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Lifestyle and physical activity of young people in Greece: The role of the school and the community in the promotion of active living.

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Abstract

The investigation of young people lifestyles and attempts to influence them to a desirable direction are high priorities on the research agenda for health and education bodies worldwide, since the formulation of the concept of lifestyle begins during childhood with the dynamic interaction between individual characteristics and the physical environment. Physical activity, diet, participation on passive leisure time pursuits, smoking and alcohol consumption are today important components of the young peoples' lifestyle. These factors are directly related to the epidemic spread of obesity and a number of physical and psychological disorders. Greeks, of all age-groups, adopted an actually risky lifestyle in these terms of leisure time pursuits. Greek young people spent a great amount of time daily in passive leisure time pursuits and indicate a low interest towards active play and an increase interest for activities of social interaction and sedentary recreation. Furthermore, Greek young people are classified as the most obese between their counterparts of other European countries and they consist the leading group in the adoption of unhealthy behaviours, such as smoking and alcohol consumption. Appropriate intervention programmes are needed. Studies support the notion that interventions must i) target multi-level changes of both individual-level and environmental-level factors in an integrated approach to PA and health promotion, and ii) tailored to the needs, preferences and characteristics of young people. Schools and community can play a decisive role to this direction.

Keywords: *leisure time pursuits, health, Greek children*

The concept of lifestyle is a relatively stable model of individualized behaviours, habits, attitudes and values that affects human's health (Veal, 1993). Its formulation begins during childhood with the dynamic interaction between individual characteristics and the physical environment. Physical activity (PA), diet, participation on passive leisure time pursuits (such as TV viewing, playing with computers and video games), smoking and alcohol consumption are today important components of the young peoples' lifestyle. However, PA and diet are the two most important, since they are directly related to the epidemic spread of obesity and a number of physical and psychological disorders. The investigation of young people lifestyles and attempts to influence them to a desirable direction are high priorities

on the research agenda for health and education bodies worldwide (Department of Health, 2004). The adoption of an active and healthy lifestyle in childhood may play an ultimate role on the national economy and the quality of life of citizens, while there is evidence that this behaviour tracks throughout adulthood and active people have about half the risk of disease and premature death from all causes. This fact suggests that by encouraging young people towards an active lifestyle, future health of the population as a whole is being promoted (Wang, 2004).

However, despite the well documented benefits of regular participation in PA, a large proportion of young people have adopted a sedentary lifestyle (Armstrong & Welsman, 2007) with poor values on health related aspects. This fact is more obvious between western societies and Greece is not excluded. A number of studies indicated that exist remarkable differences in the lifestyle and the PA patterns of young people in different European countries (Pieron, Telama, Almond & Costa, 1997; Lasheras, Aznar, Merino & Lopez, 2001). Greece is a country with great socio-economic, cultural, educational and environmental differences compared with other countries. These differences may explain to some extent why Greeks, of all age-groups, adopted an actually risky lifestyle in terms of leisure time pursuits, PA, diet, alcohol consumption and smoking (Avgerinos, 2002).

Greek young people spent a great amount of time daily in passive leisure time pursuits such as tv viewing and computer games (21-32 hs/week) (Vlachou et al. 1996; Krassas, Tzotzas, Tsametis, & Konstantinidis, 2001). Also, they overall indicate a low interest towards active play and an increase interest for activities of social interaction and sedentary recreation (Avgerinos, 2002). Lack of time is internationally an important barrier for PA participation and it seems to be equally important for the Greek students as the *participation in private lessons for better academic performance* and the *learning of foreign languages* in private institutions is a unique feature in the range of leisure-time activities for the Greek students (Avgerinos, Stathi, Almond & Kioumourtzoglou, 2004). Findings have shown that participation in PA and sports ranks low among the activities that students enjoy being involved in, and as a result, a great percentage of students can not meet the PA recommendations for health (Avgerinos, Fragouli & Stathi, 2002; Tzormpatzakis & Sleap, 2007). This cutback is more intensive as children moved from the elementary to secondary education, particularly for the girls. Research findings indicate that in Greece, school is the most important setting for the promotion of PA in young

people, while almost 47% of total daily PA was accumulated in the school environment. However, Greek schools offer limited opportunities for participation in organised sport activities. As a result, school can not realize its full potential to cultivate values related to sports and lifelong active lifestyle.

At the same time, Greeks shifted from the traditional 'Mediterranean diet' towards a less healthy diet behavior (Hassapidou, Fotiadou, Maglara, & Papadopoulou, 2006). The combination of the increased consumption of foods with high energy density and low nutrient content and the adoption of a sedentary lifestyle results the epidemic prevalence of obesity in all age groups on both gender. The Attica Study (Panagiotakos et al, 2005) has shown that 53% and 31& of women classified as overweight. Last two years, Greek young people classified as the most obese between their counterparts of other European countries. Finally, in some other important health related behaviours, such as smoking and alcohol consumption, Greek young people won another 'gold metal'. According to a recent study of the University of Athens, 45% of the population aged 16-25 yrs-old and 37% of the teenagers aged 12-17 yrs-old is regular smokers. A large proportion of them are involved in regular alcohol consumption.

The current sedentary lifestyle of Greek young people, the over consumption of poor quality food and regular smoking/alcohol consumption can be an 'explosive blend' for the nation's health and economy next years. The avoidance of the negative consequences could be achieved through appropriate intervention programmes. The conception of the mechanism behind of the lifestyle structure and PA behaviour is the key for success of any initiative. However, many public health interventions to promote active lifestyles have been attempted, but results have been discouraging (Van-Sluijs, McMinn, & Griffin, 2007). Although there are currently no interventions which could be described as a model for "best practice", the available research findings support the notion that interventions must i) target multi-level changes of both individual-level and environmental-level factors in an integrated approach to PA and health promotion, and ii) tailored to the needs, preferences and characteristics of young people. Schools and community can play a decisive role to this direction.

Schools in Greece should promote the adoption of an active and healthy lifestyle by i) establishing a 'health and sport ethos' within the school environment,

ii) creating adequate conditions for regular PA and exercise, iii) improving sport infrastructure, iv) offering opportunities for participation in quality PA/sport programmes, v) adopting and implementing health programmes in order to create 'well informed consumers', and vi) guiding parents to play a role model and to encourage their children to get more opportunities for participation in PA, and spend less time in sedentary recreation at home. Some practical ideas easy applied to Greek schools listed below:

1. Give to children opportunities for active play during recess periods of school day by a) creating supportive and safe physical environment, and b) making available sport materials (balls, ropes, rackets etc).
2. Organize formal and informal sport games and leagues within the school.
3. Create more attractive and enjoyable physical education lessons.
4. Create channels of communication between the school and the local health and sport authorities.
5. Organize seminars to inform parents about the risk of their children and offer practical ideas for action.
6. Offer to children quality and healthy food choices at school buttery.
7. Collaborate with the community in order to create the condition for active transportation towards and from school.
8. Create a 'health and sport culture' within the school in order to promote specific values and practices.
9. Give every day the right messages being role model for children.

Finally, local communities in Greece should develop appropriate health policies, design attractive programmes and create the necessary infrastructure so that young people can move and play safely.

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