

MAPHM Symposium 2017

20th October 2017

Abstract Title:

The physiotherapeutic perspective on preventing childhood obesity: A quantitative study on the effectiveness of an educational talk to caregivers.

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Abstract

Background: The ever-increasing prevalence of childhood obesity led to a public health crisis with efforts being made from all stakeholders involved to halt its rise. In 2013, the Malta Association of Physiotherapists (MAP) implemented an educational talk on obesity and physical activity as a national campaign. This educational talk was not tested for effectiveness, which leads to the research question of this study: “Is an educational talk on obesity and physical activity effective at improving the caregiver’s health literacy?”

Methods: A quasi-experimental research design was used. The intervention was the educational talk developed by the MAP and a self-designed health literacy tool was used to collect data on health literacy. The health literacy tool underwent a process of expert review which was then followed by translation procedures. Caregivers of 5-6 year old children attending primary state schools in Gozo were invited to participate in this study through an information letter. The health literacy tool was filled in twice to establish a baseline score of health literacy before the educational talk and a score of health literacy after the educational talk.

Results: Data collected from the health literacy tools revealed that there was a statistical improvement in the participant’s health literacy score after the educational talk. Hypotheses testing also showed that there was no statistical difference between health literacy score difference and demographic variables (gender, age, education level, and employment status).

Conclusion: Health literacy enables caregivers to use and interpret information related to their health to obtain the desired health outcomes (Nielsen-Bohlman, Panzer, & Kindig, 2004). The effective educational talk presented in this study could therefore be an essential component of public health initiatives which target childhood obesity. The lack of statistical difference in health literacy scores among demographic groups shows that the educational talk was effective across the whole population, narrowing down health inequalities.

Messages: The World Confederation of Physical Therapists advocates the key role of the physiotherapist in preventing childhood obesity to prescribe the correct dose of physical activity in children. The educational talk presented in this study can therefore be used by physiotherapists as a public health initiative to empower parents to take control of their children’s physical activity levels, ensuring an active lifestyle from the start and better quality of life in the future.