Author's response to reviews

Title: Engaging families in physical activity research: A family-based focus group study

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Title: Engaging families in physical activity research: A family-based focus group study

We would like to thank the reviewers for their insightful responses to our manuscript, and are pleased they consider the work to be of clinical relevance and academic significance. We acknowledge the concerns of each reviewer, and are grateful to the BMC Public Health editorial team for the opportunity to answer them. We have sought to address each comment below (see italicised text), and where appropriate, have made changes to the manuscript (highlighted using red text). We look forward to hearing your thoughts, and welcome further feedback.

Reviewer 1: Major compulsory revisions

Introduction
The introduction is largely sufficient and clearly identifies an evidence gap. However, a few statistics could be provided in paragraph 2 illustrating the problem with recruitment and retention of families in PA research. While the implications of the problems of retention are well argued, a clear idea of the size of the problem is not provided.

We agree this would be a useful addition to the Introduction of this manuscript. We have added commentary and data from a review of recruitment and retention rates in studies of child health to supplement the second paragraph (P3 L7).

Methods
Recruitment
The section describing recruitment seems to be missing an initial component describing where the study took place, how the study population was derived and why this area was selected. Given that later the authors comment about the high-SES of the sample and that this might be a limitation, it leaves the reader questioning why this outcome was not identified when selecting the study population and steps taken to address it. Although the recruitment process is better illuminated by the Figure, it is still reads a little as if the description “starts in the middle”.

We have added details of the geographical area from which participants were recruited (P4 L10). We agree that the high socio-economic status of recruited families is a limitation of this work (and reflects a problem experienced by researchers more widely). As we have now explained in the manuscript (P4 L10), particular effort was made to contact schools and community groups (through which to deliver recruitment materials) that were located in areas representing all levels of socio-economic status. We have also added suggestions for targeted research to the Discussion (P8 L33).

Data collection
It would be helpful given the central role that the cards listing the barriers and facilitators of participation to have a list of those card items (in the appendix if it is extensive) and also some explanation of from where they were derived. Were they from previous research (if so which studies) or from some sort of formative research?

We have added a new figure (Figure 2), which provides examples of the flashcards used with children and their parents. We have also added text to the Methods (P4 L30) to further elucidate the use of these cards to prompt discussion of facilitators and barriers, and to explain that cards were developed using feedback from our pilot focus group.

Data analysis
The authors state that the data were analysed “thematically” however no information is given about what informed the process of identifying themes – was there any theoretical grounding that informed that process?

Thematic analysis (i.e. emerging themes identified, coding frame developed and duplicate-tested on a proportion of transcripts, discrepancies discussed and consensus reached, quotations clustered around broad themes) was used to explore the key facilitators and barriers to participation. No specific theory was used to develop the coding frame for analysis. We have added text to the Methods to make this process clearer for the reader (P5 L13).

Results
Mostly the results make sense and are supported by the example quotes provided. However there are two concerns I had in the rendering of the results. Firstly, the theme around benefits of participating in PA research which focus on experiencing new things, developing character and increasing contact do not make the specific reference to PA research, as opposed to participating in PA generally. I am not sure whether this lack of specificity occurred at the point of data collection or in the writing up and selection of quotes, but I think given the point of the paper there needs to be a reference to PA research specifically rather than just benefits of PA – i.e., is there something different about doing PA for research compared with just doing PA? Presumably there is nothing stopping them from doing PA (or if there is, how does doing PA for research overcoming that obstacle), but does doing it in the context of research have some extra benefits?

We have now more clearly outlined the social benefits of being involved in research that participants cited (P6 L4). We agree that the quotes provided do not specifically refer to research (as compared to physical activity more generally); however, this was a function of how the conversation progressed (i.e. the interviewer described example research studies, and prompted parents to order cards and discuss possible incentives). In that sense, the quotes refer to taking part in physical activity interventions, which to research participants may be synonymous with taking part in research. We consider that the included quotes offer insight into the perceived benefits of research participation, knowledge of which may contribute to the development of effective recruitment and retention strategies for children and their families.

My second concern is that much is made in the introduction and discussion about having the whole family participate in the research yet only parents and the target children are quoted and discussed. There doesn’t seem to be much coming from the other family members. It may well be that not much else is learnt by including them – a negative result but should still be reported. The case studies do give a bit more but I would be interested to know how other siblings in particular view it and does that affect the decision to participate as a family?

The cited quotes include both target children and their siblings. For example, on P6 L39, the quotes refer to a conversation between the target child (Girl, 9y) and her younger brother (Boy, 7y). We have also ensured that information on family interaction (elicited from both observer notes and transcripts) is included in the family case studies (for example, describing occasions where siblings were surprised by the response provided by the target child, or where siblings contradicted each other).

Unfortunately, very little information was provided on the effect of siblings’ perspective on a family’s decision to participate in physical activity research. As previously, comprehensive thematic analysis was conducted to identify key findings, and we have been careful not to draw conclusions beyond the data.

Discussion
There is a statement under “Barriers to Involvement” in the results that research activities should be kept outside of working hours, yet in the discussion it says single parents would like the opposite. This should be resolved perhaps by putting the finding about single parents into the results and then discussing the different perspectives of subgroups in the conclusions. 

We thank the reviewer for this suggestion; we have added this finding to the Results (P7 L1) and have clarified the text pertaining to family structure in the Discussion.

Minor Essential Revisions
None

Discretionary Revisions
None

Reviewer: Adam Walsh

Thank you for allowing me to review this well written manuscript on an issue relevant to all researchers who attempt to recruit families. The manuscript is succinct which contributes to its readability and delivers its simple, yet important messages on the topic well. Whilst the participants are not representative of the population, which does limit generalizability, this manuscript still allows an insight into recruiting families that is of importance for researchers involved in family-based research. I have only one minor suggestion for revision.

Major Compulsory Revisions
Nil

Minor Essential Revisions
Nil

Discretionary Revisions
1. For consistency, when describing the SES percentage of families in the results section, include number of families in brackets – e.g.: 89% (15 families), as the follow on sentences describes the other two families, which, whilst the maths is easy enough to work out, impacts on readability.

We agree that the addition of absolute number of families adds clarity for the reader; and have added this figure where suggested (P5 L34).