on her birthday, reflecting a patriarchal norm which permits and encourages the violation of girls’ and women’s bodies by boys and men. In the other a teacher made a misogynistic joke about a girl menstruating after she asked to be excused to visit the bathroom. In response to these experiences the girls described being embarrassed and feeling “uncomfortable.”

Research has shown that girls have identified sexual harassment, homophobia, and abuse to be intimidating, and to be barriers to their participation in physical activities and sports (Lenskyj, 1990). In addition, even when sexual harassment is absent, both Sleap and Wormald’s (2001) and Cockburn and Clarke’s (2009) research have found that gender bias among physical education teachers is a barrier to girls’ continued engagement in physical education courses. Adolescent girls in Constantinou and colleagues’ (2009) research reported that they would stay in physical education classes if teachers would create emotionally and physically safe environments that emphasized effort over skill.

In addition to sexual harassment, the study also revealed that girls’ bodies were increasingly objectified and violated as a result of “Slap Ass Fridays.” A phenomenon reported by participants in different regions of Canada in which boys would target “hot” girls and physically hit their bottoms. This had the side effect of reducing girls’ safety in their bodies while at school. While the girls in the study did not report disengagement from physical activities as a direct result of “Slap Ass Fridays,” there is some research that identifies gender-based teasing, harassment, and assault to be a barrier to girls’ enjoyment and full participation in school-based physical activities (Bauer, Yang, & Austin, 2004; Storch et al., 2007). As a result, as girls age they increasingly feel less comfortable at school, which makes it more difficult for them to engage in physical activities.
Findings of the present investigation support an emphasis on changing the school environment to make it a more positive and safe space for girls. In her qualitative analysis of a program implemented at a ballet school that aimed at enhancing the experience of the body as a site of equity, safety and agency through systemic changes at the school, Piran (2001) found that transforming the school environment decreased the body and shape preoccupations among female students (Piran, 1999).

Also supporting the importance of changing the school environment is Neumark-Sztainer and colleagues’ (2001) school-based program, entitled “New Moves,” that incorporated principles from the literature on obesity and eating disorders for adolescent girls from less privileged economic and non-White ethnocultural backgrounds located in the United States. The program included components such as all-girl physical education classes, motivational interviewing, nutrition education, teacher training, and parental outreach. The authors found that the program had significant positive effects, including increased physical activity, decreased unhealthy weight control behaviours, and improvements in body image and self-worth. Similarly Pate and colleagues’ (2005) school based intervention entitled LEAP (Lifestyle Education for Activity Program) reported increased physical activity levels among adolescent girls after changes to both instructional practices and the school environment to increase support for physical activity among adolescent girls located in the United States. For example the intervention included enhancing self-efficacy and enjoyment, all-girl physical education classes, choice based instructional programs both inside and outside of class, and a variety of activities both recreational and competitive sports. In terms of changing the school environment, the intervention focused on role modeling of staff, promotion of physical activity by school staff, and encouragement for family and community based activities.
Both school-based programs (“New Moves” and “Leap”) illustrate the importance of changing the school environment in order to increase adolescent girls’ physical activity levels. School-based programs that did not involve school environment changes reported limited success. For example Robbins and colleagues’ (2006) intervention entitled “Girls on the Move,” found a lack of significant changes in physical activity levels following a 12 week intervention comprised of a personal computerized physical activity program and nurse counselling. Additionally, Schofield and colleagues’ (2005) school-based intervention targeting “low-active” adolescent girls through the use of pedometers to self-monitor physical activity similarly reported insignificant physical activity level changes.

In addition, Piran’s (2010) examination of eating disorders prevention programs in secondary schools and universities found that interventions that did not include environmental changes led to only momentary changes, suggesting that for individuals to experience long-term changes, their immediate social environments must change. It is particularly important for school-based physical activity initiatives to emphasize the creation of positive school environments that foster equity and safety in order to facilitate adolescent girls’ engagement in physical activities.

Enjoyment to Chore

This thematic continuum revealed a shift from enjoyment of physical activities to an increased focus on fitness beginning in early adolescence. Categories that emerged included: “Enjoyment,” “Increased focus on fitness,” and “Reduced enjoyment.”

**Enjoyment.** From childhood to tweens the girls described enjoying a range of physical activities at recess and in their physical education classes. The importance of enjoyment has previously been highlighted as a motivating influence to girls’ continued
engagement in physical activities (Whitehead & Biddle; 2008; CAAWS, 2009; Petlichkof, 1992).

**Increased focus on fitness.** In the present study, there was a recognizable shift in early adolescence in which discourses of health, fitness, and the body entered physical education classes. While a few physical education teachers tried to incorporate a range of leisure-based activities such as yoga and dance, most of the participants described an increased focus on fitness and weight-loss exercises. The shift towards fitness is in line with recent policies and education reform efforts to increase physical activity among youth in an attempt to reduce obesity (Gard & Wright, 2001). Lupton and Tulloch (1998) argue that one of the “hidden agendas” in the school environment is the regulation, normalization, and disciplining of bodies (p. 22).

One school-based program discussed in the current study is the Daily Physical Activity (DPA) program. In 2005, the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) mandated the DPA policy to all elementary schools across Ontario in an attempt to increase physical activity among students (OME, 2005). The policy required that all students, grades one to eight, have a minimum of 20 minutes of physical activity each instructional day, 5 days a week. Recent research examining the effectiveness of DPA found that the majority of schools were unable to meet DPA’s required frequency (5 days) or intensity (20 minutes) (Stone et al., 2012). In addition, as another study focusing on DPA’s implementation found, teachers identified time to be the most significant barrier, as DPA was perceived to take time away from more important subjects (Patton, 2010). In line with recent literature, the current study highlights concerns related to DPA. For example, several of the girls perceived the “random” exercise to be disjointed from the rest of the instructional day and, more importantly, none of the girls reported enjoyment in engaging in DPA exercises. DPA’s reported limited success is
consistent with previous curricula and school-based attempts to increase physical activity without focusing on what motivates individuals to be active (Power et al., 2010). Another problem with DPA is that it reinforces weight-based stigma and moral discourses related to obesity because it values “fit” disciplined bodies over others and equates slimness with fitness (Cooper, 2010). As a consequence DPA may increase the incidence of weight-based teasing by fostering an environment in which larger bodies are viewed as problematic and requiring “discipline.” Research has consistently documented that weight-based teasing reduces adolescents’ engagement in physical activities (Storch, 2005).

Overall these findings suggest that the DPA program needs to be modified both in terms of how it is implemented as well as how well it relates to students’ needs. If girls are to continue to engage in physical activities they need to have positive and pleasurable experiences doing so at school.

**Reduced enjoyment.** Similar to DPA, as girls enter early adolescence physical education classes also begin to emphasize exercise over enjoyment. Several girls said that they did not enjoy the circuit training, aerobics, and endurance testing that was introduced at this time. It is not surprising then that low enrolment of girls in non-compulsory physical education courses has been a consistent trend (Chorney & Weitz, 2009). In order to increase girls’ enrolment in physical education courses, modifications to course curricula would have to shift the focus towards enjoyment as several studies have cited low motivation and lack of enjoyment as major barriers to adolescent girls’ engagement in physical activities (Whitehead & Biddle, 2008; Culp, 1998; Sleap & Wormald, 2001). In addition, Wallhead and Buckworth’s (2004) extensive review of studies exploring the role of physical education in physical activity levels reveals that girls who enjoy physical education are more likely to be physically active both in and outside of school hours. These results suggest that positive
physical education experiences could have a significant effect on girls’ motivation to participate in physical activities.

**Summary of School Experiences**

The findings from the current study reveal how the school environment increasingly becomes a barrier to engagement in physical activity as girls age. The two thematic continuums, “Movement and Confidence to Restriction and Apprehension” and “Enjoyment to Chore,” exhibit the intense and pervasive challenges that girls face while at school. “Movement and Confidence to Restriction and Apprehension” documents a number of barriers such as restriction of physical space, reduced time devoted to physical activity, limited opportunities for physical activity, gender insensitivity, and harassment and assault. With respect to “Enjoyment to Chore,” while girls initially enjoyed physical activities at recess and in physical education classes there was an increased focus on fitness as they aged, which resulted in reduced enjoyment.

The school is an important social context that has the potential to disrupt gendered discourses of physicality and of femininity. The study found that schools are not currently utilizing this potential but instead are reproducing and maintaining oppressive gender norms. Schools have been cited as an optimal site for prevention programs due to their continual and concentrated access to a large number of girls from diverse backgrounds (Neumark-Sztainer, 1999; O’Dea, 2000; Piran, 2004). However, in order to change the school environment, teaching staff must be better equipped with gender sensitivity training and school programming must emphasize a variety of competitive and non-competitive physical activities in order for girls to feel more confident and enjoy physicality. Donovan’s (2003) research into physical education suggests the modification of physical education teaching
practices to increase inclusiveness and to foster a positive peer culture to change the school environment’s social norms related to physical activity. This way schools could play an essential role in reversing adolescent girls’ reduced engagement in physical activities through the creation of more equitable spaces that would empower girls to live more physically connected to their bodies.

**Family Experiences**

The narratives from the girls revealed that their families were perceived as facilitators of engagement in physical activities during childhood; however, as girls got older, more barriers were perceived within the family context. This was especially true for girls from less privileged economic backgrounds. The transition in the perception of families from facilitative to restrictive is described by two continuums: “Social and Economic Support to Lack of Social and Economic Support” and “Cherishing the Body to Disciplining the Body.”

**Social and Economic Support to Lack of Social and Economic Support**

This continuum reveals that the girls from privileged economic backgrounds were consistently able to access more physical activity opportunities than the girls from disadvantaged backgrounds. Categories that emerged include: “Parental encouragement,” “Performance and play,” “Care giving practices,” and “Socioeconomic barriers.”

**Parental encouragement.** Both mothers and fathers appeared to have played a significant role in the girls’ level of engagement in physical activity. The majority of girls of White Anglo-Canadian heritage from privileged economic backgrounds reported that their parents enrolled them in lessons and sports leagues when they were children. Most of these girls described feeling supported and encouraged to engage in extracurricular activities by both of their parents. Kantomaa and colleagues (2007) also found that higher levels of family income are positively correlated with higher levels of participation in after-school activities.
Participants from a variety of backgrounds revealed that they predominantly engaged in physical activity with male family members throughout their childhoods. There was a notable absence of recollections of shared activity with female family members, which suggests that girls were exposed to gender differences in physicality from a young age. With respect to parents, Davison and colleagues (2003) report that mothers and fathers adopt different strategies to encourage their daughters to be physically active. For example, fathers are more likely to encourage physical activity through “explicit modeling” such as engaging in shared activities or leading a family outing, whereas mothers employ “logistic support” in the form of registration, transportation, and moral support during sporting events.

**Performance and play.** The girls’ experience of bonding with their fathers and other male family members through physical activity suggests that physical activity was experienced as the exclusive domain of male family members and prepubescent females, hence a strong message was relayed to the girls about acceptable embodied practices. As the girls entered adolescence and their bodies became more feminine they noticed a decline in engagement in physical activities with their fathers. At the same time, the few girls who continued to participate in competitive sports reported that their fathers focused primarily on their brothers’ athletic development through coaching or attending games and practices more frequently than they attended the girls’ games or practices. In addition, these girls reported that when their fathers did attend they would often criticize their performance, which motivated them to try harder but at the same time made them feel as if they were a disappointment to their fathers. This finding is consistent with Robbins and colleagues’ (2008) study, which found that girls experience a significant drop in support for their physical activities from their fathers when they enter adolescence. This was experienced as a loss for many of the girls as they felt that they were no longer welcome in the masculine
Domain of physical activities. This is an important finding that emerged in studies that use prospective methodology, or retrospective recall.

**Care giving practices.** In the study, the girls consistently described their mothers as the parent who organized registration, transportation, and offered praise and encouragement in relation to engagement in physical activity. Similarly, Krahnstoeever Davison and colleagues (2003) found that mothers perform the majority of care giving practices that support girls’ engagement in physical activities. The girls in the current study were acutely aware of their mothers’ help and many of them indicated that there was inequitable distribution of household chores between their parents. Only one participant, Scorch Willow, indicated that her father performed the majority of household chores. She was also the only girl who described engaging in physical activities with her mother throughout early adolescence. Girls growing up with physically inactive mothers may internalize restrictive ideals of femininity according to which being a woman means being less physically active. Judith Butler (1990) asserts that gender is socially constructed and that girls learn through socialization how to live and behave in their bodies in particular “gendered” ways. Similarly, Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory indicates that children learn and reproduce the gender norms that are modeled and reinforced by their parents. Consequently, from a young age, girls learn a set of behavioural expectations related to femininity, a set of gendered prescriptions that restrict the ways in which they engage and connect with their bodies. In Western culture, femininity is linked to docility, emotionality, fragility, and vanity (Roth & Baslow, 1994). Therefore, embodying a gendered body marked by femininity leads to a decline in physical activity because girls learn to value appearance over the development of competence, strength, and functionality in their bodies.
Several of the girls reported that in adolescence they began to exercise or participate in fitness classes with their mothers, activities that aimed at maintaining body shape. As a result, they learned that physical activity is for weight and shape maintenance rather than enjoyment or pleasure. Young (1980) argues that gender socialization in a patriarchal culture results in girls learning to live in their bodies as both object and subject, which illustrates the dual relationship that girls negotiate when engaged in physical activities. In the study, the girls’ engagement in fitness-related activities with their mothers was particularly problematic because the nature of the activity often reinforced body objectification and the view of the body as something that requires disciplining rather than as a medium of agency and power. Theberge (1987) highlighted that fitness-based activities that focus on the development of heterosexual attractiveness continues to oppress women (and girls) through the “sexualization of physical activity” (p.389). Consequently girls learn to focus on the appearance rather than the functionality of their bodies. The finding that the majority of the girls did not engage in physical activities with their mothers throughout childhood, but joined them in weight-loss activities during adolescence is a unique contribution of the current investigation.

**Socioeconomic barriers.** In addition to restrictive gender norms, the study found that girls from less privileged economic backgrounds faced ongoing financial barriers such as an inability to afford community programs, and transportation difficulties for girls in rural settings. A number of girls in the study from working class backgrounds, living in apartment buildings in urban settings, reported that they lacked physical space to run around in as children. Larson and colleagues (2004) and Maea and colleagues (2006) found that a lack of safe places to play outside is a socioeconomic barrier to physical activity. The literature suggests that girls living in less privileged neighbourhoods face a number of environmental
barriers to engagement in physical activity. Research comparing adolescent girls’ physical activity rates have found that they differ depending on the socioeconomic status of their neighbourhoods; it has been found that working class neighbourhoods consistently have the lowest physical activity levels (MacLeod et al., 2008). These findings suggest that girls from less privileged economic backgrounds living in urban settings are at particular risk for disengagement from physical activities because they do not have safe spaces in which to be active. Cohen and colleagues’ (2006) research examining the association between park proximity and physical activity in adolescent girls in an urban setting found that girls who live near more parks engage in more physical activities. These findings suggest that community projects such as increased green space and accessible recreational centres could be useful interventions to assist girls to engage in more physical activities.

In addition to obvious financial barriers, the current study further revealed less apparent barriers that the participants from less privileged economic backgrounds faced, for example, reduced parental attendance at games and increased after-school responsibilities such as chores and part-time employment. As such, girls from less privileged economic backgrounds must overcome multiple challenges in order to continue to remain physically active.

**Cherishing the Body to Disciplining the Body.** The second thematic continuum, “Cherishing the Body to Disciplining the Body,” revealed that the majority of girls experienced a lack of care and support related to their bodies from childhood through to adolescence. Categories that are discussed are: “Cherishing the body” and “Disciplining the body.”

**Cherishing the body.** The girls in the study experienced a few instances in which their families provided support for and modeling of self-care for the body. Only a few
mothers offered support to their daughters by encouraging them to engage in creative movement, purchasing comfortable clothing for them to wear while engaging in physical activity, giving them information about pubertal changes, celebrating menarche with them, and encouraging them to accept their bodies. It has been previously found that family support during puberty increases adolescent girls’ experience of body satisfaction (Schulenberg et al., 1999). Similarly, Mizevich’s (2012) research found that women, who resisted social pressures to be thin, reported having mothers that did not make negative comments about their own or the participants’ bodies and role modeled healthy ways of treating themselves and their bodies through their own behaviours and attitudes.

Tremblay and colleagues (2000) have found that improvements in body satisfaction are positively correlated with increased participation in physical activities, which suggests that a family culture that fosters body satisfaction can have an indirect positive effect on participation in physical activity.

Disciplining the body. The study found that a few participants experienced weight based criticism and encouragement to engage in hair styling and hair removal practices by their family members in their childhood and tweens. During early adolescence and beyond, most girls became aware of their mother’s body dissatisfaction, which affected their own connection to their bodies. Pike and Rodin (1991) found that adolescent girls’ body dissatisfaction is often related to their mothers’ weight and shape preoccupations. In addition, Tester and Gleaves (2005) examined the effects of family influences to control weight and found that women who reported low past family pressure to control weight were less likely to internalize societal messages related to thinness. Additionally, Stice, Spangler, and Agras’ (2001) longitudinal study examining the effect of media exposure on adolescent girls,
reported that only girls who previously experienced pressure to be thin from family and peers experienced increased negative affect from the media.

The study found that girls’ recognition of body dissatisfaction in their mothers in early adolescence was followed by shared fitness-related exercises with their mothers in adolescence. Therefore, girls initially observed their mothers to be dissatisfied with their bodies and later engaged in joint body disciplining practices. Tracking the girls’ family experiences over time in the present investigation revealed that most engaged in pleasure-based physical activities with their fathers as children and later engaged in fitness-based activities with their mothers in adolescence. This pattern of engagement leads to the internalization of gendered norms, whereby pleasure-based forms of activity are restricted to the masculine domain and body modification-based activity is in the feminine domain.

Recent research has examined the importance of the different cognitions women have about exercise and have found that young women who engage in exercise primarily as a means to control their weight or shape are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviour (Adkins & Keel, 2005; Mond et al., 2006). These findings are particularly troubling in light of the findings that many girls engage in fitness-related activities with their mothers, which sets them up for a lifetime of body dissatisfaction. Even more troubling is research that has found that women who are members of fitness centres exhibit greater self-objectification, self-monitoring, and disordered eating compared to women who do not belong to a fitness centre (Slater & Tiggemann, 2006). Prichard and Tiggemann (2008) emphasize that fitness centres increase self-objectification because they focus on appearance-related reasons for exercises rather than functional reasons such as health and enjoyment. The findings of the current study reveal an absence of shared pleasure-based physical activities, such as hiking or dancing, with family members as girls aged,
suggesting that women’s engagement with physical activity is grossly different from girls’ engagement with physical activities as children.

**Summary of Family Experiences**

The findings from the current study reveal that family experiences increasingly become a barrier to engagement in enjoyable physical activity as girls’ age. The two thematic continuums, “Social and Economic Support to Lack of Social and Economic Support” and “Cherishing the Body to Disciplining the Body,” exhibit pervasive challenges related to gender. “Social and Economic Support to Lack of Social and Economic Support” documents numerous barriers to physical activity created by family such as reduced attention from fathers, inequitable distribution of household chores, and socioeconomic barriers which was consistent with previous research (Dwyer et al., 2006; Coackley & White, 1992). With respect to “Cherishing the Body to Disciplining the Body,” the study found a lack of support related to girls’ bodies, an absence of parental modeling of self-care practices, and mothers’ own body dissatisfaction and related body regimens consistent with previous research (Rodin, 1991; Slater & Tiggeman, 2006). A girls’ familial culture is a particularly important as it is the main site of gender socialization. The current study found that the vast majority of the girls’ families have reproduced the gender discourse of patriarchy, which prioritizes the needs of men over women. Beginning in their own homes, the girls have learned that the feminine role is to take care of others and to discipline the body in an attempt to make it consistent with cultural ideals of feminine beauty. As a result the girls have learned that physical activity for pleasure and athletic development belongs exclusively to the masculine domain. Raised within this context, girls miss out on the opportunity to view their bodies as strong and are not encouraged to develop their athletic skills in the way that their brothers.
are. The girls’ family experiences illustrate how the dominant discourse of gender is maintained and reproduced in the family and underline the necessity for interventions to include girls’ families.

**Peer Experiences**

The narratives revealed that peer relations also begin as facilitators to engagement in physical activity in childhood and increasingly become, from tweens and beyond, barriers to such engagement. Two continuums were identified in the influences on participation in physical activities in this area: “Acceptance of Different Social Positions to Rejection of Different Social Positions” and “Physical Activity to Sedentary Activity.”

**Acceptance of Different Social Positions to Rejection of Different Social Positions**

The first thematic continuum, “Acceptance of Different Social Positions to Rejection of Different Social Positions” describes the shift from acceptance of differing social positions and norms in childhood to the rejection of differing social positions and norms that began in the tweens and persisted throughout adolescence. This transition from facilitators to barriers is divided into three major categories: “Acceptance of Different Social Positions,” “Restrictive Gender Norms” and “Ethnocultural/Racial Heritage Restrictions.”

**Acceptance of different social positions.** The girls’ accounts revealed that in childhood, they had the freedom to explore, get messy, run, have fun in their bodies, play sports with both genders, and they were free from the restrictive gender ideals of femininity. Similarly, Legge’s (2011) prospective qualitative study investigating the “tomboy/girly girl” dichotomy found that girls who identified with the label “tomboy” in childhood were physically free in their bodies and did not feel compelled to conform to external pressures and demands related to gender. In general, the research indicates that childhood is a time when girls are unconstrained by gender-specific appearance and behaviour norms. However,
the research also indicates that while there are positive consequences for girls who have the
freedom to play with both girls and boys, there is a tendency towards gender-segregated play
in early childhood (McGuffey & Rich, 1999). Whereas previous research has found that
gender-segregated play begins as early as age three and increases as children age (Fabes,
Martin & Hanish, 2003; Martin & Fabes, 2001), the current study found that gender-
segregated play became more common in grade five, that is, approximately age nine. Thorne
(1993) argues that children construct gender through “gender play,” which recreates social
relations and practices through daily interactions. As a result of segregated “gender play”
girls and boys develop different skills, attitudes, interests, and physical activity levels
(Leaper, 1994). As is discussed in earlier sections, in Western culture, femininity is linked to
submissive behaviours, such as dependency, emotionality, and vanity (Roth & Baslow,
1994). Masculinity, on the other hand, is related to behaviours associated with toughness,
assertiveness, independence, and competitiveness (Rathus, Nevid, & Rathus-Fichner, 1993).
Bronstein (1988) indicates that girls and boys are treated differently in that girls are given
more opportunities to gain social skills while boys are given more opportunities to develop
motor skills. As a result of this difference girls internalize the idea that there are different
expectations for how boys and girls live in their bodies, and these differences are reinforced
through “gender play.”

This study found that the girls who were able to transgress the gender divide in their
tweens experienced a sense of social power as a result of being accepted by the boys, but also
experienced negative social consequences, which are discussed in greater detail in the next
section.

Restrictive gender norms. In the current study, dominant gender ideologies were
found to disrupt girls’ engagement in physically activity as they entered adolescence.

Connell’s (1987) concept “hegemonic masculinity” describes the enforcement of a gender order that privileges masculine qualities over others. In such a context, girls and women adopt what he refers to as “emphasized femininity” which is, “orientated to accommodating the interests and desires of men” (Connell, 1987, p. 183). McGuffey and Rich’s (1999) observation of middle school children found that high-status boys actively maintain the hegemonic hierarchy by regulating gender transgression for both boys and girls through name-calling, physical aggression, and exclusion. Consistent with the existing literature, in the current study the majority of girls described adopting stereotypical feminine behaviours at the onset of puberty (Wichstrom, 1999; Dwyer et al., 2006).

The current study found that girls who continued to transgress gender boundaries after their tweens faced a number of challenges related to peer approval, also consistent with the literature (Harrison & Lynch, 2005; Whitehead & Biddle, 2008). For example, athletic girls in the study described the incongruent nature of the appearance norms of stereotypical femininity and participation in physical activities, which caused them to struggle between their passion for movement and the maintenance of heterosexual attractiveness.

For example, Jackie described her frustration with the double standard that allowed only her male peers to simultaneously possess popularity and athleticism. She later went on to explain that popular girls were expected to wear “high heels…be like a porcelain doll…sit and be perfect.” Similarly Cockburn and Clarke’s (2002) qualitative study found that adolescent girls recognize that they challenge expectations linked with femininity by participating in physical activity that involves running, sweating, exhibiting strength, and having messy hair. The authors also highlighted the finding that belonging to a group of active girls makes it easier for a girl to resist the stereotypes of femininity. In the current
study many active girls said that they were often in the minority, and that this made resisting dominant social pressures more difficult. Michel Foucault (1979) theorized that systemic pressures create “docile bodies” by disciplining individuals who resist the dominant system’s rules. There are parallels between Jackie’s labelling of popular girls as “porcelain dolls” and Foucault’s “docile bodies” as both concepts illustrate how dominant discourses of gender shape how girls live in their bodies. The result as described by Jackie is the internalization of the “porcelain doll,” which results in a girl increasingly monitoring her body’s weight and shape, disengaging from sports, and engaging in physical activities for weight-loss purposes.

In the study, the girls who continued to resist stereotypical femininity and to defy gender boundaries in their tweens and early adolescence reported experiencing negative social consequences. For example, both Spiderwort and Lauren described instances in which playing with boys resulted in teasing and exclusion by other girls.

The experiences described by the girls in the current study also demonstrate a heteronormative shift in the meaning of friendships during tweens; girl/boy relationships are no longer viewed as platonic but rather as potentially romantic. This shift created a tension for the girls who favoured playing with boys but also yearned to be accepted by their less active girlfriends. As a result of social needs for acceptance many girls gradually reduced their engagement in the unorganized and spontaneous forms of physically active play that took place at recess or in their neighbourhoods, eventually limiting their physical activity to physical education classes and organized extracurricular physical activities. The study highlights the finding that girls’ engagement in physical activities is restricted by gender socialization and subsequent peer pressures. Inevitably, a culture that encourages stereotypical gender norms forces girls to negotiate how active they can afford to be in order to maintain social relationships. This finding makes sense in light of previous research.
indicating that there is a steady decline in participation in physical activities by girls in adolescence related to both social norms of femininity and peer pressures (Whitehead & Biddle, 2008; Maea et al., 2006; Cockburn & Clarke, 2002). For example, both Leslie and colleagues (1999) and Taylor and colleagues (2000) found that adolescent girls reported messing up their hair and make-up to be deterents to physical activity. Cockburn and Clarke (2002) emphasize that the difficulty for girls to reconcile the dichotomous demands of feminine appearance norms and involvement in physical activity often impacts girls’ participation choices.

Finally, the study also found that the girls who challenged gender norms by engaging in sports, maintaining a more muscular body, and refusing to wear makeup and fashionable clothing were given derogatory labels such as “butch” and “beast.” The derogatory labels are a form of social control of girls and women who dare to challenge the gender hierarchy by threatening prescribed notions of femininity and masculinity. Cockburn and Clarke (2002), in their study of active adolescent girls, discuss their participants’ use of safeguards such as having a boyfriend to avoid having their heterosexuality questioned. The authors argue that homophobia affects all females who participate in sports as part of the discriminatory repercussions of challenging male power and privilege. In a heterosexist culture, it is assumed that a heterosexual woman would conform to the socially constructed ideals of femininity in order to gain male approval. Therefore, a failure to adhere draws a woman’s sexuality into question. As girls enter adolescence and are exploring their own sexualities, these homophobic messages limit their freedom to continue to engage fully in the activities they have always enjoyed. While homophobia was not an explicit concern raised in the study, the use of terms such as “butch,” and homophobic teasing have been identified as social barriers to adolescent girls’ participation in physical activity (Shakib, 2003). Likewise,
Blinde and Taub (1992) found that homophobia causes women to downplay their athletic abilities and focus on their physical appearance. Athletic girls can be at risk for discrimination based on homophobic and sexist notions of the types of activities young women should engage in and the appearance rules set by social ideals of femininity.

**Ethnocultural/racial heritage restrictions.** In the current study, girls of Métis, Aboriginal, African-Canadian, or Muslim heritage identified teasing based on their heritage and restrictive stereotypes as disruptive to their comfort in their bodies. Previous research has consistently found that adolescent girls of non-White ethnocultural groups in North America have lower levels of physical activity than their White counterparts (Owen et al., 2009; Kimm et al., 2002; Van Der Horst et al., 2007). There is a gap in the current literature with respect to how ethnocultural/racial heritage and socioeconomic status affect Canadian adolescent girls’ levels of physical activity (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2003). In this study, all but one of the girls who reported being teased and excluded because of her heritage were also from working class economic backgrounds. Ethnocultural/racial heritage and socioeconomic status are often correlated as a result of imperial regimes and colonial rule (Mani & Frankenberg, 1985).

In the study, several girls reported experiencing prejudice that had a negative effect on how they felt in their bodies, and a few girls provided examples directly linking teasing with later disengagement from physical activities. For example, following her cultural standards of dress, Hazel wore tights and a t-shirt to swim in at her community pool and was teased as a result. The consequence was, as Hazel described later in the interview, that she no longer swam though it was her favourite activity, and she found that she was self-consciousness about being the only student in her physical education class who wore a headscarf. Similar findings reported that girls of Muslim heritages found clothing, co-
education, and the public performance of physical activity to disrupt their level of participation (Daiman, 1994; Zaman, 1997; Benn, 2002).

Unfortunately, most of these girls described instances in which appearance characteristics such as skin colour or body hair, as well as attire, made them a target for harassment, which caused them to feel like outsiders among their peers. Larkin (1994) found that adolescent girls from non-White ethnocultural groups were more likely to be teased and harassed by both boys and girls. Kumar’s (2004) qualitative exploration of second-generation Hindu Indo-Canadian adolescent girls and physical activity reported that the girls actively avoided teasing by adhering to gender behavioural norms and appearance expectations. For example, the girls would downplay their athletic abilities and sit and talk rather than engage in physical activities. Kumar’s research highlights the intersection of gender and ethnocultural/racial heritage by showing that sexism and racism both play a role as girls may choose to disengage from physical activities in order to deflect attention from themselves.

The study found that mainstream religious and racial stereotypes shaped what peers assumed about the interests and abilities of some of the participants. For example, both Ashley and Hazel said that stereotypes, such as that ‘African-Canadians are gangsters; and “Muslims are good at math” caused them to feel boxed in. Stereotype threat refers to the anxiety caused by a feeling that one is at risk of confirming a negative stereotype about one’s group (Steele & Aronson, 1995). The concept of stereotype threat has been used to explain how group membership, for example, by gender or race, can negatively affect an individual’s performance. Stereotype threat has been found to lead to decreased verbal performance among African American students when stereotypes related to the intellectual ability of African Americans were activated (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Chalabaev and colleagues (2008) reported decreased athletic performance among female soccer athletes when
stereotypes related to poor athletic ability and poor technical ability of women were activated. The authors argue that gender based stereotypes are often an invisible barrier that limits girls and women’s participation in sports (Chalabaev, et al., 2008). Sabo and Veliz (2008) argue that girls in North America whose appearance characteristics do not comply with dominant White norms appear to be one of the most disadvantaged populations because they are affected by both gender and racial inequities. In addition, the authors argue that girls in immigrant families are less likely than their male counterparts to participate in physical activities and sports possibly as a result of cultural differences in gender norms (Sabo & Veliz, 2008).

**Physical Activity to Sedentary Activity**

The second thematic continuum, “Physical Activity to Sedentary Activity,” represents the shift from participation in physical activities in childhood to sedentary activities that begins in the tweens and persists throughout adolescence.

**Physical activity.** The girls in the study reported that as children they had the freedom to have fun in their bodies, and play sports with both girls and boys. In a qualitative study with young women, Piran and colleagues (2002) found that young women who described experiencing greater freedom to engage in physical activities with either gender during childhood felt a greater sense of connection to their bodies.

**Sedentary activity.** The study found a consistent trend towards engagement in more sedentary activities beginning during tweens, such as the cessation of spontaneous unorganized forms of play and a greater focus on shopping, watching movies, and sitting and talking at recess. The current study found that the girls’ peers reinforced their transition to more sedentary activities. In particular, peers supported adherence to restrictive gender norms. One finding of the present investigation was that several girls expressed a dislike of
competitive nature of sports, which affected their withdrawal from relevant athletic forums in early adolescence. Further, girls also suggested that increased pressures to perform that begin in early adolescence also led to their withdrawal from engagement in physical activities. These findings resonate with previous research findings that some adolescent girls dislike competition because they perceive the pressure to win as stressful and they worry about being judged for their performance (Dwyer, 2006, CAAWS, 2009). Young’s (1990) work highlights the finding that the majority of women (and girls) underestimate their bodies’ athletic abilities and therefore inhibit their movements, leading to being less successful. It also could be that girls’ dislike competition because of a lack of confidence in their bodies’ athletic abilities coupled with the internalization of the stereotype that the female body is weak. Beyond lack of confidence in the body, Meier (2005) indicates that the stereotypical masculine nature of competitive sports such as aggressiveness and development of muscles are also major obstacles for girls’ involvement in competitive sports. As discussed previously, girls in the current study were perspicaciously aware of social labels given to girls who did not adhere to gender norms of appearance and behaviour.

Summary of Peer Experiences

The findings from the current study revealed that peer experiences increasingly became barriers to engagement in physical activities as girls aged. The two thematic continuums: “Acceptance of Different Social Positions to Rejection of Different Social Positions” and “Physical Activity to Sedentary Activity,” reveal the pervasive challenges related to gender. The first theme documents different peer-generated barriers shaped by restrictive gender norms and ethnocultural/racial insensitivity. With respect to the second theme, the study documented gradual reductions in physical activity and increased preferences to engagement in sedentary activities beginning in tweens and intensifying
throughout adolescence. As adolescence is a time marked by an increased desire for peer approval, it is important to understand how peers maintain and police norms, particularly those related to gender. The findings from the study illustrate the necessity for interventions to increase girls’ level of physical activity to also target peer groups and was consistent with previous research (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002; Shakib, 2003).

**Embodied Experiences of Physicality**

The narratives revealed that experiences of physicality begin as facilitators to engagement with physical activity in childhood and increasingly become barriers to such engagement from tweens to adolescence. Two continuums describe patterns of participation in physical activities from this perspective: “Body Immersion and Empowerment to Body Objectification” and “Comfort to Beauty.”

**Body Immersion and Empowerment to Body Objectification**

The first thematic continuum reveals the cognitive shift from the immersion in, and empowerment of, the body in childhood to the objectification of the body that begins in the tweens and persists throughout adolescence. The transition from facilitators to barriers is divided into four categories: “Body Immersion and Empowerment,” “Self-Consciousness Related to Pubertal Changes,” “Self-Consciousness Related the Body,” and “Weight and Shape Preoccupation.”

**Body Immersion and Empowerment.** The study found that in childhood engagement in physical activity was characterized as both passionate and in the moment. The girls described that they were unconcerned about their physical appearance, felt a degree of competence in their bodies, and focused on having fun. Carroll and Loumidis (2001) found that children engaged in physical activity report comparable experiences, although boys report higher levels of competence and enjoyment than girls. The positive features associated
with experiences of physical activity in childhood resonate with Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi’s (2009) positive psychological experience of “flow,” a concept that describes immersion in the present moment, a loss of reflective self-consciousness, a sense of agency over the situation, and the sense that an activity is intrinsically rewarding. Other studies examining the effects of physical activity on adolescents girls found that regular engagement is associated with mental health benefits such as improved self-esteem (Parfitt & Eston, 2005), decreased social problems (Kirkaldy et al., 2002), and increased levels of social maturity and social competence (Fletcher, Nickerson, & Wright, 2003). In Bredmeier and Shield’s (1986) research on female athletes, the participants reported higher levels of self-esteem, and that this allowed them to resist peer pressure to engage in self-harm and risky sexual activities.

In the current study, only girls from privileged economic backgrounds who continued to engage in physical activities, such as organized sports, reported experiences that resembled “flow” states. Thus, it appears that economic privilege was a factor in the girls’ participation in physical activities and maintaining positive embodiment.

*Self-consciousness related to pubertal changes.* The study found that girls from a variety of backgrounds described increased self-consciousness related to pubertal changes such as breast development, menarche, and increased perspiration. The girls in the study described pubertal changes, as having a negative effect on their experience of embodiment and it appears that health courses do little to assist girls in framing this transition more positively. Erchull and colleagues (2002) found that the media and educational books on puberty are ambivalent at best and negative at worst. Krahnstoever Davison and colleagues (2007) report that girls who go through puberty early have both lower levels of mental well-being and of physical activity compared to their peers. In the current study, the girls
described the onset of puberty as an unwelcome and negative experience. For example, when asked about menarche, Lauren disclosed that she “wished” she were a boy in order to escape the narrow confines of stereotypical femininity. Lauren’s wish to escape her female body illustrates the harsh reality adolescent girls face when they recognize the restrictions associated with living in a female body in a patriarchal culture. The identification of the restrictive nature of femininity as a barrier to adolescent girls’ physical activity is also echoed in previous research that similarly identified stereotypical gender rules (Culp, 1998), perceptions of femininity (Whitehead & Biddle, 2008), and stereotypes of femininity (Dwyer et al., 2006) as barriers.

A consistent barrier to physical activity documented in the study was the girls’ aversion to perspiration. Many of the girls described actively inhibiting sweating, as well as holding the perception that sweat negatively affected their physical appearance. The girls’ aversion to sweat related to a different construction of male and female athletes. For example, Erica said that boys are “sports players and get sweaty” whereas she viewed girls who sweat as “gross.” Erica’s narrative suggests why female athletes continue to be largely invisible in mainstream media sources. Pirinen’s (1997) textual analysis of women’s magazines and Weber and Carini’s (2013) content analysis of *Sports Illustrated* magazine found that in photographs female athletes are rarely actively engaged in sports but are instead posed in submissive positions made up to meet the standards of heterosexual attractiveness. Girls internalize the dominant message that while they can transgress the masculine domain of sports, they must still adhere to the restrictive ideals of femininity. Many of the girls in the study described maintaining gender social norms by actively trying to minimize perspiration in order to avoid messing up their hair and makeup. This finding is consistent with previous
studies that found that adolescent girls limited their engagement in physical activity in order to reduce perspiration (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002; Sleap & Wormald, 2001).

**Self-consciousness related to the body.** The study found that the girls experienced increased self-consciousness related to the body’s physical appearance such as anxiety related to hair on the arms, legs, and face as well as concern about others’ judgments of their appearance, and that this negatively affected their engagement in physical activities. Both Cockburn and Clarke (2002) and Dwyer and colleagues (2006) report similar barriers to adolescent girls’ engagement in physical activities.

In the study, a notable finding related to increased concern about body hair primarily in girls of Aboriginal and Métis heritage. Several of the girls’ narratives revealed that, in their experience, others felt free to comment on and tease girls about their body hair. As a consequence the majority of the girls began to use hair removal techniques to rid their body of unwanted hair. The issue of body hair is particularly relevant to the girls’ level of physical activity since physical education is a class that requires young women to wear shorts and may put girls at risk of teasing if they are among the remaining few who do not engage in hair removal practices. While previous research has highlighted girls’ concerns about their bodies, including the hair on their heads (Dwyer & colleagues, 2006; Culp, 1998; Whitehead & Biddle, 2008; Taylor et al., 2000; Cockburn & Clarke, 2002), there is an absence of research into how girls negotiate body hair in relation to physical activity. While body hair was not explicitly identified as a barrier to adolescent girls’ physicality in the current study, it would be useful for future research to examine this potential barrier in further detail. Additionally, hair as a barrier to physical activity may present different challenges for girls from different ethnocultural/racial heritages and it would be useful to investigate this further.
In a patriarchal culture that sexually objectifies women and girls’ bodies, girls internalize the objectifying observer’s perspective on their own bodies, thus becoming conscious of their external appearance in a particular way, an effect Fredrickson and Robert (1997) term “self-objectification.” These authors have found that self-objectification results in an increase in negative emotions such as shame and anxiety and for a decrease in positive experiences such as enjoyment and flow states. Similar to Slater and Tiggemann’s (2002) research, the current study’s findings suggest that the onset of puberty disrupted girls’ connection to their bodies and increased experiences of self-objectification. In a culture obsessed with female beauty, young women are increasingly being subjected to messages telling them that their bodies are undesirable the way they are (Wolf, 1991).

As girls conform to society’s rules of femininity their participation in sports is reduced. They begin to work to meet the prescribed ideal of femininity, which does not include involvement in sports, but instead entails restricting movement so as to take up less physical space. The girls’ lived experiences suggest that adherence to the rules of femininity prevents them from fully living in their bodies, resulting in a disruption in the connection to the body. Bordo’s (1993) argument that the body is often the site of social control and linked to an individual’s social power appears to be supported by the sense of powerlessness and lack of agency over their bodies described by girls in the study as they entered adolescence.

Weight and shape preoccupation. The study found that at the beginning of the tweens girls experienced weight- and shape-based teasing, which resulted in the restriction of food intake and relate increase in exercise regimens aimed at weight loss. For one participant, Bronwen, food restriction and weight control practices took time and enjoyment away from activities she enjoyed such as rowing. Research on the relationship between weight concerns and physical activity has had mixed results. Some studies have found that women who self-
objectify are less likely to be physically active (Greenleaf, 2005), while other research has found that concern about weight is a major motivator for participation in exercise (Strelan, Mehaffey, & Tiggemann, 2003). However, weight and shape preoccupation disrupts the experience of joy in the body and its movement (Piran & Teall, 2012).

**Comfort to Beauty**

The second thematic continuum, “Comfort to Beauty” demonstrates a transition starting in early adolescence from prioritizing comfort in childhood to a gradual and intensified focus on physical appearance.

**Comfort.** The study participants resisted wearing restrictive clothing during childhood and tweens, such as dresses, in order to be able to freely engage in physical activities. In addition, in early adolescence a few self-identified “active” girls from middle class or higher socioeconomic backgrounds described resisting conforming to feminine appearance. Similarly, research has consistently documented that girls who regularly participate in sports have an improved sense of self (Kirkaldy et al., 2002) and are more likely to resist peer pressure (Bredmeier & Shields, 1986). These findings suggest that continued engagement in organized sports, likely related to socioeconomic standing, may have provided some level of protection against the predominantly restrictive gender norms. The resistance to feminine appearance norms in the present study held by few girls during adolescence was not consistent with the silencing of girls’ resistance to feminine ideals during adolescence and attempts to imitate the “perfect girl” Found by Gilligan’s (1994) longitudinal study with girls post puberty.

**Beauty.** The present study documented that the majority of participants experienced intensifying pressure to engage in beautifying body based practices. Their narratives illustrated the processes of changing their clothing preferences over time to tighter and more
fashionable clothing, starting to wear make-up, and beginning to manage and discipline their body and scalp hair. Girls who had previously contested uncomfortable and restrictive clothing began to adopt tighter clothing, make-up and hair maintenance practices in their adolescence. Girls discussed explicit pressuring from peers and family to adopt feminine appearance norms. While most of the girls did not explicitly connect their adherence to feminine appearance norms to physical activity, some of them did disclose that wearing tighter clothing was less comfortable. Earlier research has linked wearing tight clothing and reduced levels of physical activity amongst adolescent girls (Duke et al., 2003).

The process of the girls’ transition from ‘Comfort’ to ‘Beauty’ due to increasing pressures related to rigid feminine appearance ideals in order to gain social acceptance by their peers and family, resonates with Bordo (1993) who argued that the body is the site of social control. Bordo claims that the “elusive ideal of femininity” acts as a subversive form of control by the way it demands that women spend an inordinate amount of time and energy devoted to their physical appearances instead of more meaningful areas of their lives. Further, Piran and colleagues’ (2006) described, “physical corseting” one of several important constructs developed through the qualitative study of girls and women’s journeys of embodiment that described limited movement and physicality as a result of restrictive dictates regarding appearance expectations, clothing, and gender roles.

For many girls the pursuit to embody the feminine ideal is met with restrictive practices regarding bodily movement that consequently influence levels of physical activity.

**Summary of Embodied Experiences of Physicality**

The findings from the current study reveal that embodied experiences of physicality become barriers to engagement in physical activities as girls age. The two thematic continuums: “Body Immersion and Empowerment to Body Objectification” and “Comfort to
Beauty,” reflect the pervasive challenges related to gender. The first theme documents numerous disruptive experiences related to girls’ positive connection to their bodies through immersion and joy and physical activities. With respect to the second, the study documents gradual conformity to body based practices associated with feminine ideals of appearance beginning in tweens and intensifying throughout adolescence and was consistent with previous research (Dwyer et al., 2006; Whitehead & Biddle, 2008). The findings from the study illustrate the necessity for interventions to focus critically on patriarchal pressures that require girls to alter their bodies to gain social acceptance at the expense of being physically connected and active in their own bodies.

**Strengths and Limitations of the Current Investigation**

The present study used qualitative methods to examine the multilayered social contexts that foster or hinder adolescent girls’ participation in physical activity. The results of the present study are grounded in both strengths and limitations, which are discussed in turn. **Strengths**

The richness of the study lies in the complexity of each of the core categories (“School Experiences”, “Family Experiences”, “Peer Experiences”, and “Embodied Experiences of Physicality”), which included documentation over time across four age categories (childhood, tweens, early adolescence, and adolescence) and an analysis of the social processes behind girls’ engagement in physical activity. This allowed for an examination of girls’ lived experiences in four social contexts and how these affect girls’ engagement with physical activity over time. For example, the study helped to clarify the processes through which internalized gender norms related to femininity disrupt girls’ participation in physical activities. The study also helped to uncover the complexity of adolescent girls’ physical activity levels; for example, by uncovering the intersection of
economic factors. Reduced physical activity opportunities at school affected girls from less privileged economic backgrounds most negatively.

One strength of the present study is the use of multiple qualitative methodologies. The use of a prospective qualitative interview design with girls, while also encouraging their reflections about past experiences prior to the first interview, and between the annual interviews, as well as the use of focus group discussions have enriched the understanding of the varied social processes that affected girls’ engagement with physical activities across time. For example, the girls’ narratives revealed how gender norms related to “emphasized femininity” were increasingly internalized as they aged, resulting in the shift from what the body could do (functionally) onto what the body looked like. Further, the individual interviews provided an opportunity to explore with the girls the impact of varied social contexts on their body experiences including, for example, the school and family environments. The use of focus group discussions, in turn, provided a unique forum to discuss social experiences in a group format and, through that, to explore further the results that emerged in the individual interviews. In addition, the reflective process in which group members engaged provided the opportunity to amplify and validate social experiences that, until the group meetings were considered by the girls to be personal, rather than externally enforced, experiences. For example, many girls were unaware that other girls also felt uncomfortable about engaging in physical activities with high school boys during their physical education classes; as a result of the group discussion they decided to collectively raise this issue with their physical education teacher.

Another strength of the present study was the diversity of backgrounds among those interviewed and those who participated in the focus group discussions. This includes ethnocultural/racial heritage, socioeconomic background, geographical location, and family
structure. This diversity enabled a fuller understanding of the ways in which the social and cultural context of their lives influenced their engagement with physical activities.

Yet another strength of the study relates to its aim to examine a broad range of social experiences that shape engagement in physical activity over time, both barriers and facilitators. The study therefore examines social experiences in the school, peer, family, and learned internalized embodied experiences. It further uniquely sheds light about a shift from facilitative experiences to barriers in all these domains over time, suggesting the multi-determined nature of the reduced engagement in physical activity by girls as they go through puberty. While most of the research to date has examined either facilitators or barriers at one point in time, the current study aimed to provide a comprehensive picture of physical activity across time in four different social domains.

**Limitations**

The study has a number of limitations. One of the limitations is that despite the ethnocultural/racial diversity of the participant group, there were no girls from Caribbean or South Asian heritages. Similarly, there was no representation from girls with physical disabilities or girls who were born outside of Canada. Including a more diverse group of girls in the study may have resulted in the emergence of additional themes, reflective of the lived experiences of a broader group of girls. The group of girls may have also been relatively more physically active than a representative sample of girls, as they selectively agreed to participate in a study about body image and social experiences, including engagement in physical activity. Further, the study involved a relatively small number of participants; a larger group may have further enriched the findings of the study. Additionally, the study included participants who were 9 to 18 years of age, with the majority of participants, namely focus group members and few individual participants, being 13 years of age. As there were
13 focus group participants, the majority of the qualitative data was concentrated in early adolescence compared to the other age categories. The downside of selecting this particular age group for the focus group discussions was that their accounts of the facilitators and barriers to engagement with physical activity throughout their tweens and childhood years were retrospective. A larger cohort of girls involved in prospective interviews, as well as focus groups of different age groups, would have likely enriched the emergent findings.

A limitation inherent in qualitative studies is the subjectivity of the researcher. To address this limitation, in the initial stages of the analysis, individual interview study participants were provided with a chronological summary of their interview and encouraged to provide feedback to the interviewer to clarify or amend aspects of their narrative. In addition, the first focus group discussion results were provided to participants in the second focus group discussion. Participants were encouraged to provide feedback or amendments. This helped to address the potential bias of researcher’s subjectivity during the data collection and the initial data analysis phase.

Nevertheless, the final analysis was guided by the researcher’s interests and interpretations of the narratives and informed by a feminist theoretical approach, with attention paid to social and contextual factors. For example, my interest in ethnocultural/racial influences has made me especially attentive to participant narratives from non-White ethnocultural heritages, particularly in relation to their peer and school experiences, including instances of prejudice and racism. In addition, I have had other pre-existing thoughts on how social factors influenced physical activity, such as how gender norms would reduce girls’ participation in physical activities across all age groups. Journaling has allowed me to become aware of my pre-existing thoughts and assumptions and remain open to all aspects of the participants’ experiences. As a result, numerous themes
that emerged in the data were unexpected. For example, I expected the girls’ mothers to primarily take a caregiver role, including in relation to exercise. Yet following the girls over time revealed that girls engaged in fitness-related physical activities with their mothers in adolescence. In addition, the emergence of harassment as a theme related to physical activity was unexpected. The categories and themes that emerged from the analysis were discussed with and supported by the academic supervisor.

While the research explored a broad area of social experiences in several domains, the breadth may have also limited the detail with which specific experiences could be explored. For example, focusing on only one domain, such as the school, and examining changes within the school prospectively, may have allowed for a more detailed exploration of the school environment in relation to physical activity. For example, Theberge’s (2003) research on Canadian female adolescent hockey players allowed for a deeper understanding of how these participants negotiated and challenged notions of gender and physicality in relation to hockey. As a result, Theberge (2003) makes a case that hockey and other sports can offer girls alternative forms of embodiment that are rooted in agency, power, and competence.

**Areas for Future Research**

The present study uncovered a facilitator-to-barrier shift with regards to engagement with physical activities, a process only previously identified by Nagasawa (2009) in this research area. Future research may further explore the shift along the continuum of facilitators and barriers that emerged in this study with a larger and more diverse group of girls. In particular, an examination of girls who are new immigrants to Canada and an exploration with girls of Aboriginal heritage living on reserves could have enriched the findings. Such explorations could help clarify the nature of the shift from facilitators to barriers amongst groups that have been identified as having lower rates of engagement in
physical activity compared to girls from more privileged social locations. The prospective design of this study was found to be important in understanding the shifts in engagement in physical activity over time. Therefore, future research could embark on a more extensive prospective methodology, beginning with girls in childhood and following them through to adulthood. Participatory projects with girls, aiming to enhance their engagement in physical activities may further enhance the understanding of facilitators and barriers to engagement in physical activity.

**Health Promotion and Clinical Implications.**

Research has demonstrated how one’s body experience centrally relates to mental well-being (Piran, 2002; Piran & Teall, 2012). The findings of the present study have health promotion implications for improving the lived experiences of girls through the development of physical activity initiatives to foster positive embodiment. The study has further emphasized puberty as a critical age for a girls’ development and continued maintenance in physical activities.

The results of the study also highlight the importance of interventions in four different social domains. First, the school environment was found to increasingly become less safe and attuned to girls’ unique needs as they aged. The study suggests the importance of implementing school-wide systemic changes, for example: creating safe spaces in which girls’ feel comfortable and joyful in engaging actively with their bodies at school, especially during the sensitive time during pubertal changes. Other systemic changes could include: gender sensitivity training for teachers of physical education classes, increased physical activity opportunities during and after school hours, reduced emphasis on fitness and body modification activities, zero tolerance policies related to sexual harassment and assault, and improvements to existing physical activity initiative programs such as the DPA. To this end,
school environments have the potential to disrupt and change harmful discourses related to gender.

Second, the role of the family highlighted the need to involve families in physical activity initiatives. In particular the girls’ families were seen as reproducing and maintaining gender differences through different roles employed by mothers and fathers in supporting girls’ engagement with physical activities. In particular it would be important for fathers to recognize how disengagement from their daughters and increased focus on their sons is particularly damaging. Additionally, mothers should engage in more pleasure-based activities rather than in fitness focused exercises with their adolescent daughters. It is important to convey to parents the positive impact of refraining from making comments about their daughters’ bodies and encouraging and modeling acceptance and self-care. Parents need to stop commenting negatively on their own bodies, since they are frequently seen as role models. An effort should be made for families to engage in physical activities together and foster engagement with both organized and unorganized forms of activity such as participation in sports but also more economically accessible activities such as hiking and dancing.

Third, peer processes were found to be important in girls’ engagement in physical activity. In particular, peers were found to maintain dominant discourses related to gender and ethnocultural/racial group membership. As such, girls earned social power through conformity to dominant gender norms such as engaging in more sedentary activities. Conversely, girls faced social barriers when resisting gender expectations. Girls from non-White ethnocultural groups were found to encounter both gender and ethnocultural/racial barriers making engagement in physical activities particularly challenging as they aged. Peers’ engagement in facilitated forums that enhance a critical look at cultural forces on the
body, and that also enhance a social justice perspective, could help address adverse peer
norms. Fourth, the role of embodied experiences of physicality played an essential role in
girls’ engagement in physical activity. In particular, the internalization of gender discourses
related to feminine ideals of appearance was found to shift the focus of the body from
functionality to objectification. As girls increasingly objectified their bodies in order to
adhere to societal ideals, they were unable to experience their bodies as a site of competence
and strength. In all domains of the social environment, girls need to be exposed to critical
perspectives towards restrictive gender-based discourses in order to remain positively
connected to their bodies and to maintain engagement in physical activity.

Educators, parents, and clinicians must work together to change gender discourses that
disrupt girls’ freedom to stay physically engaged in their bodies. This work includes creating
more accessible spaces in which girls feel comfortable to engage physically in their bodies.
Empowering girls to remain physically active is one way in which we can help adolescents to
remain positively connected to their bodies. It is hoped that this study, together with other
studies that have utilized critical perspectives on the social contexts and experiences of
adolescent girls’ will inform education reform, clinical practice, and future research in order
to create a world that is safer, more equitable, and empowering for all girls and women.
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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW STUDY: POSTER ADVERTISEMENT

Understanding Girls’ Self and Body Image

Would your daughter like to participate in a research study examining how girls’ understand their self and body image? We are looking for girls aged 9-10 and 13-14 who attend a private or public school setting to participate in our research study.

Who are we?
This study is conducted through the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). The principal investigator is Dr. Niva Piran. One of Dr. Piran’s graduate students, Robyn Legge, will be assisting in conducting the interviews.

What will participants do?
In confidential interviews, girls will spend about 1-1 ½ hours in 2 or 3 interviews. The interviewers will ask girls about their self and body image in different social situations, and how these experiences changed over time.

What will participants get?
Participants will have an opportunity to discuss their experiences of self and body image, and the interviews aim to emphasize participants’ strengths. Girls will also receive their choice of a movie pass or a gift certificate (e.g., HMV music store) with a value of $10.00.

Benefits of the study:
We hope that a greater understanding of the social experiences that affect girls’ self and body image may help parents, teachers and other professionals in providing better conditions for girls to grow into strong women with positive self and body image.
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW STUDY: TELEPHONE INFORMATION

Understanding Girls’ Self and Body Concepts

My name is Dr. Niva Piran. I am a professor in the Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). I understand you wish to hear more details about the study entitled “Understanding Girls’ Self and Body Concepts”.

The goal of the study is to find out more than we currently know about the ways in which girls’ self and body image change over time, and what kind of social experiences change the way girls feel about themselves and their bodies. In order to understand more, we need to hear from girls themselves how they describe their experiences and what they think about how their different experiences affect their self and body image. A better understanding of girls’ experiences can help adults, like parents, teachers, health, and mental health professionals provide girls with better social experiences.

If you agree to allow your daughter to participate, my research assistant or I will interview your daughter 2-3 times for about 1-1 ½ hours, depending on how much time your daughter has, or how long she is interested in being involved in the interviews. In the first (and, if needed and agreed upon, the second) interview, we will interview your daughter about herself and body image, how she describes herself in different social situations, such as with friends, at school, and at home. We will also ask her how herself and body image changed over time. We will invite her to write down her experiences of herself and her body image and to draw herself, if she wanted to. About 4-6 months after the initial interview(s), we will contact you and your daughter to see whether we can schedule a follow up interview with your daughter. In this interview, we will ask your daughter about any further thoughts on these topics, make sure we understood her experience well by reading the summary of the interview(s) with her, and ask her views about the findings of the study. This will be our opportunity to again let your daughter know how much we value her opinions and contribution to the study. We
will use an audio cassette tape recorder to record all interviews. We will conduct the interviews at a private room at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, at your home, or another place of your choosing.

When we finished interviewing all girls who are participating in the research, we will be glad to share with you the results of the research and, in particular, results that are useful for parents to know from the study. We would ask you for the way you prefer to receive this information, by mail, email, or by phone. If you have further questions about the results of the study, you are welcome to contact us.

Confidentiality will be respected and no information that discloses the identity of your daughter will be published without consent unless required by law. The tapes will be kept in locked files for 1 year and then destroyed. The tape will be identified by a research code name only. The tapes will be transcribed and all identifying names and information will be taken out of the transcripts. The transcribed interviews, identified by a research code only, and with all identifying information erased, will be kept in locked files until five years following the completion of the study, and then will be shredded. In any publication related to this research, we will ensure that all identifying information will be omitted so that your child could not be identified. The one exception to this is the very unlikely event that your child indicates that she might do serious harm to herself or others, or that she is being harmed. If that were to happen, we would inform you and appropriate mental health professionals.

In terms of direct benefit, girls often express an interest in having the opportunity to talk about their experiences of themselves and their bodies, and in this interview, myself or my research assistant aim to emphasize how much we value each girl’s views and opinions and the special strengths she has in dealing with day to day situations.

In terms of indirect benefit, we believe that the study may benefit girls. A greater understanding of the social experiences that affect girls’ self and body image may help parents and professionals in providing better conditions for girls to grow into strong women with positive self and body image.

There are no known harms associated with participation in this study. The only potential risk we have identified is that your child may feel some discomfort when talking about her experiences. We will clearly inform your child that she may decline to participate and that if she decides to participate she may skip any question, request a break, or withdraw from the study at any time. We aim to emphasize in the interview your daughter’s strengths. Throughout the interview, and especially before the end of the interview, we will check the way your daughter feels about the interview. Following the session, if you find the discomfort to be more than minor, please contact us so that we can discuss how to provide further support. Should you decide to withdraw your permission for your child to participate in the study, please let me (Dr. Piran) know about your decision by telephoning me at the number below.

In order for your daughter to participate in the study, you will need to agree to her participation and to sign a consent form for your daughter participation. After you sign a consent form, we will describe the study to your daughter, and if she wants to participate in the study, we will read an assent form to her, and she will then state her decision. She is free to make her own choice.

Do you have other questions?
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW STUDY: ASSENT LETTER

*Understanding Girls’ Self and Body Concepts*

We have learned that some girls feel better about themselves and their bodies than some other girls. Sometimes, girls feel good about themselves and their bodies in some places, for example, when playing with their best friend, but not in other places, for example in school. Sometimes girls change the way they feel about themselves and their bodies when they get older. I am working with Professor Niva Piran, who works at the University of Toronto, and we want to continue our research on how girls feel about themselves and their body and what makes them feel the way they do. I am interested in what girls say about themselves and their bodies. We also want to know what makes them feel good or not so good about themselves and their bodies and how this changes over time. You may have questions about the research which I will try and answer now.

*Why are we doing this research?* The thoughts you and the other girls who participated in the study shared with us during the first two interviews were so helpful. Your thoughts helped us understand how girls’ feelings changed about themselves and their bodies over time. I would like to continue to understand and explore these changes with you. I think that if teachers, parents, doctors and other professionals know how girls feel about themselves and their bodies, these adults will be able to be more helpful to girls. I believe that your opinions, thoughts, and feelings are very important.

*What will happen during the study?* This study has two parts. In the first part, I will interview you once for about 1 – 1 ½ hours (or twice if we find we need more time and you agree to meet again). During these times, I will ask you different questions. Some of the questions will be about how you feel about yourself and your body in different places, such as school, with friends, or at home with your family. I will also ask you how your feelings about yourself and your body have changed from the last time we met. I will suggest to you to draw yourself like you did before. In the second part of the study, after I finish all of the interviews, I will contact you to see if you agree to meet one more time. During this time, I will see if you wanted to add anything and I will read to you a summary of what you said in the first interview to make sure I understood you well. I will ask you whether there were changes from the first interview in how you feel about yourself and your body. I will also let you know what the results of the study are and ask your opinion about these results. I will always tape the interviews, in order to type out your answers, think about them, and relate your experiences to that of the other girls interviewed.
Who will know about what I did in the study? The professor I am working with and I will put the results together, talk about it at conferences, and publish it so that parents, teachers, doctors, and other professionals and researchers learn what we have found. The tapes and your drawing or writing will not have your name on them. Research assistants will sometimes help in putting together the results, but they will not know your name. When I write or present about this research, people hearing our presentations or reading what I write will not know who participated in the study. I do not tell names of who participated in the study or give any information that can help people know who you are.

Are there any reasons why you might tell my parents what I said even though you promised to keep it secret? I will not tell your parents about what you talked about unless you tell me that you will seriously hurt yourself or someone else, or someone else is seriously hurting you. In this situation, I will have to tell your parents and make sure you get help. Otherwise, everything you tell me is secret.

Are there good things and bad things about the study? I will ask you different questions about your feelings and thoughts about yourself and your body. It is possible that you will find the questions interesting and that, together, we can think about your special knowledge and other qualities that give you strength in your day to day life.

There are no bad things about the study. The only thing that might happen is that you may feel a little uncomfortable talking about yourself and how you feel about some things. If you feel that you don’t want to answer some of the questions, you can tell me, and we will talk about it. You may also tell me that you want to stop, that you want to skip the question or that you need a break and want to continue some other time. Nothing bad will happen to you if you do that. You are free to participate in a way that makes you comfortable.

Can I decide if I want to be in the study? Yes. Your mother/father signed a letter saying that they agree for you to be in the study, but you don’t have to agree to participate if you don’t want to. Nothing bad will happen to you. You are free to decide what you want to do.

Do you have any other questions? Do you agree to participate in this research?

“I was present when ___________________________ read this form and gave her verbal assent.”

Name of person who obtained assent ___________________________

Signature ___________________________ Date ___________________________
Dear Parent:

My name is Robyn Legge. I am a doctoral student, working with Dr. Niva Piran, in the Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). We are asking your permission for your daughter to continue her participation in the research project we are doing about girls’ self and body concepts: the way they describe their feelings and thoughts about their image of themselves and their bodies when they are in different social situations (for example, with friends, parents, and at school) or when they think about ideal images of girls and boys, and the way these feelings and thoughts have changed over time.

Purpose of the Research
Why are we doing this research? Most of the research to date suggests that, in order to support girls in becoming strong women, we need to find out more about the ways in which girls’ self and body image changes over time, and what kinds of social experiences change the way girls feel about themselves and their bodies. In order to understand more, we need to hear from girls themselves how they describe their experiences and what they think about how their different experiences affect their self and body image. After analysis of the first two interviews, we have realized even more strongly how much is changing for this age group of girls. Through an ongoing follow-up with your daughter, we would have the opportunity of gaining a better understanding of these changes and what it means for girls. A better understanding of girls’ experiences can help adults, like parents, teachers, health, and mental health professionals provide girls with better social experiences.

Description of the Research
If you agree to allow your daughter to participate, I will interview your daughter 2-3 more times for about 1-1 ½ hours, depending on how much time your daughter has, or how long she is interested in being involved in the interviews. In the first (and, if needed and agreed upon, the second) interview, I will interview your daughter about herself and body image, how she describes herself in different social situations, such as with friends, at school, and at home. I will also ask her how herself and body image changed over time. I will invite her to draw her experiences of herself and her body image if she wanted to. About 10 months after this interview(s), I will contact you and your daughter to see whether I can schedule a follow up interview with your daughter. In this interview, I will ask your daughter about any further thoughts on these topics, make sure I understood her experience well, and ask her views about the findings of the study. This will be my opportunity to again let your daughter know how much I value her opinions and contribution to the study. I will use an audio cassette tape recorder to record all interviews. I will conduct the interviews at a private room at the Ontario
Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, at your home, or another place of your choosing.

When we have finished interviewing all girls who are participating in the research, we will be glad to share with you the results of the research and, in particular, results that are useful for parents to know from the study. We would ask you for the way you prefer to receive this information, by mail, email, or by phone. If you have further questions about the results of the study, you are welcome to contact me.

Confidentiality
Confidentiality will be respected and the identity of your daughter will be protected unless required by law. The tapes will be kept in locked files for 1 year and then destroyed. The tape will be identified by a research code name only. The tapes will be transcribed and all identifying names and information will be taken out of the transcripts. The transcribed interviews, and any additional material provided by your daughter during the interviews (such as drawings), identified by a research code only, and with all identifying information erased, will be kept in locked files until five years following the completion of the study, and then will be shredded. In any publication related to this research, we will ensure that all identifying information will be omitted so that your child could not be identified. The one exception to this is the very unlikely event that your child indicates that she might do serious harm to herself or others, or that she is being harmed. If that were to happen, we would inform you and appropriate mental health professionals.

Potential Benefits
In terms of direct benefit, girls often express an interest in having the opportunity to talk about their experiences of themselves and their bodies, and in this interview, we aim to emphasize how much we value each girl’s views and opinions and the special strengths she has in dealing with day to day situations.
In terms of indirect benefit, we believe that the study may benefit girls. A greater understanding of the social experiences that affect girls’ self and body image may help parents and professionals in providing better conditions for girls to grow into strong women with positive self and body image.

Potential Harms, Discomforts or Inconveniences
There are no known harms associated with participation in this study. The only potential risk we have identified is that your child may feel some discomfort when talking about her experiences. I will clearly inform your child that she may decline to participate and that if she decides to participate she may skip any question, request a break, or withdraw from the study at any time. I will aim to emphasize in the interview your daughter’s strengths. Throughout the interview, and especially before the end of the interview, I will check the way your daughter feels about the interview. Following the session, if you find the discomfort to be more than minor, please contact us so that we can discuss how to provide further support. Should you decide to withdraw your permission for your child to participate in the study, please let us know about you decision by telephoning us at the numbers below.

Participation
Participation in research is voluntary. Your daughter may withdraw at any time without consequence and she may skip any questions she is uncomfortable with.

Sponsorship
This dissertation project is being funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Canada Graduate Scholarship.
Should you wish further information about the study, or have any questions please telephone me. My number is listed below.

Sincerely,
Robyn Legge, M.A.
rllege@oise.utoronto.ca
(416) 465-3547

Niva Piran, Ph.D.
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto
(416) 923-6641 Ext, 2339

“I acknowledge that the research procedures described above have been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been informed of the alternatives to participation in this study, including the right not to participate and the right of my child to withdraw at any time. As well, the potential harms and discomforts have been explained to me and I also understand the benefits (if any) of participating in the research study. I know that I may ask now, or in the future, any questions I have about the study or the research procedures. I have been assured that research records relating to my child’s participation in the research will be kept confidential and that no information will be released or printed that would disclose personal identity without my permission unless required by law.”

“I hereby consent for my child to participate.”

__________________________________________
Name of Parent

The person who may be contacted about the research is:

Robyn Legge

__________________________________________
Signature

who may be contacted at:

(416) 465-3547

__________________________________________
Date

__________________________________________
Name of person who obtained consent

__________________________________________
Signature
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW STUDY: INTERVIEW GUIDING QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW – FIRST STAGE (Collected in 1 OR 2 interviews)

(Questions in Italics are geared for the 13-14 year olds; All probes that relate to changes over time, will specifically ask about changes during puberty, for 13-14 year olds)

Introduction, rapport building, and background information

My name is Robyn Legge and I am a student in the university and I am working on this research with Dr. Piran about how girls feel about themselves and their bodies.

Can you tell me about yourself?
First, what is your date of birth?
Where were you born?
Do you know where your parents were born?
How many brothers and sisters do you have?
What does your mother do?
What does your father do?
What are the things you like to do?
What school you go to, what grade, etc?
Who are you living with (family members, ages and number of siblings)?

Introducing the central question and examining girl’s own interest in the research.

(Introducing the central question and examining girl’s own interest in the research. Are there particular things that make her interested in the research? What are they?)

In this research we want to understand how girls feel about themselves and their bodies when they are with friends, at school, at home and in other places where they like to spend time, and what makes them feel this way.
What do you think about these questions?
Do you have a question in your own mind about how girls feel about themselves and their bodies?

Repetition of freedom not to answer questions and the freedom to stop the interview at any point.

I want to make sure that you know that you do not have to answer any question that you do not want to, and that you can also stop the interview whenever you want. Before you leave, I will want to check how you have felt about the interview.

Self concept descriptions and related probes

Here is a chart that invites you to write about the way you feel about yourself when you are with different people. You can write it yourself, or you can let me know and I will write it.
Mother
Father
Sisters
Brothers
Best friend (girl or boys)
Friends (girls)
Friends (boys)
Teachers (coaches)
Others (who?)

Probes for each facet:

What makes you feel this way?
Has it changed over time? (*Interviewer: For 13-14 years old, examine specifically about changes following the onset of puberty*)

**Body concept descriptions and related probes (parallel to self concept questions)**

Here is a similar chart that invites you to write about the way you feel about your body when you are with different people. You can write it yourself, or you can let me know and I will write it.

Mother
Father
Sisters
Brothers
Best friend (girl or boys)
Friends (girls)
Friends (boys)
Teachers (coaches)
Others (who?)

Probes for each facet:

What makes you feel this way?
Has it changed over time? (*Interviewer: For 13-14 years old, examine specifically about changes following the onset of puberty*)

Regarding circles of friends:
Have your friends changed over time? (Explore further if friendships networks include only males or females or have changed regarding gender compositions)

**Activities**

**Eating**

**Experience in Relation to Widely Disseminated Cultural Images**

**Ideal Images of girls and boys**

**Cultural Idols**

**Clothing**
Body Care
Thinking about puberty
Health
Thoughts about the Future

Ending the Interview

This is our time to stop the interview. I learned a lot from you. What you talked about today will help us understand more about how girls feel about themselves. Thank you for your valuable help.

How are you feeling about the interview?

I am so impressed by your ________ (Interviewer: highlight the different strengths of perception, thinking, confidence, knowledge etc.).

Do you have questions you want me to answer?

(Interviewer: if all questions were asked),

Now, I, together with the research team, am going to spend time thinking about your important information and the information of other girls that we interviewed. Will it be OK if I, or somebody else from the research team will contact you in about 4-6 months to see if you agree to meet one more time so we can see if you want to add or change anything. At that time, we can read with you a summary of what you talked about in the beginning of the study and you can tell us if there is anything you want to change. We also want to let you know what the findings of the study are and see if they make sense to you. This is up to you and you can decide to meet or not to meet, or you can think about it, and tell your decision over the phone.

(Interviewer: if there was not enough time to cover all relevant topics),

I wanted to know whether it is OK with you that we meet another time soon, within the next month, and continue with the interview, because there were a few more questions I wanted to ask you. It is up to you and you can decide to meet or not to meet. Would you like to make a decision now, or would you like to think about it and tell your decision over the phone?

INTERVIEW – SECOND PHASE

Introduction

We found the information you talked about in the first interview(s) very helpful and important in helping to understand girls’ self and body image, how being with others affect self and body image and the way self and body image change over time.

Reflections about the first interview(s)

First we wanted to know what were your reactions to the first interview(s) and if you had any more thoughts about what you talked about.

Reading a summary of the first interview(s)
We wanted to read to you (or you may want to read it by yourself) a summary of what we understood you said in the first interview(s) and we wanted to check that we understood you correctly.
What will you change?
Revise?

**Reading a general summary of the results adapted to benefit of this particular participants and highlighting this participant’s contribution to the report**

We wanted to share with you the main findings of the study, results to which you contributed. We want to see if you agree with these results, if they make sense to you, if you will change anything, and also to find out if it is useful for you to hear these results or how can we make the results more useful to you.

**Questions to consider for second, third and fourth interviews RE: LABELS ‘TOMBOY’/‘GIRLY’**

**INTERVIEW – THIRD AND FOURTH PHASE**

**Possible questions to probe:**

**Family dynamics and attractiveness**

**Ideal Girl**

**Body Weight**

**Dieting**

**Ending the Interview**

This is our time to stop the interview. I learned a lot from you. What you talked about today will help us understand more about how girls feel about themselves. Thank you for your valuable help.

How are you feeling about the interview and participating in this project over the last several years?

I am so impressed by your __________ (Interviewer: highlight the different strengths of perception, thinking, confidence, knowledge etc.).

Do you have questions you want me to answer?

---

**APPENDIX F**

**FOCUS GROUP STUDY: LETTER TO PRINCIPALS**
Dear Principal [Insert name],

My name is Sachiko Nagasawa and I am a fifth year doctoral student in the Counselling Psychology program at the University of Toronto, working under the supervision of Dr. Niva Piran, I am conducting a research study to understand what type of physical activities girls choose to do and why they make these choices. We also want to ask them about their suggestions about what will help them stay physically active.

I am writing to you to ask for permission to conduct focus groups at your school with some of your students. Your students are invited to participate in a study called Physical Activity: An Exploration of Girls’ Behavioural Practices. I am writing this letter to obtain your consent to have female students at your school to participate in two focus group interviews with me as well as complete a personal information form indicating their name, age, grade, contact information (scheduling focus groups), geographical location, ethnocultural/racial heritage, family structure, country of origin, parent/guardian’s occupation, level of physical activity, and preferred pseudonym (pretend name) that will be used throughout the study in order that they are not identified. These focus groups will be conducted with six to seven female students (ages 12-14 years old) and myself. Everything discussed in the two focus groups will remain confidential. However, due to the nature of focus groups, the researcher cannot guarantee that the girls will not talk about the material outside of the focus groups. The researcher will encourage your students to respect each other and not discuss the material outside of the group and will give repeated reminders to share experiences they feel comfortable sharing with other kids at school.

I require your consent because I require the consent of you and your school board in order to conduct focus groups with your students.

Previous studies have indicated that regular participation in physical activity is essential for the healthy growth and development of girls and young women. As well, participation in physical activity may also support girls and young women to develop positive self-esteem and overcome personal and social challenges.

In spite of the numerous benefits of physical activity in the lives of girls and young women, studies show that beginning around 12-14 years of age girls’ involvement in physical activity decreases at the same time as these girls begin to develop body image issues. Yet, little research has explored the social processes that influence the physical activity experiences and participation of diverse girls.

Your students are invited to participate in this study because they may be able to provide some important perspectives on what influences girls’ physical activity patterns.

Each focus group will run from 45-50 minutes and will be audio-recorded. The two focus groups will be led by myself and be conducted at lunch hour. It will be important that the focus groups take place in private space, which is less publicly accessible (e.g. staff meeting room, parent’s consultation room).
The information gathered in this study will not identify your students and will be kept strictly confidential by the researcher (myself). Your students’ name, age, grade, contact information, and all data collected will be known and accessible only to the researcher and will not be published in any form. All data generated from the focus groups, including audio recordings hand written focus groups notes, the personal information form, and the transcribed materials will be kept locked up in my supervisor’s office (Dr. Niva Piran) at the university at all times. The personal information form will be destroyed upon transcription of the focus group interviews. The audio recordings and the hand written focus group interview notes will be destroyed after five years. The transcribed material will never identify your students.

Your students’ participation in this study is strictly voluntary and they may withdraw at any time prior to the write up of the results of the study. They may also decline to answer any questions in the focus group interviews or on the personal information form, and decline discussing issues that they find uncomfortable. You will have the opportunity to ask questions or raise concerns at any time during the study. The interviewer will satisfactorily answer all of the appropriate questions. You may also raise questions and/or concerns with my supervisor.

Should one of your students appear at risk or disclose any information to the interviewer (myself) that someone may be harming her (for example, child abuse), you and the appropriate authorities will be immediately notified. In case of the child abuse, the Children’s Aid Society will be contacted along with you even if the child is at risk of being abused or is actually being abused by a person other than a family member. In case one of your students discloses child abuse by her parents/guardians, I have a duty to report to the Children’s Aid Society first (within 24 hours) and not to the abusing parents/guardians. Finally, should one of your students indicate an imminent intention to cause serious harm to herself or to another I will immediately contact a qualified individual to conduct an enhanced risk assessment. You and the parents will be notified immediately.

At the completion of the second focus group, your students will receive a gift certificate for $10.00 to either itunes music or a local bookstore. In addition, participating in the study will provide an opportunity for your students to express their feelings and experiences related to her physical activity experiences and participation. You students’ participation will provide important information to further understanding how social processes influence the physical activity level of young women.

If you grant permission to your students to participate in this study, please sign the attached Consent Forms.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me, Sachiko Nagasawa at sachi.nagasawa@mail.utoronto.ca, or my supervisor, Dr. Niva Piran, in her office at 416.978.0712 or email niva.piran@utoronto.ca.

Thank you for considering my invitation to have your students participate in this research study.
Sincerely,

Sachiko Nagasawa, H.BSc, M.A., Ph.D. Candidate
Applied Psychology and Human Development, University of Toronto
Telephone: 647.678.6004
Email: sachi.nagasawa@mail.utoronto.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Niva Piran
Applied Psychology and Human Development, University of Toronto
Office Telephone: 416.978.0712
Email: niva.piran@utoronto.ca

If you have any questions about the rights of a research participant, please contact the U of T Ethics Review Office at 416-946-3273 or ethics.review@utoronto.ca

APPENDIX G

FOCUS GROUP STUDY: PRINCIPAL CONSENT FORM

I have received and read the attached letter and this consent form.
I understand that:
1) This is a qualitative research study to explore how social processes influence adolescent girls’ experiences and participation in physical activity for a doctoral dissertation project;
2) My students will complete a personal information form indicating their name, age, grade, contact information, geographical location, ethnocultural heritage, family structure, country
of origin, parent/guardian’s occupation, level of physical activity, and preferred pseudonym
(pretend name);
3) My students will participate in two focus group interviews with 6-7 other female participants, and the researcher;
4) There will be two focus groups each will run from 45-50 minutes and will be audio-recorded;
5) The information gathered in this study will not identify my students and will be strictly confidential by the researcher and the participants will be encouraged to respect each other and not discuss the material outside of the focus group. However, the researcher cannot guarantee that girls will not talk about the focus group material outside of the groups. Therefore they will be given repeated reminders to only share experiences they feel comfortable sharing with other kids at school.
6) My students’ participation in this study is strictly voluntary and they may withdraw at any time prior to the write up of the results of the study without negative repercussions;
7) My students may decline to answer any questions in the focus group interviews or on the personal information form, and decline discussing issues that they finds uncomfortable;
8) I will have the opportunity to ask questions or raise concerns at any time during the study. The interviewer will satisfactorily answer all of my questions. I may also raise questions and/or concerns with her supervisor;
9) Should any of my students appear at imminent risk of self-harm, harming another, or disclose any information to the interviewer that someone may harm her (for example, child abuse), the appropriate authorities and I will be immediately notified. The Children’s Aid Society will be contacted along with myself even if the child is at risk of being abused or is actually being abused by a person other than a family member. In the case of any of my students disclosing child abuse by her parental/guardians, I understand that the interviewer has a duty to report to the Children’s Aid Society first (within 24 hours) and not to the abusing parents/guardians.

I understand what is required of the participants in the research study called Physical Activity: A Meaning Based Exploration of Girls’ Behavioural Practices and that my consent is sought because the researcher requires the consent of myself and the school board.

PRINCIPAL CONSENT:
YES I DO consent to having my students participate in this research study.

Print Your Name________________________________________________________
Signature__________________________Date______________________________
Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Sachiko Nagasawa and I am a fourth year doctoral student in the Counselling Psychology program at the University of Toronto. Working under the supervision of Dr. Niva Piran, I am conducting a research study to understand how girls from different backgrounds choose various levels of physical activity and asking them for suggestions in the creation of physical activity initiatives.

Your daughter is invited to participate in a study called Physical Activity: A Meaning Based Exploration of Girls’ Behavioural Practices. I am writing this letter to obtain your consent to have your daughter participate in two focus group interviews with me as well as
complete a personal information form indicating her name, age, grade, contact information (scheduling focus groups), geographical location, ethnocultural heritage, family structure, country of origin, parent/guardian’s occupation, level of physical activity, and preferred pseudonym (pretend name) that will be used throughout the study in order that she is not identified. These focus groups will be conducted with your daughter, as well as six to seven other female participants, and myself. The information gathered in the study will not identify my daughter; will be strictly confidential by the researcher. The participants will be encouraged to respect each other and not discuss the discussions outside of the focus groups. However, the researcher cannot guarantee that girls will not talk about the focus group material outside of the groups. Therefore my daughter will be given repeated reminders to only share experiences she feels comfortable sharing with other kids at school. I require your consent because your daughter is a minor.

Previous studies have indicated that regular participation in physical activity is essential for the healthy growth and development of girls and young women. As well, participation in physical activity may also support girls and young women to develop positive self-esteem and overcome personal and social challenges.

In spite of the numerous benefits of physical activity in the lives of girls and young women, studies show that beginning around 12-14 years of age girls’ involvement in physical activity decreases at the same time as these girls begin to develop body image issues. Yet, little research has explored the experiences of girls from different backgrounds and what factors influence their level of physical activity.

Your daughter is invited to participate in this study because she may be able to provide some important perspectives on the influence of multiple social factors on the physical activity experiences and participation of girls from different backgrounds.

Each focus group will run from 45-50 minutes and will be audio-recorded. The two focus groups will be led by myself and be conducted at lunch hour in a private room in the school.

The information gathered in this study will not identify your daughter and will be kept strictly confidential by the researcher (myself). Your daughter’s name, age, grade, contact information, and all data collected will be known and accessible only to the researcher and will not be published in any form. All data generated from the focus groups, including audio recordings hand written focus groups notes, the personal information form, and the transcribed materials will be kept locked up in my supervisor’s office (Dr. Niva Piran) at the university at all times.

The personal information form will be destroyed upon transcription of the focus group interviews. The audio recordings and the hand written focus group interview notes will be destroyed after five years. The transcribed material will never identify your daughter’s name and all identifying information will be removed.

Your daughter’s participation in this study is strictly voluntary and she may withdraw at any time prior to the write up of the results of the study. She may also decline to answer any questions in the focus group interviews or on the personal information form, and decline
discussing issues that she finds uncomfortable. You will have the opportunity to ask questions or raise concerns at any time during the study. The interviewer will satisfactorily answer all the appropriate questions. You may also raise questions and/or concerns with my supervisor.

Should your daughter appear at imminent risk of self-harm, harm to another, or disclose any information to the interviewer (myself) that someone may be harming her (for example, child abuse), you and the appropriate authorities will be immediately notified. In case of the child abuse, the Children’s Aid Society will be contacted along with you even if the child is at risk of being abused or is actually being abused by a person other than a family member. In case of your daughter disclosing child abuse by her parents/guardians, I have a duty to report to the Children’s Aid Society first (within 24 hours) and not to the abusing parents/guardians.

At the completion of the second focus group, your daughter will receive a gift certificate for $10.00 to either iTunes music or a local bookstore. In addition participating in the study will provide an opportunity for your daughter to express her feelings and experiences related to her physical activity experiences and participation. Your daughter’s participation in the study will provide important information to further understanding how social processes influence the physical activity rates of young women.

If you grant permission to your daughter to participate in this study, please sign the TWO attached Consents Forms.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me, Sachiko Nagasawa at sach.nagasawa@mail.utoronto.ca, or my supervisor, Dr. Niva Piran, in her office at 416.978.0712.

Thank you for considering my invitation to have your daughter’s participation in this research study.

Sincerely,

Sachiko Nagasawa, H.BSc, M.A., Ph.D. Candidate
Applied Psychology and Human Development, University of Toronto
Email: sach.nagasawa@mail.utoronto.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Niva Piran
Applied Psychology and Human Development, University of Toronto
Office Telephone: 416.978.0712
Email: niva.piran@utoronto.ca

If you have any questions about the rights of a research participant, please contact the U of T Ethics Review Office at 416-946-3273 or ethics.review@utoronto.ca
I have received and read the attached letter and this consent form. I understand that:

1. This is a qualitative research study to explore how girls from different backgrounds choose various levels of physical activity and asking them for suggestions in the creation of physical activity initiatives for a doctoral dissertation project;
2. My daughter will complete a personal information form indicating her name, age, grade, contact information, geographical location, ethnocultural heritage, family structure, country of origin, parent/guardian’s occupation, level of physical activity, and preferred pseudonym (pretend name);
3. My daughter will participate in two focus group interviews with 6-7 other female participants, and the researcher;
4. The information gathered in this study will not identify my daughter and will be strictly confidential by the researcher and the participants will be encouraged to respect each other and not discuss the material outside of the focus group. However, the researcher cannot guarantee that girls will not talk about the material outside of the focus groups. Therefore the researcher will give constant reminders to share experiences they feel comfortable sharing with other kids at school.
5. There will be two focus groups each will run from 45-50 minutes and will be audio-recorded;
6. The information gathered in this study will not identify my daughter and will be strictly confidential by the researcher;
7. My daughter’s participation in this study is strictly voluntary and she may withdraw at any time prior to the write-up of the results of the study, without negative repercussions;
8. My daughter may decline to answer any questions in the focus group interviews or on the personal information form, and decline discussing issues that she finds uncomfortable;
9. I will have the opportunity to ask questions about the study at any time during the research study. The interviewer will satisfactorily answer all of my questions. I may also raise questions and/or concerns with her supervisor;
10. Should my daughter appear at imminent risk of self-harm, harm to another, or disclose any information to the interviewer that someone may harm her (for example, child abuse), the appropriate authorities and I will be immediately notified. The Children’s Aid Society will be contacted along with myself even if the child is at risk of being abused or is actually being abused by a person other than a family member. In the case of my daughter disclosing child abuse by her parental/guardians, I understand that the interviewer has a duty to report to the Children’s Aid Society first (within 24 hours) and not to the abusing parents/guardians.

I understand what is required of the participants in the research study called Physical Activity: A Meaning Based Exploration of Girls’ Behavioural Practices and that my consent is sought because my daughter is a minor.

PARENTAL/GUARDIAN CONSENT:

Please print your DAUGHTER’S FULL NAME______________________________________
YES I DO consent to having my daughter participate in this research study.
Print Your Name_________________________________________________________________
Signature__________________________ Date________________________________
APPENDIX J

FOCUS GROUP STUDY: STUDY INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY: A MEANING BASED EXPLORATION OF GIRLS’ BEHAVIOURAL PRACTICES

NAME OF RESEARCHER: Sachiko Nagasawa, Doctoral Candidate, University of Toronto

WHY AM I DOING THIS STUDY?

A lot of girls start to drop out of physical activities around 12 years of age. At the same time, many girls start to feel differently about how they look and how they act. Not many people have asked girls how they feel about themselves or if these feelings are related to physical activities they enjoy or drop out of. In addition, not many people have asked girls what they think can be done to increase and support girls’ participation in physical activities.

I am doing this study to understand how and in what ways sociocultural factors may influence girls’ physical activity. I am interested in conducting focus group interviews with girls ages 12 to 14 years to better understand what social situations you think are influencing your physical activity choices. Physical activities include: dancing, biking, swimming, playing on team sports, gym classes, chores at home, hiking, and yoga. If you are not taking gym classes or are not in any school or after-school sports or activities, your voice and experiences are still important and I would like to know what you have to say.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THE STUDY?
During the study, TWO main things will happen:

You will fill out a PERSONAL INFORMATION FORM. On this form, you will fill out your name, age, grade, geographical location, ethnocultural heritage, family structure, country of origin, parent/guardian’s occupation, and level of physical activity. Also, you will make up a PRETEND name to call yourself during the interview.

I will conduct two focus group interviews at TWO different times. In each focus group interview, I will ask questions about yourself and physical activity and you can answer whichever ones you want. You can also ask me any questions about the research study and I will answer all of them. Each focus group interview will last 45-50 minutes and will take place in a private room at your school during lunch hour. I will audiotape the focus group interviews. I will not put your real name on the tape or the interview notes or call you by your real name during the focus group interviews.

Please remember:

You don’t have to answer any questions in the focus group interviews or fill out any questions on the personal information form that you don’t want to;
You don’t have to talk about something you don’t want to;
During and after the focus group interviews, you can tell me if you want to add something or take something out;
You can also talk to me without me recording anything;

During the study, if you tell me that you are at imminent risk of hurting yourself, or another, or someone may be hurting you or is hurting you in any way, I will have to tell. If someone who is not a family member may be hurting you or is hurting you in any way, I will have to contact the Children’s Aid Society and your parents/guardians. If your parents/guardians may be hurting you or are hurting you in any way, I will have to tell the Children’s Aid Society right away.

Our focus group interviews will help myself and other researchers understand how a lot of girls just like you feel about themselves and their bodies in physical activity.

If you have any questions, you can email me anytime during and after the study at sachi.nagasawa@mail.utoronto.ca. I will answer all of your questions. Your parents/guardians also have my email address.

WHO WILL KNOW ABOUT WHAT I SAID IN THE STUDY?

When I write up my research reports for this study, I might quote you. But I will NEVER describe you or state your real name and link it to your quote. No one but you, the other focus group members and myself will ever know what you say in the focus group interviews and what you write down on the personal information form unless I think or you reveal to me that someone is hurting you. All focus group participants will be encouraged to respect each other and not share the discussions outside of the focus group. However, I cannot guarantee
that girls will not talk about the material outside of the focus groups so it will be important that you only share experiences you feel comfortable sharing with other kids at school.

**CAN I DECIDE IF I WANT TO BE IN THE STUDY?**

YES! Both you and your parents need to agree to allow you to be in this study. If you decide you want to drop out, you can leave at any time prior to the write up of the results of the study, without any problems or consequences!

THANK YOU for thinking about being part of this study!

Sachiko Nagasawa, H.BSc, M.A., Ph.D. Candidate
Applied Psychology and Human Development, University of Toronto
Telephone: 647.678.6004
Email: sachi.nagasawa@mail.utoronto.ca

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the U of T Ethics Review Office at 416-946-3273 or ethics.review@utoronto.ca

If you have read and understood this letter and would like to be in this study, please sign the TWO ASSENT FORMS.
I have received and read this assent form.

I understand my role as a research participant in the study called Physical Activity: A Meaning Based Exploration of Girls’ Behavioural Practices.

PARTICIPANT ASSENT:

YES, I DO want to be involved in this study and participate in the two focus groups.

Please print full name ____________________________________________________________

Signature __________________________________ Date ______________

Contact (to contact for focus group scheduling)

Phone: ________________________________________________

Email: ________________________________________________

I was present when ___________________________________________ read this form and gave her verbal and written assent.

Sachi Nagasawa ___________________________ Date ___________________________
Hi, thank you so much for helping me in my study called, Physical Activity: A Meaning Based Exploration of Girls’ Behavioural Practices

As you already know, I want to have you participate in two focus group interviews because I want to know what influences your level of participation with physical activity and how you feel about yourself, and your body when you are engaged in physical activities. Even if you are not taking gym classes or you are not in any school or after-school sports or activities, I still want to know what you have to say!

Please fill out the information for the questions listed below. Please remember that only you and I will ever know about what you tell me unless you reveal you are being hurt, or are at imminent risk to hurt yourself or another.

I will never link what you write down or what you tell me in the interviews to your real name or a description of you, and no one will access the forms or interviews except me.

1) What is your name? ______________________________________________________

2) What is your age? ______________________________________________________

3) Do you live in the city (urban) or out in the country (rural)? Please circle
   Do you live in a house, apartment, condominium, townhouse, other? Please circle.

4) Please tell me about your ethnocultural heritage/ racial identity. For example, Aboriginal/Catholic, Southeast Asian/Muslim, Hungarian/Jewish, Japanese, Caribbean-Canadian, etc.

5) Please tell me about your family and whom you live with. For example I live with both parents, my older sister and younger brother, I live with my mom during the week and my father, stepmother and stepsister on weekends, and or I live with my adopted parents and brother.

6) Please tell me what country you were born in
7) My parents/guardians’ occupation(s)__________________________________________________________

8) I described myself as: a) not very active, b) somewhat active, and or c) very active. Please circle one. Please also describe what physical activities you enjoy participating in:

9) I need you to make up a name that I can use instead of your real name (so people don’t know it is you!) Please do not use ‘nicknames’ your friends and family know. What is a pretend name that you would like me to use that is not your real name when I refer to you in the focus group interviews and when I write up the study?

Pretend Name: __________________________________________________
APPENDIX M

FOCUS GROUP STUDY: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Hi __________________________. Thank you for being in my research study, Physical Activity: A Meaning Based Exploration of Girls’ Behavioural Practices.

I am going to briefly remind you about this study before we begin our (first/second) focus group interview. I am doing this study to understand how and in what ways different factors may influence girls’ physical activity. Physical activities include: dancing, biking, swimming, playing on team sports, gym classes, chores at home, hiking, and yoga. If you are not taking gym classes or are not in any school or after-school sports or activities, your voice and experiences are still important and I would like to know what you have to say. In the focus group interviews, I will be asking you questions and you can answer whichever ones you want. You can also ask me any questions about the research study and I will answer all of them. Each focus group session will last for 45-50 minutes and only, you, the other focus group participants, and myself will be in the classroom. I will be audio-recording our focus group interviews.

Please remember: You don’t have to answer any questions during the focus group (or fill out any questions on the personal information form) that you don’t want to. Also, you don’t have to talk about something you don’t want to. I suggest that you talk about things you are comfortable sharing with other kids at school. I ask that you respect each other and not share the discussions outside of the focus group. However, I cannot control what you guys say outside of the groups so I will remind all of you to only share experiences you feel comfortable sharing. You have the right to feel comfortable and safe at all times.

We will discuss how everyone feels about the topics we discussed and give an opportunity to resolve any concerns or difficult emotions that have arisen from our conversations after every group session. I am also available during and after focus groups (via email) if participants have any concerns or questions. And you can always talk without me recording what you say.

I will not talk outside of the focus groups about what specific girls said. BUT, if you tell me that you are at imminent risk of hurting yourself, or another, or someone may be harming you or hurting you in any way, I will have to tell someone. If someone who is not a family member may be hurting you or is hurting you in any way, I will contact the Children’s Aid Society along with your parents/guardians. If your parents/guardians may be hurting you or are hurting you in any way, I will have to tell the Children’s Aid Society right away.
When I write reports about the study, I use your pretend name and will not give any identifying information about yourself.

I hope that you HAVE FUN talking to me and your peers about what you see influencing your participation in physical activities and how you feel about your body in physical activities. Our talks will help to understand how a lot of other young women just like you feel about themselves and their bodies in physical activities. If you need to contact me after the focus group interviews, my email address is located on the assent form that you signed. Thanks again for participating! Let’s begin!
APPENDIX N

FOCUS GROUP STUDY: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1) Social Influences

a) Peers
How do peers influence girls’ level of engagement in physical activity?
Are there any labels used to refer to girls who are engaged in sports?

b) Family
Does your parents’ level of physically activity influence your level of activity?
What could families do to help support physical activity?

c) School
What can teachers do to improve physical education classes for girls?
Are there intramurals at lunch hour or after school?
What do you think about Daily Physical Activity (DPA) at your school?
Do you have to change for physical education classes?

d) Body Centered Concerns
Do you think puberty effects girls’ level of physical activity?
What helps girls to resist concerns related to appearance?
Is it okay for girls or women to have muscles or to be muscular-why or why not?

e) Media
Do you think that girls and women’s sports are well represented in the media sources such as
in newspapers, magazines and on television?
Do you have any female athletic role models?

2) Health/Well-Being/Motivation

What is being healthy? What role do you see physical activity playing in being healthy?
Why do you or do not engage in physical activities?
What activities do you love participating in?
Do you think girls change the way they are involved in physical activities, as they get older?
What do you feel when you are active?

3) Access

Do you think you have enough time to engage in physical activity?
Does finances influence your involvement with physical activity?
Do you think you are given equal opportunities in physical activity compared to boys?
Do different cultural groups have different challenges participating in physical activities?
APPENDIX O

FOCUS GROUP STUDY: POSTER ADVERTISEMENT

GIRL RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED
FOR A STUDY ON PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

We are looking for girls from different backgrounds between the ages of 12 to 14

Purpose and Nature of the Study
This study is being conducted by Sachiko Nagasawa, Ph.D. Candidate, of the Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development, at the Ontario Institute for the Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT).

The aim of this study is to understand what type of physical activities girls choose to do and why they make these choices.

Participants would take part in two focus groups with six to seven other participants at lunch hour (45-50 minutes) in a private room in your school. Physical activities include: dancing, biking, swimming, playing on team sports, gym classes, chores at home, hiking, yoga, and much more. If you are not taking gym classes or are not in any school or after-school sports or activities, your voice and experiences are still important and I would like to know what you have to say.

How Can You Participate?
We are looking for girls of different backgrounds between the ages of 12-14. If you are interested in the study you can ask a grade eight teacher to give you a study package.

Will there be Compensation for Participation in the Study?
Participants will receive a $10 gift card to Indigo or itunes after the completion of the second focus group interview.

If you are interested, or would like further information about this study, please contact me at: sachinagasawa@mail.utoronto.ca. You can also pick up a study package from your grade eight teacher!