

European survey on the terms of sport practice of autistic people

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Context

Although a few recent studies have examined the impact of sport on autistic people (1, 2), they have often targeted very specific practices in small samples. The European Sacree project, funded by the Erasmus+ Sport programme, aims to improve the daily lives of autistic people by promoting sporting activities. The general aim of the programme is to design and test the effects of a specific Adapted Physical Activity (APA) programme for autistic people. We present here the first phase of the project, which aims to gain a better understanding of the links that autistic people have with sport and physical activity, and thus to question current practices.

Material and method

A questionnaire consisting of 20 questions on physical activity (if yes: type, frequency, duration, if no: reason for lack of activity) and on the barriers to/levers of physical activity was distributed in Europe within the 5 partner countries of the project, translated into each native language (France, Croatia, Belgium, Italy, Portugal). This questionnaire, distributed between March and September 2023, targeted autistic people directly, or their relatives if they were unable to fill it in themselves, aged 3 or over and with no maximum limit.

Results

A total of 540 responses were received, with 71% of respondents indicating that they regularly practised a physical activity, compared with 29% who did not. The most frequently reported physical activity was once a week, lasting an average of 60 minutes. This frequency is higher among the over-40s (2 times a week), and the duration of sessions the lowest among 3-10 year-olds (45 minutes). Of those who take part, 56% say they do so in a club, the rest in specialised facilities or on their own. The choice of activity depends on personal preference (55.4%), ease of access (19.6%) or because friends or family also do it (12.2%), with aquatic activities being the most popular (see Figure 1). Whether or not respondents practised sport, most of them (74%) said that sport was not accessible or visible to people with autism.

Discussion and conclusion

With regard to the ‘dose’ of APA, there is a disparity between what is recommended in the literature (3) and the responses to the questionnaires. For example, while most studies recommend programmes of 3 sessions a week, many exercisers actually only do one. The choice of activity remains largely dictated by the user's personal preference, which becomes the main criterion. Finally, these results highlight 1) the difficulty that autistic people have in finding a suitable programme close to home, 2) the lack of information from facilities on how to accommodate and adapt their practices to such a public.

Bibliographical references

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Conflicts of interest: No conflict

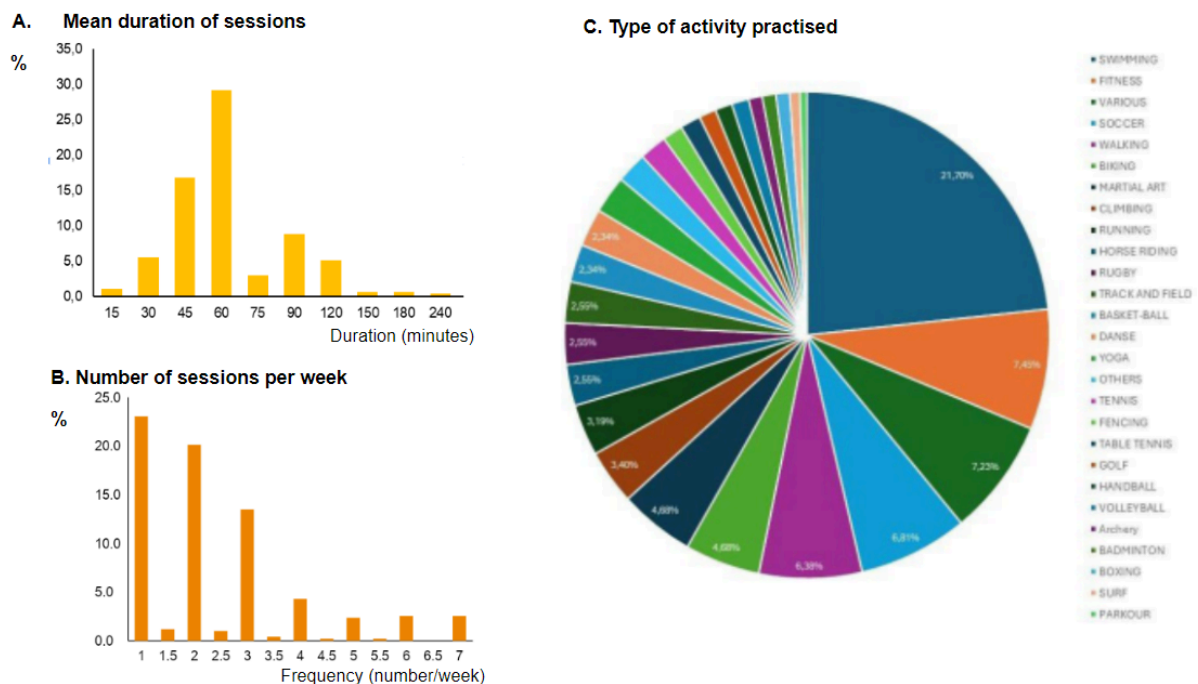


Figure 1: Key data from the European survey on sport for autistic people. Responses from 540 people, data shown as a percentage of respondents. A. Duration of sessions. B. Number of sessions per week. C. Sports practised.