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## "I'd Rather Dance Outside": A Phenomenological Examination of Youth Experiences in Outdoor, Noncompetitive Physical Activity

Richard W. Christiana  
*Appalachian State University, christianarw@appstate.edu*

Marsha Davis  
*University of Georgia*

Melissa Freeman  
*University of Georgia*

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## "I'd Rather Dance Outside": A Phenomenological Examination of Youth Experiences in Outdoor, Noncompetitive Physical Activity

### Abstract

Research has shown that youth with low levels of fitness or little interest in organized sports and traditional physical education are more likely to participate in noncompetitive outdoor physical activity. However, little is known about what influences youths' decisions to participate in these activities. This study examined rural young adolescents' experiences of participating in noncompetitive outdoor physical activity. In depth qualitative interviews were conducted with young adolescents aged 11-13 years (N = 24) from one rural middle school to elicit detailed descriptions of experiences of participation in outdoor physical activities. Interview transcripts were analyzed inductively and emergent themes related to young adolescents' participation in outdoor, noncompetitive physical activity were identified. Twelve themes were categorized as either respondents' relationship with the outdoors, activity preferences, and external conditions that determine participation. The results of the study indicate the presence of a complex dynamic relationship of social and physical environmental factors influencing young adolescents' participation in outdoor activities. These include parental and peer influence, personal choice and enjoyment, spending time outdoors, appreciation for nature, availability of equipment, and previous experiences of participation. More research is needed to corroborate the results of the study and to better understand youths' preferences for noncompetitive versus competitive physical activity.

### Keywords

Motivation, Phenomenological Interviewing, Physical Activity, Rural, Symbolic Interactionism, Young Adolescents

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## **“I’d Rather Dance Outside”: A Phenomenological Examination of Youth Experiences in Outdoor, Noncompetitive Physical Activity**

Richard W. Christiana

Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, USA

Marsha Davis and Melissa Freeman

University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, USA

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*Research has shown that youth with low levels of fitness or little interest in organized sports and traditional physical education are more likely to participate in noncompetitive outdoor physical activity. However, little is known about what influences youths’ decisions to participate in these activities. This study examined rural young adolescents’ experiences of participating in noncompetitive outdoor physical activity. In depth qualitative interviews were conducted with young adolescents aged 11-13 years (N = 24) from one rural middle school to elicit detailed descriptions of experiences of participation in outdoor physical activities. Interview transcripts were analyzed inductively and emergent themes related to young adolescents’ participation in outdoor, noncompetitive physical activity were identified. Twelve themes were categorized as either respondents’ relationship with the outdoors, activity preferences, and external conditions that determine participation. The results of the study indicate the presence of a complex dynamic relationship of social and physical environmental factors influencing young adolescents’ participation in outdoor activities. These include parental and peer influence, personal choice and enjoyment, spending time outdoors, appreciation for nature, availability of equipment, and previous experiences of participation. More research is needed to corroborate the results of the study and to better understand youths’ preferences for noncompetitive versus competitive physical activity. Keywords: Motivation, Phenomenological Interviewing, Physical Activity, Rural, Symbolic Interactionism, Young Adolescents*

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Continually engaging in adequate levels of physical activity is associated with numerous health benefits later in life including a decreased risk of heart disease, diabetes, various forms of cancer, and other chronic diseases (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004). Research has shown that physical activity behaviors may have their roots in childhood (Gordon-Larsen, Nelson, & Popkin, 2004; Tammelin, 2005). The development of positive physical activity behaviors during childhood has been shown to be associated with an increased likelihood of maintaining physical activity during adulthood (Gordon-Larsen et al., 2004; Tammelin, 2005; Thompson, Humbert, & Mirwald, 2003). Therefore it is important to understand the aspects of physical activities and the contexts within which children and adolescents participate in physical activity to foster the early development of positive habits.

Longitudinal studies of youth predictors of physical activity during adulthood find the strongest relationships to be directly attributed to the natural athletic abilities of children (Tammelin, 2005; Telama, Yang, Laakso, & Viikari, 1997). Children with increased fitness, physical activity self-efficacy, and participation in competitive sports are more likely to be active as children and adults. A primary concern then is to increase the levels of physical activity of children who are not fit, have low perceived competence in their abilities, or do

not have an interest in participating in competitive sports (Barnett, Morgan, van Beurden, & Beard, 2009). Increasing these children's physical activity can increase motor skills, fitness, and self-efficacy that may promote lifelong participation in physical activity.

Noncompetitive physical activities, including unstructured play, may attract children who shy away from or have little interest in sports. Unstructured play provides youth with physical, psychological, emotional, and behavioral benefits (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005). Noncompetitive physical activities do not require participants to compete against one another such as biking, skateboarding, swimming, climbing trees, and games such as tag. During these activities, the participants determine their own level of involvement and establish parameters of any rules concerning time limits and any social interaction between participants. In contrast, competitive activities are usually supervised by others (i.e., coaches, referees, parents) and are bound by established rules that determine the expected level of participation, the characteristics of participants' interaction, and the amount of time that the activity will last (Rees, 2000).

The outdoors presents a promising setting for the promotion of physical activity among children since their physical activity in the outdoors is usually in the form of noncompetitive, creative, unstructured play that appeals to them (Pate, Baranowski, Dowda, & Trost, 1996; Vadala, Bixler, & James, 2007). Studies investigating children's play have shown that children are more vigorously active when they are outdoors as opposed to indoors (Baranowski, Thompson, DuRant, Baranowski, & Puhl, 1993; Sallis et al., 1993). This is especially important for rural communities where outdoor space is more plentiful than urban and suburban areas. According to a recent review of the literature, rural children spend more time in the outdoors engaged in unstructured activities than urban children (Sandercock, Angus & Barton, 2010). Therefore, the outdoor space in rural areas may allow for more opportunities for play.

Research investigating youth's experiences in outdoor unstructured play from the perspective of youth themselves has largely been conducted outside of the United States (Brockman, Jago, & Fox, 2011; Hume, Salmon, & Ball, 2005; Miller & Kuhaneck, 2008; Thompson, Rehman, & Humbert, 2005; Veitch, Salmon, & Ball, 2007). Of the studies conducted in the United States, qualitative research on youths' experiences in physical activity has primarily focused on participation in organized sports and traditional physical education (Azzarito & Solmon, 2009; Azzarito, Solmon, & Harrison, 2006; Gilbert, 2001). Currently there is a lack of understanding of youths' experiences in physical activities that are more noncompetitive in nature. Of the qualitative studies that have investigated youths' physical activity more generally, none have focused on distinguishing between the contexts of competitive and noncompetitive (Thompson et al., 2003; Thompson et al., 2005). The purpose of the current study is to examine young adolescents' experiences of engaging in noncompetitive outdoor physical activity to more fully understand factors that influence decisions to participate.

The present study was conducted as part of a larger study examining the influential factors of rural young adolescents' participation in noncompetitive outdoor physical activity. The larger study consisted of conducting an initial questionnaire collecting data related to self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2002) and the theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1985, 1991) followed by qualitative interviews and analysis. SDT and TPB are two social-cognitive theories that have been widely applied to physical activity behaviors. The present study is the qualitative phase that sought to expand upon the initial questionnaire to understand the motivations and intentions of young adolescents' to participate in noncompetitive outdoor physical activity through the rich contextual description they provide. The social-cognitive theories that formed the basis of the

questionnaire thus helped guide and frame the current study within the context of motivational factors of participation in physical activity.

SDT speculates that motivation to perform a behavior is a process involving the interplay of various psychological, social, and environmental conditions (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2002). Central to SDT is the quality of a person's motivation as more self-determined or controlled. When motivation is self-determined and more intrinsically regulated, a person feels their behavior is their own choice and within their control. When motivation is not self-determined and is more extrinsically regulated, a person feels pressured or controlled by external factors such as the significant others around them. Studies have consistently found that engaging in physical activity is associated with self-determined motivation and that interventions based on SDT increase youth participation in leisure time physical activity (Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2009; Gillison, Osborn, Standage, & Skevington, 2009). The TPB states that the most influential factor in determining behavior is behavioral intention, which is determined by individual's attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of control related to the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). The TPB has been used extensively to determine engagement in physical activity and studies consistently have found a strong relation between the TPB and initiation of physical activity (Ajzen & Driver, 1992; Hagger, Chatzisarantis, & Biddle, 2002).

The study fills a gap in knowledge regarding the participation of young adolescents in noncompetitive outdoor physical activities that may appeal more to youth who are at increased risk of physical inactivity. The study strives to answer the following questions: 1) What influences young adolescents to participate in noncompetitive outdoor physical activity? And 2) Do any differences exist in participation between noncompetitive and competitive outdoor physical activity?

## Method

### Participants

Participants for the initial quantitative survey were youth aged 10-14 years from one rural middle school in the southeastern United States. Approximately 1350 students were enrolled in the middle school. The initial quantitative survey consisted of students filling out a questionnaire on items related to variables from SDT and the TPB. All students were given an opportunity to participate in the quantitative phase and 83.8% ( $N = 1032$ ) of students participated.

For the subsequent qualitative phase that is presented here, 24 students aged 11-13 years were selected based on their responses to items on the questionnaire related to demographic variables (gender and race/ethnicity) and self-reported participation in noncompetitive outdoor physical activity. Brief descriptions of the participants identified by pseudonyms are presented in Table 1. An equal number ( $n = 6$ ) of noncompetitively physically active and inactive males and females were selected based on the extremes of questionnaire responses to compare responses from the broadest spectrum possible on the physically active-inactive continuum. Nine respondents identified their race as "Black/African American," eight as "White," three as "Hispanic/Latino," one as "American Indian/Alaska Native," and three as "Other." There was almost an even split in the grade level of the respondents with 13 in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and 11 in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Eight of the respondents participate in the free or reduced lunch program at the school.

The university's institutional review board approved the study procedures. All interviews with students were conducted at the middle school during the Spring of 2012.

## Theoretical Framework

Most research has focused on parents and teachers for information on what engages youth in outdoor play, especially in the United States (Darbyshire, MacDougall, & Schiller, 2005). The current study gives youth a voice as the most important informants of their experiences of participating in outdoor activities. An interpretive symbolic interactionist perspective grounded by phenomenology informed the methodology of this study (Blumer, 1969; Crotty, 1998; Mead, 1934). Within this perspective, youth are considered to be autonomous and cognizant with their own outlook on lived experience rather than passive members of society (Morrow, 2001). Symbolic interactionism and phenomenology complement one another as both emphasize exploring the construction of action and meaning (Charmaz, 1990, 2006).

Interviews were conducted using a phenomenological approach from within a symbolic interactionist perspective. The use of phenomenological interviewing from the vantage point of another theoretical framework is useful when the focus of the interviews is to go beyond pure description of individual experience (Patton, 2002). While phenomenology is primarily concerned with obtaining detailed descriptions of phenomena as experienced by individuals, symbolic interaction offers a perspective from which to examine shared meanings that are created through interactions (Crotty, 1998; Patton, 2002). This approach to interviewing aided in obtaining detailed descriptions of young adolescents' experiences of noncompetitive outdoor activity while providing a means to move beyond mere description of experiences to gain a more detailed understanding of the factors influencing young adolescents' motivation and participation.

**Table 1.** Description of Participants based on Questionnaire Responses

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity*	Age	Grade	Free/Reduced Lunch Program?	PA or PIA**	Participate in Competitive Activities?
Anthony	M	H	12	7 <sup>th</sup>	No	PIA	Rarely
Bobby	M	W	unk	6 <sup>th</sup>	No	PA	Frequently
Cassandra	F	W	11	6 <sup>th</sup>	No	PA	Frequently
Corey	M	AA	12	6 <sup>th</sup>	No	PIA	Occasionally
David	M	W	12	6 <sup>th</sup>	No	PA	Frequently
Denise	F	AA	12	7 <sup>th</sup>	No	PA	Frequently
Drake	M	AA	12	7 <sup>th</sup>	Yes	PIA	Frequently
Elaine	F	AA	13	7 <sup>th</sup>	No	PIA	Rarely
Erin	F	O	12	6 <sup>th</sup>	No	PA	Frequently
Ian	M	W	12	7 <sup>th</sup>	No	PA	Occasionally
James	M	AA	11	6 <sup>th</sup>	No	PA	Frequently
Jen	F	W	12	7 <sup>th</sup>	No	PA	Frequently
Kate	F	AA	13	7 <sup>th</sup>	Yes	PIA	Rarely
Kenny	M	AA	12	7 <sup>th</sup>	Yes	PA	Frequently
Laura	F	W	11	6 <sup>th</sup>	Yes	PA	Frequently
Megan	F	H	11	6 <sup>th</sup>	No	PIA	Occasionally
Michael	M	H	unk	6 <sup>th</sup>	Yes	PIA	Rarely
Michelle	F	AA	12	7 <sup>th</sup>	Yes	PIA	Rarely
Monica	F	AA	13	7 <sup>th</sup>	No	PIA	Rarely
Nick	M	O	unk	6 <sup>th</sup>	Yes	PIA	Occasionally
Peter	M	AI	12	6 <sup>th</sup>	Yes	PIA	Rarely
Roger	M	O	11	6 <sup>th</sup>	No	PA	Frequently
Sarah	F	W	13	7 <sup>th</sup>	No	PIA	Rarely
Tina	F	W	unk	6 <sup>th</sup>	No	PA	Frequently

\* W=White; AA=Black/African American; H=Hispanic/Latino; AI=American Indian/Alaska Native; O=Other \*\* PA=Physically Active; PIA=Physically Inactive

## **Interview Procedures**

Participants were initially contacted during school hours to meet in groups of 4-5 with the PI (first author) for a brief group interview. Participants were given disposable cameras for one week and asked to bring the cameras home to take pictures of the activities they enjoy. During the group interview participants were asked to think of the pictures that they might take with the camera. This allowed participants to meet and spend a short time with the interviewer to help ease some of the possible awkwardness of the interview situation during a longer follow-up one-on-one interview (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). The group interview took a conversation-style of questioning and lasted approximately 10 minutes. Once cameras were collected, participants were asked to engage in the follow-up one-on-one interview.

The one-on-one interview began with a discussion of the pictures that the participant took during the week to help open up dialogue. The pictures from the camera were downloaded to a laptop computer and displayed during the beginning of the one-on-one interview. Similar methods using disposable cameras have been shown to be useful in getting children to talk and open up during interviews (Darbyshire et al., 2005; Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Morrow, 2001). This strategy also provided a starting point to the interview scenario and a way to establish shared meaning between participants and the interviewer (Ellis, 2006; Punch, 2002).

The one-on-one interviews were conducted by the PI and were semi-structured, consisting of an interview guide with a set number of open-ended questions asked. Using the phenomenological approach, the study participants' detailed description of an experience engaged in an outdoor activity was the primary focus of the interviews. This description given by each participant then guided the rest of the interview as the participant reflected on the significance and meanings that this experience has for him or her. Appropriate probing questions were used so that the participants would provide detailed information regarding their motivation and intention to engage in the type of activity described, the aspects of the activity that they enjoy most, the interactions with peers and adults while engaging in the activity, their past participation in such activities, and their continued participation in the type of activity. Through the detailed description of an outdoor activity, importance was inferred as those aspects of the description that were given the most weight or prominence by the respondent as indicated by repetition and time spent discussing the particular aspect (Patton, 2002).

The interviewer approached each interview with an open mind for how each participant constructed meaning from childhood experiences in the outdoors. Participants guided the interview through their descriptions of experiences, but the interviewer maintained focus throughout the interview on the aspects of the participants' involvement in the described activity. The one-on-one interviews each lasted approximately 30 to 50 minutes and were audio recorded. Assessment of data saturation was ongoing and revealed that there was a lull in the amount of new information being provided by participants by the 18<sup>th</sup> interview with the amount of new information continuing to decrease through the last 6 interviews.

## **Data Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed verbatim immediately following their conclusion and were analyzed on an ongoing basis throughout data collection. Initially, the transcripts were read individually by each author and open coded for potential themes that emerged. Potential themes were identified according to common attributes such as being frequent, unique, and previously unrecognized (Merriam, 1998). Themes were identified in relation to the research

questions, which focused on aspects of motivation and intention of being outdoors participating in activity. After the open coding process, potential themes were compared across the transcripts in order to identify similarities. Focused codes were agreed upon by all authors to reduce bias from any one researcher. Focused codes were based on the similarities of themes across the transcripts and were then reduced to form overarching categories. When a code was found in only one transcript and not in any of the others, the code was either integrated to expand upon another existing code when deemed appropriate or was thrown out of the analysis if it did not provide additional pertinent information to answer the research questions.

## Results

Emerging themes fell into three broad categories relating to respondents' relationship with the outdoors, activity preferences, and external conditions that determine participation in activities. An overview of the themes is provided in Table 2. The first theme will be discussed in detail to show how all of the themes were derived with subsequent themes being discussed more succinctly.

**Table 2.** Themes from Data Analysis

Category	Theme
Relationship with the outdoors	1) Outdoors person sees value in what the outdoors provides 2) Indoor person views outdoors as boring unless with others
Activity preferences	3) Outdoor activities as active and indoor activities as inactive 4) Intrinsic properties 5) Extrinsic properties 6) Social time with others 7) Spending time with animals and pets
External conditions that determine participation in activities	8) Motivators 9) Family as role-models 10) Parent concern for safety 11) Availability of resources and equipment for activity 12) Previous experiences in outdoor activity

### Relationship with the Outdoors

Whether respondents spent more time outside or inside after school and on the weekends had a connection with their relationship with the outdoors. Though the relationship was communicated in various ways, the positive or negative direction that the relationship took was different among the respondents and was influenced by the time spent indoors and outdoors. The following themes indicated that respondents' view of the outdoors was different according to whether they identified themselves to be outdoors or indoors people.

#### **The outdoors person sees the value in what the outdoors provides**

Ten of the respondents said that they spend a large majority of their time outside after school and that the decision to be outside is largely their choice. When asked what it was about the outdoors that they liked, these respondents described an appreciation for the outdoors and what the outdoors provides them that was not provided by other respondents. Michael was one of the few respondents that spends a majority of his time outside but reported not participating in noncompetitive outdoor physical activities on the questionnaire. Interestingly, he talked a lot about the outdoor activities that he liked to do during the interview and made clear references to his appreciation for nature and the need to protect it



saying “I just like nature. Sometimes I take a bag with me and pick up trash around the roads and everything...cause I think people should take care of nature cause we need it to live.”

Laura also showed an appreciation for the outdoors, however Laura differed slightly from Michael in that she saw the loss of natural resources as being very personal and having an influence on the time that she spends with her family. Laura said “I’m just hoping that there’ll still be fish in there so that when my dad and I go, my dad me and my sister go fishing, we’ll all be able to catch some fish and stuff,” showing concern about a recent drought and the resulting lack of fish in the ponds near her home.

Kenny said, “I’d rather dance outside because it’s like nature and you can just hear different sounds and dance to like simple beats and stuff...I like to hear noises outside. I might hear birds singing or tweeting and then like a hawk or eagle and like there’s like dogs and cats come around and bark and meow and stuff. And I just love like being outside and hearing how nature sounds.” Kenny’s value of the outdoors was expressed in terms of what it provides him in the specific activities that he likes to do. He sees the outdoors as a place that provides him with the things that are needed to dance and this shapes his view of the outdoors.

Kenny and several other respondents talked about how more space is available in the outdoors compared to the indoors for movement and when building and constructing structures such as forts and dirt bike ramps. Almost half of the respondents made reference to the outdoors as a place that they could spend time alone. Alone time was valued by these respondents and each saw the outdoors as providing a space that was fundamentally different than the indoors. Drake was one that mentioned a variety of different noncompetitive activities that he likes to do, but when asked about his favorite activity, said he likes to “just sit down and look at the sky and just think about stuff...what I’m doing the next day and stuff.” Laura mentioned her time spent outdoors walking alone as time for reflection, “sometimes when I go by myself I just, I have some time to myself and be able to like talk to myself and I talk to God sometimes.”

### **The indoor person views the outdoors as boring unless with others**

Six respondents specifically said that they spend more time inside than outside and prefer to spend their time indoors versus outdoors. Among these respondents there was consensus that the outdoors was boring and uninteresting unless outdoors with friends. Furthermore, the preference of these respondents to remain indoors rather than go outside was due more to the boring characteristic of the outdoors rather than any exciting or interesting characteristic of the indoors. In fact, none of these respondents mentioned anything exciting about spending time indoors.

### **Activity Preferences**

Respondents discussed their participation in activities in terms of the aspects of the activities that they liked and disliked. The preference for specific characteristics of activities was important for respondents in forming their reasons to participate in certain activities. The following themes each spoke to a particular preference that respondents viewed as important to their decision to participate in activities.

### **Outdoor activities as active and indoor activities as inactive**

About half of respondents preferred to participate in outdoor activities while the rest preferred either indoor activities or did not have a preference. When respondents discussed

their favorite activities, differences in physical activity level existed according to whether the activities were outdoors or indoors. Indoor activities that were mentioned by respondents as being a favorite were sedentary in nature and included watching TV, playing video games, going online on the computer and cell phone, and texting. Compared to indoor activities, the outdoor activities discussed by respondents were more physically active. The outdoor activities that were mentioned by respondents as a favorite the most were playing sports both competitively and noncompetitively, hunting and fishing, and riding bikes and 4-wheelers.

### **Intrinsic properties**

Intrinsic properties of activities are those that pertain to the autonomy, or choice, that a person perceives they have in whether or not they participate in the activity. Respondents alluded to personal enjoyment of participating in noncompetitive outdoor activities. One of Kenny's favorite activities was dancing outside and his enjoyment of dancing showed in his discussion of what he likes about dancing. Having a choice in whether to participate in activities was an important aspect in determining enjoyment of noncompetitive outdoor activities for respondents. When Jen discussed the times when she goes horseback riding, she said "I would go outside and I would just decide I'm going to ride her that day." Michelle also alluded to the choice she has when saying "I can go out whenever...if I'm not doing anything with my brother then I can, I will go outside and walk or do whatever."

Unlike noncompetitive outdoor activities, participation in organized sports was viewed by several respondents as lacking any choice. Elaine mentioned her lack of choice at several points during the interview as one of the aspects of participating on the school track team that she disliked. She discussed her frustration with not having any choice in the track events she was told to do by her coaches. Elaine also discussed how her mother might not allow her the choice of whether to participate on the track team at all next year. Elaine's ability to choose her participation on the track team was hindered by the adults in her life and she viewed this lack of control in making choices concerning her participation very negatively. Elaine mentioned that she wanted to participate on the track team, but also wanted to feel that she could voice her concerns to coaches and her mother about her participation.

### **Extrinsic properties**

Extrinsic properties of activities are those aspects of an activity that are external and control whether a person participates or not. Several respondents mentioned competition and competing against others as a favorite aspect of playing sports. An example was Tina who said, "I like the competition in it...I like to play with other people. Then see their skills I guess." The drive to succeed and win in competitive sports was highlighted by respondents in various ways as well, such as David who said that "It makes you wanna do it more because you wanna get better so you can win."

### **Social time with others**

The social aspect of participating in activities was important to respondents like Cassandra who referred to participating in noncompetitive activities such as 4-wheeling as being more fun with others, "If you do it by yourself it's like, it's fun but it's not as fun as you would doing it with your cousins or whatever." David and Drake thought that spending time with friends was one of the benefits of participating in organized sports and a reason why they liked to participate.

### **Spending time with animals and pets**

Noncompetitive activities involving animals and pets were mentioned by a majority of respondents. The activities ranged from riding horses to walking and playing with their dogs. For some respondents, spending time with their pets was one of the only reasons why they would go outside. Animals were also mentioned in terms of a general love of animals that formed a connection with nature and the outdoor environment.

### **External Conditions that Determine Participation in Activities**

Family members and friends played important roles as motivators, role-models, and barriers to respondents' participation in outdoor physical activity. Availability of resources and equipment related to outdoor activity near respondents' homes as well as previous experiences of participation in outdoor activities were also influential. These themes are distinct from the individual preferences that respondents indicated in that each one reflects the social and physical environment of respondents that are for the most part out of their control.

### **Motivators**

Respondents referred to several different people in their lives that motivated them to be outside and to participate in outdoor activities. Parents were mentioned by respondents most often as motivators. Respondents referred to how parents encouraged and participated in outdoor activities with them on a regular basis. Roger said that his mother encourages him to be outside with statements such as "you need to go outside and have a little fun." Kenny discussed how his parents support and encourage him to participate in activities when he said, "well they like, if I dance or something, they'll like watch and cheer me on."

In contrast, most of the respondents who spend a majority of their time inside described their parents as less encouraging to outdoor activities. An example was Anthony who said, "My dad he plays soccer with me, but most of the time he's inside working."

Respondents also discussed siblings and friends as motivators. Bobby and Laura spend most of their time outside after school and described how they and their siblings would encourage each other to get outside to do outdoor activities. Bobby also described riding BMX bikes as something that he and his brother have the most in common and that this forms a bond between them. Additionally, Cassandra and Drake discussed how they would often invite their friends to play outside, and vice versa.

### **Family as role-models**

Role-models mentioned by respondents were all family members and acted as role-models both through past and current active involvement in activities themselves. Drake mentioned that his mother's enjoyment of riding 4-wheelers now and as a child influenced his own enjoyment of riding. Corey mentioned that he likes to walk around the neighborhood and that his mother's habit of walking regularly was a reason why he likes to walk. Kenny discussed the important role his older sister has had on his participation in dancing and basketball. Kenny's sister acted as a role-model and greatly influenced Kenny's enjoyment of these activities.

### **Parent concern for safety as barrier**

Several respondents discussed their parent's concern for safety as a reason that they do not participate in certain outdoor activities. Though Sarah had a friend that was located within walking distance to her house, she was not allowed to walk down the street and neither was her friend. The concerns for safety of both Sarah's and her friend's mothers hindered their ability to spend time participating in activities outdoors. Anthony talked about his mother's concern for safety being much different than his father's. Anthony talked about how his mother was very concerned for his safety with getting back into playing soccer after a minor injury while his father wanted Anthony to begin playing again. Though traditionally a competitive sport, Anthony viewed his playing soccer with friends as more noncompetitive than competitive given the casual nature of the activity of just "running and kicking around the ball" rather than keeping any score or teams. After his injury Anthony sided with his mother and decided to not play soccer anymore.

### **Availability of resources and equipment for activity**

All respondents identified that they had outdoor space for activities available near home and that the amount of space was equal to at least half of a football field. The outdoor space ranged from front yard and backyard space to nearby open fields, woods, lakes, and ponds. While free access to the outdoor space was not mentioned by all respondents, over three quarters of the respondents identified that they could use the outdoor space whenever they wanted provided that parents gave permission.

Respondents talked about how school clubs provided them with opportunities to participate in new outdoor activities and to interact with other students that had similar interests. Having access to equipment that is needed for outdoor activity was also mentioned by respondents as influential to their participation. Access to swimming pools, basketball hoops, and playgrounds were mentioned most often.

### **Previous experiences in outdoor activity**

Respondents that had positive past experience participating in outdoor activities referred to these as reasons for their interest and continued participation. Ian's favorite activities were hunting and fishing. He referred to having participated in these activities since he was younger as an important reason why he likes to still go hunting and fishing. Like other respondents who talked about hunting, Ian described hunting as quality time spent outdoors with his father even when he was too young to participate in shooting a gun, bow, or harvest an animal. Conversely, Peter used to participate in the Boy Scouts, but does not anymore due to his negative experience of being forced to stop due to his family moving. Peter did not want to get involved with Boy Scouts anymore because he felt that he would have to stop participating in it again.

Injury experiences were mentioned as reasons for some respondents to stop participating in certain activities. As mentioned previously, one of Anthony's favorite activities was to play soccer with friends in his neighborhood. However, since having had an injury while playing soccer, Anthony has decided to not participate in soccer anymore even though the injury itself has long since healed. In addition, Anthony currently likes to skateboard and was aware of the risk of injury of skateboarding. He identified that he would stop skateboarding or skateboard less frequently if he has a significant injury experience. Though Anthony's decision to stop playing soccer with his friends was influenced by his mother's reaction to his injury, Anthony also identified the experience of injury itself as

having an influence on his decision to side with his mother over his father on whether or not to keep participating in soccer. However, injury experiences were not seen by all respondents as a deterrent to participating in outdoor activities, but rather saw their injury experiences as a learning moment. Bobby had injured himself twice fairly badly while riding BMX bikes and viewed his injuries as experiences that tested his resolve to keep participating when he said, "It's just the drive to something, makes you wanna do it and when you get hurt it's just, it teaches you and you do it again."

## Discussion

The results provided evidence for 12 emerging themes across 3 categories relating to the research questions. Respondents that spend most of their time after school outside expressed an appreciation for nature and the spatial features that the outdoors provides for activities. In contrast, respondents who spend most of their time indoors viewed the outdoors as boring with nothing to do and only spend time outdoors when with friends. Therefore, fostering youths' familiarity and appreciation for nature through time spent outdoors may be important in order to increase their interest in outdoor activities. Providing youth with more opportunities for time spent in the outdoors may prove beneficial to build positive attitudes towards nature and the environment that may influence intrinsic motivation as indicated by SDT to engage in outdoor activities. Reciprocally, personal enjoyment of being outdoors in nature may motivate youth and adults to spend more time outdoors which has been shown to be related to physical activity levels (Baranowski et al., 1993). This may be especially salient for youth living in rural areas.

Characteristics of noncompetitive outdoor activities that respondents prefer are the personal enjoyment they get, having a choice in whether to participate, spending quality time with friends and siblings as well as with animals and pets. These characteristics have also been found in studies conducted outside of the United States to be related to youths' participation in active free play (Brockman et al., 2011; Hume et al., 2005; Thompson et al., 2005; Veitch et al., 2007). In contrast, an aspect of competitive sports and activities that respondents do not like is the lack of choice they have in participating due to coaches and parents. These results are consistent with studies relating SDT to unstructured free play that includes noncompetitive activities. While studying young adolescents in the United Kingdom, Brockman et al. (2011) found that these youth saw that freedom from adult control and rules were an important influence on their participation and enjoyment of active free play. Noncompetitive activities may naturally possess greater intrinsic qualities than competitive sports such as freedom, choice, and personal enjoyment that may develop during childhood and carry into adulthood.

In line with the constructs of SDT and TPB relating to the social environment, significant others in respondents' lives were found to play important roles as motivators, role-models, and barriers to participation in noncompetitive outdoor activity. The people that motivated and encouraged respondents to participate were parents, siblings, and friends. Parents encourage through verbally communicating that they want their children to participate and by actively participating in activities with their children. Both siblings and friends encourage participation through actively participating in activities. Parents and older siblings act as role-models through participating in outdoor activities themselves for their own personal enjoyment and through past enjoyment of engaging in activities as children and then passing those experiences onto young adolescents. Parents act as a barrier to outdoor activity through their concern for their children's safety in terms of avoiding injury and the concern for "stranger danger." The results of the study indicate that parents may have the most influence on young adolescents' outdoor physical activity through the social

environment and that most barriers to participation can be overcome by parental action. The perceived influence of parents on the outdoor play of youth has been shown to be a significant factor of participation in other studies (Thompson et al., 2005; Veitch et al., 2007). This is consistent with the level of control that parents maintain throughout early adolescence in terms of the activities of their children.

Future research should investigate whether noncompetitive outdoor activities have a greater potential to be intrinsically motivated than competitive sports and the influence this may have on lifelong participation. Research will need to determine if the activities that young adolescents tend to carry into adulthood are those that are competitive or noncompetitive. The potential role of the intrinsic nature of noncompetitive outdoor activities may be more likely to impact physical activity as adults than the extrinsic properties of competitive sports. Research will also need to investigate approaches to providing young adolescents with supportive social and physical environments to participate in noncompetitive outdoor activities. Providing parents with the resources needed for supporting youths' autonomy of participating in physical activity is especially important given the level of control of parents.

The important role that parents play in young adolescents' noncompetitive activities should be accounted for in intervention programming. Interventions targeted towards parents should inform parents of the important role they have on their children's physical activity and the ways they can encourage and role-model behavior as well as support their children's autonomy. Including both parents and their children creates an opportunity for cooperative participation in noncompetitive outdoor activities that may not exist in the home environment. Providing community and neighborhood resources for families, such as physical activity equipment and transportation, is important to support parents. While the availability of outdoor space may not be a primary issue in rural areas as indicated by the current study, the availability of transportation to outdoor spaces where youth can meet with friends to engage in outdoor physical activity can be more problematic. Veitch et al. (2007) found that the lack of availability of independent transportation was perceived by Australian youth to be a barrier to their participation in active free play in the outdoors.

The availability of school clubs that provide opportunities for outdoor activity are influential in getting youth to participate in new activities to develop positive past experiences. Providing fun and interactive outdoor education and adventure programming that can build positive attitudes towards the natural environment through positive outdoor experiences is a must. A strategy may be to work with local organizations such as the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, YMCA, and 4H to incorporate physical activity components into existing programming in a variety of outdoor settings.

The study was conducted in one rural county in the southern United States and therefore the generalizability of the results should be viewed accordingly as the results may not be applicable to urban and suburban settings. The results may also not be salient to young adolescents who live in rural areas that significantly differ in community structure and geography. For instance, youth that do not live in largely agricultural communities with a high collective level of value placed on organized sports may differ in their participation in activities and motivations. In addition, youth living in mountainous areas may have less availability of flat open space and therefore participation in activities may be different.

## **Conclusion**

The results of the study found that young adolescents' participation in noncompetitive outdoor physical activity is influenced by complex dynamic relationships involving the interplay of the individual along with social and physical environmental factors. This is the

first known study to be conducted with youth in the United States focusing on experiences of participation in noncompetitive outdoor physical activity.

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### Author Note

Richard W. Christiana, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Health and Exercise Science within the College of Health Sciences at Appalachian State University. He is interested in youths' physical activity in relation to the prevention of childhood obesity and the promotion of lifelong participation in physical activity from a community-based participatory research approach. During his doctoral studies he received an Interdisciplinary Qualitative Studies Certificate from the University of Georgia. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to Richard W. Christiana, Department of Health and Exercise Science, Appalachian State University, ASU Box 32071, Boone, NC 28608. E-mail: christianarw@appstate.edu.

Marsha Davis, PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of Health Promotion and Behavior in the University of Georgia's College of Public Health and Associate Dean of Outreach and Engagement. Her research interests are in the design, implementation, and evaluation of community-based research, particularly related to nutrition and physical activity programs for children and their families. Her work is currently funded by the United States Department of Agriculture and the Health Resources and Services Administration of the United States Department of Health and Human Services.

Melissa Freeman, PhD, is an associate professor of qualitative research methodologies in the University of Georgia's College of Education and Chair of the Qualitative Research Program. Her research focuses on the role of language and dialogue in the construction of meaning and understanding, philosophical and critical hermeneutics, and alternative forms of representation in research and education.

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