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# Leisure-time physical activity and transitions into and through parenthood

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## ABSTRACT

This study provides a novel figurational sociological examination of transitions into and through parenthood and its impact on leisure time physical activity (LTPA). Drawing on the qualitative findings of an online survey completed by 218 UK parents ( $n = 186$  female,  $n = 32$  male), we show how the initial transition into parenthood was associated with a general decline in LTPA participation. This was typically accompanied by decreases in parents' capacity to derive the pleasurable excitement, tension, and sociability they previously experienced when being more active. As their offspring got older, many parents were better able to re-engage in LTPA and valued family-based leisure for fun, social activities that provided a site for building family bonds. Our evidence emphasises the continued – but often overlooked – importance of Elias and Dunning's (2008) work on the quest for excitement in leisure, and how engagement in LTPA can help parents and other participants to meet a socially conditioned psychological need for sociability and mental refreshment through the generation of pleasurable tension or excitement.

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Figurational sociology;  
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## Introduction

Family leisure and the life cycle has been of longstanding interest to leisure studies researchers (Rappoport & Rappoport, 1975; Rappoport et al., 2019). More recently, increasing attention has been given to the role families, especially parents, play in supporting the engagement of children and young people in sport and physical activity and how this can occupy much family leisure time (Allen et al., 2021; Fletcher, 2020; Green et al., 2023; Haycock & Smith, 2014a; Wheeler & Green, 2018). Indeed, leisure has been identified as an important, though often unequal, context in which different types and structures of families are differentially able to socialise, and develop physically active habituses among, children and young people (Green et al., 2015; Haycock & Smith, 2014a; Quarmby & Dagkas, 2010; Roberts et al., 2020; Wheeler & Green, 2018). Leisure is also regarded as an important social space in which parents are expected to enact their responsibilities, and respond to shifting social perceptions of what constitutes 'good' parenting during childhood, which is critical for laying the foundations for future leisure time physical activity (LTPA) participation (Evans & Davies, 2010; Fletcher, 2020; Wheeler & Green, 2018). However, comparatively little attention has been given by leisure researchers to the impact that becoming a parent has on parents' engagement in LTPA during the transition into and through parenthood.

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This sociological paper addresses this significant gap in knowledge by reporting original evidence to answer: (a) how, if at all, do the transitions into and through parenthood impact the LTPA of parents of babies and/or young children? and (b) how is LTPA negotiated in the context of parents' interdependencies (Elias, 2012b; Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998; van Krieken, 1998, 2005), or networks of social relations, especially with their children? We advance understanding of how parents negotiated the constraints, challenges and uncertainties that accompanied their transition to parenthood, and present a complex and nuanced picture of the differential ways in which parents reported doing this. We first explore the current body of knowledge on leisure and family-based sport and PA; and parents' engagement in LTPA, before introducing the key theoretical assumptions of figurational sociology and their application to investigations of family dynamics and LTPA. We then outline the qualitative online survey which generated data for the study, before explaining our findings figurationally in relation to: parents' quest for excitement; the impact of transitions into and through parenthood for parents' LTPA engagement; and how parents sought to (re)engage in LTPA in the context of their family-based interdependencies or figurations and family-based leisure.

Before we examine these issues, it is worth noting that, following Fletcher (2020), and given the diverse family types represented in the evidence we report here, in this paper we will use the word 'parent' to refer generically to any adult with responsibility for ongoing domestic care and welfare of children.

### *Leisure as a context for family-based sport and physical activity*

There is now convincing evidence from several countries which suggests that the foundations for enduring engagement in leisure-time sport and physical activity are first laid during childhood in particular family contexts (Green et al., 2015, 2023; Haycock & Smith, 2014a; Quarmby & Dagkas, 2010; Roberts & Brodie, 1992; Roberts et al., 2020). These contexts most commonly include sports-active parents, or parents who are better able to socialise their children into leisure-sport and physical activity through the transmission of socially valued forms of capital and associated practices, often for the 'love' of sport and being active (Evans & Davies, 2010; Green et al., 2015; Haycock & Smith, 2014a; Wheeler & Green, 2018). Parental engagement in such purposive leisure (Shaw, 2008; Shaw & Dawson, 2001) has often been shown to be class- and gender-related. More middle-class families are said to be better able to invest the kinds of resources (e.g. time, money, socio-emotional support), and capital (e.g. physical, social, economic, physical, symbolic), needed by their offspring to engage regularly in organised leisure-sport and physical activity (Evans & Davies, 2010; Green et al., 2023; Haycock & Smith, 2014a; Quarmby & Dagkas, 2010; Wheeler & Green, 2018). They are also more likely to provide their children with more developmental opportunities by enrolling them in a range of formal, privatised activities (Allen et al., 2021; Evans & Davies, 2010; Stirrup et al., 2015), as part of their concern with engaging in 'increasing amounts of the 'work of learning' . . . (that) are and have to be done outside school, in and around the home, as part of . . . the "corporealisation of childhood' (Evans & Davies, 2010, p. 771).

Leisure, especially sport and being active, has also been shown to be a particularly prominent part of fathering (Fletcher, 2020; Harrington, 2009; Kay, 2009; Vagni, 2022), and is an important context in which many men can spend time with children, and share emotional closeness with them by collaborating in their activities (Fletcher, 2020; Kay, 2009). Fletcher (2020) has also noted that even when fathers play sport, with their children watching, this can be important because it is a time when families can spend and enjoy time together – what Vagni (2022) calls the 'presence mechanism'. Family bonding, quality family time, and promoting healthy lifestyles are indeed consistently cited as key motives for involving children in active lives (Allen et al., 2021; Fletcher, 2020; Harrington, 2009; Stirrup et al., 2015), and although many fathers do engage in much sport and physical activity-based leisure for these reasons, significant proportions of mothers also play an important role. However, historically mothers have done much of the 'hidden work' of family

leisure, including the planning, organising, and scheduling of sport and physical activity participation, and for many households, this remains the case (Fletcher, 2020; Green et al., 2023; Shaw, 2008; Vagni, 2022; Wheeler & Green, 2018). Such intensive parenting can have various socio-emotional, and physical, costs for mothers and especially those who seek to juggle motherhood, work, and their own engagement in physical activity (McGannon & McMahon, 2021). This is true also for fathers, whose own engagement in sport and physical activity can often come at odds with the competing demands of family life (Cohen, 2016; Fletcher, 2020; Haycock & Smith, 2014b). For Hochschild (1997), this is associated with the time-bind or time squeeze where family time (including parental engagement in sport and physical activity) must be accommodated alongside work and other pressures, and where increasing emphasis must be placed on the quality, rather than quantity, of time available for family leisure (see also Rappoport et al., 2019).

### *Parents' engagement in leisure-time physical activity*

In very many countries participation in leisure-sport and PA typically declines continuously with age (especially for males), with the heaviest drop-off, and drop-out, occurring during youth and young adulthood (Birchwood et al., 2008; Green et al., 2015; Roberts & Brodie, 1992; Smith, 2023). In the UK, as elsewhere, participation is lower among lower socio-economic groups, women, disabled people, some racialised communities, and other minority groups (Sport England, 2021). Data on parents' participation is difficult to come by, but the Active Pregnancy Foundation (2022) estimate that just one-quarter of pregnant women and new mums in the UK meet the recommended PA guidelines. It is also clear that, often in combination with other life transitions (e.g. getting married), transitions to parenthood can also impact parents' PA participation (Birchwood et al., 2008; Haycock & Smith, 2014b; Roberts & Brodie, 1992).

The limited, largely psychological, research on parents' engagement in PA has tended to focus on the social and environmental factors that influence participation. In one study, Cramp and Bray (2011) suggested that being tired, lack of time, childcare duties, physical limitations, weather, lack of motivation, lack of support, work, money and experiencing depression were among the main barriers to being physically active for women during the 6 months following childbirth. Conversely, higher levels of exercise and barrier self-efficacy were associated with higher levels of PA among mothers (Cramp & Bray, 2011). Similar constraints were identified by Mailey et al. (2014) in a study of working parents which also identified feelings of guilt, lack of support, scheduling constraints and work commitments as other barriers which prevented parents' engagement in PA. They also noted that having support available from significant others (e.g. their partner, or parents) can determine the extent of parents' PA participation (Mailey et al., 2014). Being active with children, or during children's activities, acting as a role model for children, making time to be active, and the perceived health and family benefits of engaging in PA whilst balancing household and occupational commitments are also said to be important for encouraging parents to be active (Mailey et al., 2014). The findings of a critical discourse analysis of nine interviews with one family over a 16-week period by McGannon and Schinke (2013) conceptualised the mother's identity as a 'good mother' within a patriarchal discourse of the family, where the children's needs are prioritised over the mother's own, including being physically active. However, this co-existed with a 'super mother' identity, derived from a liberal feminist discourse, where the mother simultaneously managed household and childcare duties with the demands of her career, using PA to increase stamina and energy to help excel in her work and domestic responsibilities (McGannon & Schinke, 2013).

Among the few sociological works in the area is Lloyd et al. (2016) study of mothers' participation in, and experience of, PA. Lloyd et al. (2016, p. 91) found that women were both 'resisting the ethic of care for self-care' by negotiating dominant discourses about motherhood, or femininity, to make time to be physically active as well as using PA as a transformative space through which they changed how they related to their embodied self. Despite experiencing feelings of selfishness and

guilt for engaging in PA after the birth of their child, the mothers involved in this study reframed their conceptualisation of motherhood and considered being an active mother as something that benefited the family. In discussing their embodiment of PA, mothers often referred to how being physically active afforded them with important “mental space”, an opportunity to maintain “balance” (Lloyd et al., 2016, p. 93), and engage in PA as a form of escapism in their “own domain” (Lloyd et al., 2016, p. 94). This included home-based exercise routines which enabled mothers more control over when and how they exercised, walking alone, and playing tennis or swimming or engaging in other enjoyable activities whilst free from their responsibilities (Lloyd et al., 2016).

The feelings of freedom and escapism mothers of young children associated with exercise in Lloyd et al. (2016) study was perhaps unsurprising, given the importance of pleasure, enjoyment, and emotional arousal as reasons to engage in many leisure activities (Dunning, 1996, 1999; Elias & Dunning, 2008; Rappoport et al., 2019). Indeed, as Dunning (1996, p. 192) has noted, the three basic elements of leisure are ‘sociability, motility and imagination’, and it is the pursuit of a quest for excitement or exciting significance which often distinguishes engagement in mimetic leisure activities from other non-leisure aspects of their lives (Dunning, 1996, 1999). Although this applies often to sport and physical activity participation, Roberts et al. (2020) have noted that there are a growing range of family-oriented leisure activities such as theme and amusement parks, music, heritage sites, and commercial and media-oriented leisure, which compete for the time, money and attention of parents and families which might otherwise be spent on sport and PA.

### *Figurational sociology, family dynamics and leisure-time physical activity*

Useful though existing studies of parents’ engagement in PA are, they have so far failed to sufficiently locate parents’ participation in the context of their interdependence with others, contextualise their engagement in PA within their leisure lives more broadly, or consider the differential impacts that transitions to parenthood have on parents’ PA, health, and wellbeing. To that end, in this paper we seek to address these limitations by exploring, sociologically, new parents’ experiences of LTPA through transitions into and through parenthood. In so doing, we draw theoretically upon the figurational sociology of Norbert Elias and specifically his concept of the figuration, or interdependency ties, and his closely related ideas of power (Dunning & Hughes, 2013; Elias, 2012b) as these have been used to conceptualise child-parent relations (Goudsblom, 1977; Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998; van Krieken, 1998, 2005). As Goudsblom (1977, p. 7) has noted:

From the moment it is born a child is dependent upon others who will feed, protect, fondle, and instruct it. The child may not always like the constraints exerted by its strong dependencies, but it has no choice. By its own wants it is tied to other human beings – to its parents in the first place, and through its parents to many others, most of whom may remain unknown to the child for a long time, perhaps forever. All of the child’s learning, its learning to speak, to think, to act, takes place in a setting of social interdependencies. As a result, to the very core of their personalities men [sic] are bonded to each other. They can be understood only in terms of the various figurations to which they have belonged in the past and which they continue to form in the present.

In this regard, to understand adequately parents’ LTPA and family relations requires us to examine the dynamic interdependencies, or figurations, which characterise family relations. For Elias, the concept of the figuration, or ‘structure of mutually oriented and dependent people’ (Elias, 2012b, p. 525), is central to understanding the relations between parents, their children, and other groups. These power relations are best conceptualised in terms of relative balances that are ‘dynamic and continually in flux’ (Murphy et al., 2000, p. 93), though the developmental trend in present times is towards a decrease in the power imbalance between parents and children (Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998; van Krieken, 2005). Indeed, while parents typically ‘have far greater power chances than children, a degree of caution and restraint . . . which far exceeds the degree of self-control and restraint socially required of parents in earlier epochs’

(Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998, p. 191) is now increasingly observed in many societies. It is in the context of these relations that parents' actions, and those of their offspring, are both enabled and constrained. It is within these dynamic figurations that one's habitus (our 'second nature', bio-psychological structure, or embodied social learning) develops first from birth and more gradually throughout our lives (van Krieken, 1998; van Krieken, 2005), and can come to shape engagement in LTPA and other leisure activities. For parents, such engagement can be constrained by the increasing demands of children alongside the greater degree of autonomy granted to them than in earlier periods (Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998). As Goudsblom and Mennell (1998, p. 191) have noted, 'developmental trends in this direction make themselves more strongly felt than ever before, even though in practice they have certainly often maintained the absolute authority of parents'. That being said, the gradual transition from 'a more authoritarian to a more egalitarian parent-child relationship produces, for both groups, a series of specific problems and, all in all, a rather high degree of uncertainty' (Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998, p. 191), including in relation to parents' ability to engage in LTPA.

Together with the concept of the figuration, power, and habitus, in this paper we also draw here upon how another of Elias's ideas have been applied, with Eric Dunning, to leisure studies and particularly through their work on quest for excitement (see Dunning, 1996, 1999; Elias & Dunning, 2008). In their work on leisure, Elias and Dunning (2008) conceptualised leisure not simply in relation to work, but all other spheres of social life, including family relations. They regarded leisure as an enclave within what they called the 'spare-time spectrum' and as having three basic elements: sociability, motility, and emotional/pleasure arousal (Dunning, 1996, 1999; Elias & Dunning, 2008). They also identified two forms of leisure activities: sociable activities and 'mimetic' or 'play' activities, both of which can help to counter the emotional staleness and routinisation that characterises many other features of social life (Dunning, 1996, 1999; Elias & Dunning, 2008). By generating pleasurable excitement or tension through a controlled de-controlling of emotions, leisure (including engagement in LTPA) can help to meet the socially generated emotional needs of participants (including parents) in increasingly complex societies such as the UK (Dunning, 1996, 1999; Elias & Dunning, 2018). The changing dependency bonds between babies and young children on their parents, and the associated constraints of these on family relations in the context of wider social processes, are important contexts in which the quest for excitement exists.

## Methods

The research reported here was underpinned by a qualitative approach which incorporated a qualitative online survey 'to make more understandable the worlds of experience' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017, p. 17) reported by a sample of new mothers and fathers as they navigated the transition into parenthood. A Jisc Online Survey (formerly BOS) was used to explore respondents' interpretations of, and meanings given to, engagement in PA, the similarities and differences identifiable in these, and what these indicate about parents' lived experience (Salmons, 2022). As an elicited online method, online surveys also had the practical advantage of enabling respondents to engage in the research when most convenient to them (Braun et al., 2021; Salmons, 2022), which is particularly important given the significant constraints and caring responsibilities associated with becoming a parent. They also facilitate 'affordable and often quite easy access to large geographically dispersed populations' (Braun et al., 2021, p. 643) from whom it is possible to meaningfully explore their diverse experiences of LTPA, health and wellbeing.

The survey involved a combination of closed and open questions, and respondents were not required to include any identifiable information. Researchers had ethical approval to conduct follow-up interviews, should the qualitative responses not elicit in-depth responses (this was not the case). Therefore, whilst there was no requirement to provide identifiable information, respondents were given the option to provide contact details should they wish to. Unless respondents decided to provide personal contact information at the end of the survey to indicate their

willingness to participate in a follow-up interview, all surveys were completed anonymously (Prince & Annison, 2022).

Although many figurational studies have typically involved the generation and analysis of data using socio-historical methods and sources, others, including the present study, are underpinned by data generated using alternative methods including online surveys which are ‘especially useful when researching an un- or under-explored area’ (Braun et al., 2021, p. 643) such as parental engagement in LTPA. In this study, the closed questions generated data on participants’ biographical information (including age, ethnicity, employment, family type, disability), time spent being physically active, the types of activities in which they were engaged, and whether they exercised with or without children present. The open questions, which provided the basis of the survey, enabled us to ‘capture what is important to participants, and access *their* language and terminology’ (Braun et al., 2021, p. 641), as part of our figurational concern with exploring participants’ subjective experiences of LTPA and health during the transition into parenthood and throughout the early stages of a child’s life. Since our participants are not, and would not be, self-contained, isolated and separate from other people living in ahistorical contexts (Elias, 2012a, 2012b), the open questions were intended to help explore participants’ perceptions of the changing figurations, or interdependency networks, which characterised their experiences of becoming parents, and of parenthood more broadly (Elias, 2012a; van Krieken, 2005). The open questions were thus intended to generate data on how participants’ interdependency ties with partners, children, and other members of their figurations (including grandparents) enabled and constrained their engagement in LTPA. The data generated by the open questions were also important in helping to illuminate the individual circumstances and shared social situations occupied by parents and their offspring (Elias, 2012a; van Krieken, 2005), and their implications for parents’ engagement in LTPA.

### **Participants**

The survey was open to all parents in the UK of children up to the age of four years, which included the perinatal period (conception to 1 year after the birth of a child) and early years period so that parents could reflect upon the continuities and changes in their LTPA and health. Overall, 218 respondents completed the survey, though one declined to answer questions on their biographies (Table 1). Of the survey respondents, 186 were mothers and 32 were fathers. Given the initial survey responses were typically from white mothers, promotional material was further adapted to encourage responses from more diverse groups, but there remained a much higher response rate from white mothers in the final sample of survey respondents. Most were White British (71.6%), aged 30 to 39 years (80.2%), in an opposite sex married couple family (75.1%), were working full-time (51.2%) or part-time (32.7%), and had no self-reported disability (99.1%). 89.4% of participants wanted to be more physically active.

### **Procedure**

Following receipt of institutional ethical approval, the survey was made available from May 2020, but due to COVID-19-related lockdowns, the survey was not actively promoted until April 2021 and was then closed at the end of September 2021. The survey was promoted widely among the authors’ personal and professional networks, including the social media channels of perinatal mental health charities, parent support groups and PA providers. A list of relevant professional support services were included for participants to engage in, if appropriate, and all participants were only able to complete the survey once. Informed consent was provided by participants through the completion and submission of their responses, and each participant was assigned a unique personal identifier to facilitate analysis of their responses.

**Table 1.** Summary of survey respondent biographies.

Characteristic	Overall (n=)	Mothers (n=)	Fathers (n=)
<b>Age</b>			
20–24 years	2	2	0
25–29 years	22	21	1
30–34 years	93	81	12
35–39 years	81	68	13
40–44 years	16	10	6
44–49 years	3	3	0
<b>Ethnicity</b>			
White British	156	136	20
White English	29	22	7
White Irish	4	4	0
White Scottish	2	1	1
White Welsh	2	1	1
White and Black Caribbean	1	1	0
White and Black African	1	1	0
White and Asian	2	2	0
Black or Black British Caribbean	0	0	0
Black or Black British African	0	0	0
Indian	3	1	2
Pakistani	0	0	0
Bangladeshi	0	0	0
Chinese	2	1	1
Other	16	16	0
<b>Employment</b>			
Full-time	113	83	30
Part-time	71	71	0
Casual	0	0	0
Zero-hours contract	0	0	0
Self-employed	12	10	2
Currently unemployed	12	12	0
Other	9	9	0
<b>Family type</b>			
Opposite sex married couple	163	137	26
Same sex married couple	4	3	1
Civil partner couple	1	1	0
Cohabiting couple	34	30	4
Lone parent	10	9	1
Blended (step)	3	3	0
Other	2	2	0
<b>Disability</b>			
Visual Impairment	0	0	0
Hearing Impairment	0	0	0
Physical Disability	0	0	0
Learning Disability/Difficulty	1	1	0
No	215	183	32
Other	1	1	0

### Data analysis

Cross-tabulation and descriptive statistics (proportions, frequency counts) were used to help analyse the survey biographic information and respondents' answers to the closed questions. Once we analysed the quantitative data, we extracted all qualitative free-text responses to the open questions and reviewed these alongside the descriptive statistics. The free text was copied verbatim into a data file and was not edited other than to correct for any self-evident typographical errors. Respondents were allocated pseudonyms, which are used below to quote from the individual survey comments.

The qualitative data analysis software programme, NVivo 12, was used to help manage the data retrieval process before they were subject to reflexive thematic analysis to develop patterns of experience and themes from the respondents' perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The first author led the coding and analysis process, which commenced once the transcripts had been read and re-



read, and notes made during the data familiarisation phase. Initial latent and semantic codes were developed, and then discussed with the second author, which informed the first author's ongoing coding of the data. Examples of codes included 'role modelling', 'active job role', 'feelings', 'mental health', 'barriers' and 'motivations'. Once coding was complete, the first author grouped the codes into candidate themes based on a 'two-way traffic' (Dunning & Hughes, 2013; Elias, 2012b) between relevant theoretical ideas and concepts and the participants' qualitative responses.

Once the candidate themes had been established, these were reviewed by the first author and then discussed with the second author in relation to the illustrative participant quotations. The final reflexive, or fully realised, themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022) were then defined, and their structure and boundaries agreed. These themes, which are discussed next, are: (i) *changing dependency bonds and emotional labour result in declining physical activity*; (ii) *reconstructing and modifying activity through transitions into parenthood*; and (iii) *(re)becoming an active family*.

## Analysis and discussion

### *Changing dependency bonds and emotional labour result in declining physical activity*

Throughout many of the survey responses, parents (many of whom were previously active) typically explained that they tended to become less physically active, or completely inactive, during their transition to parenthood, and especially following the birth of a new baby. This theme describes how this was often associated with the significant restructuring of their lives once their baby had been born and which characterised the increasing dependence of the child on their time. Paul, for example, noted that: 'Since having kids [I] have become generally inactive due to being tired from being up all night doing the night feeds, going to work and doing all the daily chores'. Other parents, including Mary, described how they used to be more active but found the increasing demands and changing priorities which accompanied having a baby limited her ability to be physically active again during the early years of their child's life:

I used to be much fitter and more physically active but I have found it hard to get back into a routine since having a child. I have found it hard to fit in exercise around all the other chores there are to do. I also would rather be with my daughter than exercise. The cost of a gym membership has also been hard to justify while on mat leave.

This is not altogether surprising given the changing power differentials in the child-parent relationship. From birth and during the early years of life, most parents are significantly constrained to think and act in relation to the child's needs; indeed, 'in many cases, the birth of a child forces the parents to re-arrange their lifestyles' (Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998, p. 195) in the manner described here. This restructuring of parents' lives is typically associated with their experiences of what Hochschild (1997) refers to as the 'time-bind', where parents can often find it increasingly difficult to manage the competing demands of work (where this is relevant), the needs of their children, and the other demands of home life. This, in turn, can have significant implications for how and when parents are able to spend their leisure time. Although the amount of time available for leisure does not change, more of that 'spare-time' is typically reallocated to other activities such as childcare and household jobs and is thus distinguished from 'leisure time' (Dunning, 1996, 1999).

In caring for their new babies or young children who were heavily dependent upon them for their socio-emotional and physical needs (Goudsblom, 1977; Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998; van Krieken, 2005), many of our survey respondents' lives changed significantly and had a series of psycho-social consequences for them. For a minority of respondents LTPA increased after child-birth, which for Hayley included managing experiences of postnatal depression and an eating disorder: '[I was] determined to beat them and exercise helped'. Most parents, however, explained how their engagement in LTPA declined. For example, Nichola wrote 'I used to dance 6 days a week I don't really dance at all any more . . . this makes me sad. It was a big part of my life', while another mother, Rebecca, explained how her declining physical activity 'makes me feel unattractive and

affects my mental health. I'm more anxious and snappier than when I can work out'. The impact of having children on parents' psychological outlook, and physical health, was also recalled by Stephanie who explained that 'My physical activity has reduced a huge amount since having children. I think it has made me feel tired, older and has impacted my outlook. I'm now less positive'.

Fathers also reported how reductions in LTPA, and the increased constraints and expectations of their social relations (or figurations), negatively impacted their mental health and engendered feelings of monotony and emotional staleness (Dunning, 1996, 1999; Elias & Dunning, 2008). Robert, for example, noted how his LTPA 'definitely reduced which is frustrating' (Robert), while Mike reported how the 'Lessening of exercise has worsened my mental health'. Tim similarly commented on the challenges he encountered by not being able to engage in LTPA or 'me-time' thus:

My levels of activity dipped and where [sic] probably at its lowest from 3 months til birth until around 1st birthday. during that time I didn't have much time and ability to get active which got me down. Created a loss of 'me' time and an outlet to release and manage my emotions. I had to bottle things in a lot more, including increase in stress and overload that came with having a baby and changing my lifestyle and home away from friends and family.

In this regard, for many parents, the birth of a child limited their ability to engage in leisure activities, including LTPA, which can generate socially acceptable pleasurable excitement through an 'enjoyable and controlled de-controlling of emotions' (Elias & Dunning, 2008, p. 27). This de-controlling of emotion, or loosening or relaxation of emotional restraint, can have positive mental health benefits and meet socially generated psychological needs (Dunning, 1996, 1999; Elias & Dunning, 2008). However, for most parents, the frustration and mental health challenges they experienced during their transition to parenthood appeared to result from the 'stress-tensions' (Elias & Dunning, 2008, p. 24) created by the increased emotional restraint, changing interdependencies, and constraints of family life. Through their previously active lifestyles, many of those who were formerly active sought out ways to modify their LTPA so that they could remain active.

### *Reconstructing and modifying activity through transitions into parenthood*

For Elias, a person's habitus (or psychic structure) is the part of their sense of self, for example their taste and moral standing, which is not innate but is so deeply rooted that it gradually becomes 'second nature' (Elias, 2012a, 2012b; Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998; van Krieken, 1998, 2005). Changes in habitus through a process of psychogenesis involves a shift from external to internal self-restraint, and can only be understood in connection with largely unplanned long-term changes in broader social relationships such as those between parents and children (Elias, 2012a; van Krieken, 2005). As the networks of interdependence (or figurations) between parents and children have become increasingly complex and ambivalent over time, this has required 'ever-greater degrees of foresight, self-restraint and self-management' (van Krieken, 2005, p. 42), especially among parents. This has had important implications for parents' engagement in LTPA, including through the dual impact which the historical development of processes of civilisation have had on childhood (Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998; van Krieken, 2005). As van Krieken (2005, pp. 42–43) has noted, these impacts have been:

first, the 'distance' between childhood and adulthood gradually increases as the requirements of societal membership become more demanding, so that childhood requires more time and effort in socialization and education prior to the achievement of adult status through entry into the workforce. Second, adults' 'investment' of time, skill, effort and emotions in children also increases, making them both more 'precious' and demanding at the same time.

For our survey respondents, many of whom were previously active and appeared to have formed a physically active habitus, their ability to reconstruct their engagement in LTPA, and recover the

release and escapism that this gave them, was inextricably bound-up with concerns to invest in their children. Parents appeared to do this in two main ways. Firstly, they sought to modify their own forms of LTPA, and secondly, engage in activity with their children present (Cramp & Bray, 2010; Lloyd et al., 2016; McGannon & McMahon, 2021). The trend was towards an increased individualisation of activity (e.g. running), rather than engaging in more time consuming team sports, which can be better accommodated within the constraints of family life (Green et al., 2015; Haycock & Smith, 2014b; Roberts & Brodie, 1992). Several respondents, particularly those who were able to seek support from their spouse or other family networks, described how they began to ‘fit in short bursts’ of activity (Jessica), or engage in alternative activities, like Katie, who stated: ‘I now go for runs as they are much quicker to do as opposed to travelling to a gym to workout/do a class’. In this regard, those parents were better able to draw upon their wider family relations (e.g. their spouse or child’s grandparent) to care for their children so they can engage in LTPA.

Other parents recalled how, if it was not possible to exercise alone, they became more pragmatic and endeavoured to be active with their children. Paul, for example, explained how it is ‘good to be active with the kids; [I’ve] just not got time to do it on my own’. Maria noted that ‘without child I am more focused. If my daughter is with me I am concentrating on her and her enjoyment, rather than my own needs’. Many of the parents in this study felt enabled to engage in some level of activity by including their children, but respondents also felt constrained to modify the frequency, intensity, time, and type of activity when the children were present, reflecting the findings of Cramp and Bray (2010). For Maria, some of the escapism often associated with LTPA had been lost as she focused upon her daughter’s enjoyment and needs, rather than her own.

Parents’ approaches to remaining active were largely determined or controlled by themselves, but always in the context of their independence with their children and the associated time bind (Hochschild, 1997) in which they frequently found themselves. Given the increasing constraints on new parents’ lives and the considerable time they invested in their increased caring responsibilities, our respondents appeared to regard themselves as having relatively little control over their LTPA. This led them to seek ways to adapt their leisure-time PA in a way that incorporated their dependent family members. Amber, explained how exercising with her children enabled them to witness the benefits of being active:

It is essential for my mental health. For me trying to exercise without them is really important so I get some alone time and personal space but this isn’t always possible. It is also really important to me that they see both parents being active and keeping fit and enjoying the outdoors.

Indeed, another feature of parents’ attempts to reconstitute their LTPA was closely associated with their concerns with acting as a deliberate role model for their children, and encouraging among them a love and awareness of the benefits of being active and leading a healthy lifestyle (Green et al., 2023; Haycock & Smith, 2014b; Wheeler & Green, 2018). For example, Jennifer wrote: ‘I love being a role model to my children. They quite often want to join in for part of my class when I’m working out at home’. Will similarly commented on the conscious and very deliberate approach he took to socialising his daughter into a healthy and active lifestyle: ‘We want to ensure our daughter grows up with a love of sport and PA so we will be proactive in providing her a variety of positive experiences, to give her the foundation for a happy and healthy lifestyle’. Other parents, including John, also reflected upon the tendency for active parents to have active offspring as a more-or-less central justification for their role modelling behaviour: ‘Children with active parents are 50% more likely to be active themselves and I think it is important that parents try to be good role models by showing children the different ways you can be active’. These comments were indicative of those parents identified previously in the literature, particularly from more middle-class and sports-active backgrounds, who endeavour to transmit their ‘love’ of activity and the extrinsic benefits of being active as part of a healthy lifestyle (Allen et al., 2020; Evans & Davies, 2010; Green et al., 2015, 2023; Haycock & Smith, 2014a; Stirrup et al., 2015). They also reflected the findings of other studies which reveal how being active as a family is often regarded by many (especially middle-class) parents as an

important opportunity to engage in family bonding, and to use leisure as an enclave through which to socialise their children into socially desired, and symbolically important, practices (Allen et al., 2021; Evans & Davies, 2010; Fletcher, 2020; Harrington, 2009; Stirrup et al., 2015).

### *(Re)becoming an active family*

Having considered how parents endeavoured to negotiate or reconstruct their active lifestyles in their new family contexts, it was clear that this also changed and developed as their child got older. Amy, for example, explained how she began to be more active as her baby got older and gradually became progressively less dependent on her: 'I have slowly increased my exercise as I have recovered from having a baby and there is less reliance on me to be with baby'. Holly similarly referred to how her LTPA, like other parents' PA, 'builds back up as children get older and join in'. However, not all parents reported being able to increase their LTPA as their child approached the age of 4. This was especially true for mothers who returned to work after a period of maternity leave which had previously provided them with an opportunity to be active with their children. Commenting on the challenges of balancing work and home demands which disproportionately impact mothers (Hochschild, 1997; McGannon & McMahan, 2021), and how this resulted in declines in her own activity, Lauren explained that she did 'less activity now child is at nursery and working again. [I] used to walk a lot with buggy when she was a baby'. Melanie echoed this, stating: 'While on mat leave, I was active doing baby and me exercise and walking 1–2 hours a day. Now I'm in full time employment I struggle to find time and prioritise it for my exercise'.

In the present study, we can see how family dynamics and broader relational constraints influencing LTPA change over time. These developmental experiences were also expressed by the fathers who commented that after a period of limited LTPA, and associated lifestyle changes which sometimes impacted their mental health, their activity nevertheless returned back to 'normal'. This was neatly captured in the comments of Paul, who said it was a:

Combination of tiredness and craving high sugar content food and drink [which] leads to getting stuck in a rut of poor mental health and lack of physical activity more so when kids are 0–2 years. [Then] it seems to ease up and you start to get a bit of time to do things for yourself again and get back to normal levels of mental wellbeing and physical activity.

Fathers like Will were also likely to express a preference for becoming more active again with their children as they got older, often in different types of activities such as cycling and running. He said: 'As my child is only 3 months old, the only activity I currently do with her is walking however as she gets older I would like to exercise with her in different ways e.g. cycling, running etc'. He went on to say:

For families I think it is important ... they can be active together so they can spend time together as a family and be active at the same time, for example parent and child activity classes. Sharing lived experiences from 'people like me' is absolutely vital so that people can hear different ways of being active, that appeal to them.

Similar views of the need and preference for joint family-based LTPA as children got older were also expressed by other parents, including Pippa, who emphasised the importance of being able to use LTPA as an opportunity for her to spend quality family time socialising together (Allen et al., 2021; Stirrup et al., 2015; Wheeler & Green, 2018):

Something fun, with a social aspect but physical too. Ideally something that could be taken part in as a family so it becomes fun for us all and part of a day out rather than something additional.

The importance of integrating LTPA into family life was also mentioned by Annabel, who felt that the provision of 'Local groups with different age-appropriate activities for children or that get children involved' would be important to help sustain her engagement in LTPA, and for her to support the social and physical development of her children (Allen et al., 2021; Stirrup et al., 2015; Wheeler & Green, 2018). The provision of such family-oriented activities would further enable

parents to engage jointly with children in the sociability which leisure can generate, and which can provide an opportunity for them to engage in physical and mental refreshment (Dunning, 1996, 1999; Elias & Dunning, 2008). As we noted earlier, it can also serve to counter the other highly constrained elements of family life and generate socially pleasurable forms of excitement or activity (Dunning, 1996, 1999; Elias & Dunning, 2008). Family activities involving PA and a social element would accomplish much of what Dunning (1996) considers to be the key components of leisure (sociability, motility and imagination). The so-called ‘inescapable commitment to family life’ (Elias & Dunning, 2008, p. 98) to which many women (though, increasingly, men) are said to be expected to demonstrate, especially during the early child-rearing years, can reduce their opportunities to engage in the pleasure excitement and loosening of self-restraint which leisure can provide, whether in relation to LTPA or other socially-oriented activities (Dunning, 1996, 1999; Elias & Dunning, 2008). Being active together also serves to accomplish many of the new parents’ motivations to role model active lifestyles with their child and develop an active habitus.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have reported original empirical evidence on how the transition to parenthood impacted parents’ LTPA in the context of their networks of interdependence (Elias, 2012b; Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998; van Krieken, 2005) and quest for excitement (Elias & Dunning, 2008), an area of leisure research which has so far been under-explored. Our new evidence reveals how the initial declines in many parents’ engagement in LTPA was typically accompanied by the figurational constraints related to the particularly unequal power relations which characterised child-parent relations, and which were heavily skewed by the significant dependence of newborn and young children on parents (Goudsblom, 1977; Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998; van Krieken, 2005). Among other things, this resulted in a decrease in the capacity of parents to derive the pleasurable excitement, tension, and sociability they formerly experienced in their leisure time (Dunning, 1996, 1999; Elias & Dunning, 2008). It was also clear that many family routines changed quite considerably during the initial period when a child is born and during the early years. Thereafter, family life often became more progressively and comparatively routine and parents thus began to seek greater engagement in activities such as LTPA where they were able to ‘escape’ – albeit temporarily – from the increasing constraints on their time, responsibilities, and physical and mental health.

As their offspring got older and they became progressively less dependent on them, many parents were better able to re-engage in LTPA by modifying the types of activities in which they engaged, and/or by engaging in activity with their children present. This enabled them not only to pass on their ‘love’ of activity, but also to engage in important role modelling of positive healthy lifestyle behaviour such as being physically active (Allen et al., 2021).

Theoretically, our evidence points to the continued – but often overlooked – importance of Elias and Dunning’s (2008) work on the quest for excitement in leisure, and how engagement in LTPA can help parents and other participants to meet a socially conditioned psychological need for sociability and mental refreshment through the generation of pleasurable tension or excitement. Conceptualised in this way enables us to recognise how, in the context of their complex networks of interdependence, parents can engage in ‘socially permitted self-centredness in a non-leisure world which demands and enforces the dominance of other-centred activities’ (Elias & Dunning, 2008, p. 88). It also emphasises how leisure can provide an alternative socially acceptable way of experiencing desirable emotions away from the otherwise demanding nature of family life through ‘a moderate loosening of adult controls’ (Elias & Dunning, 2008, p. 97). To that end, the findings reported here encourage us to take more seriously the ability of leisure activities, including LTPA, to meet the socially generated emotional and biopsychosocial needs of people in increasingly complex societies such as the UK.

Our findings should also encourage other leisure researchers to explore the continuities and changes in parents' diverse LTPA careers, and how these can be related to changes (especially a narrowing) in the power relations and associated constraints of their interdependence with children. Further research is also needed on how these experiences are interrelated with, and shaped by, gender and other intersecting identity characteristics, and whether engagement in different types of leisure activities meet the same socially generated needs of parents. Doing so will enable leisure researchers to recognise that 'every family relationship is a process' (Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998, p. 211) wherein the relationships between parents, children, and others are dynamic and 'the need to work consciously at our relationships with each other never ends' (Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998, p. 211).

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