Improving Physical and Mental Health in Mothers through Online and Community-Based Exercise

Research report Nov 2014
Online and community-based exercise can increase a mother’s self-reported activity levels, and progress towards fitness goals. In turn, they achieve benefits to their physical and mental health including weight-loss and increased self-esteem.

Mothers want exercise to fit with every-day life. They report that positive, specific goals can be very motivating. And accessible, credible advice is essential.

The combination of an online training programme and community exercise groups can be a powerful enabler of sustained, effective exercise for mothers.

Healthcare professionals can play a significant role in encouraging mothers to be physically active.
Introduction

This research is part of an effort to inform medical professionals on safe, effective pre and postnatal exercise, to support them in their work with pregnant women and new mothers.

The work was led by Katy Tuncer, mother-of-two and postnatal fitness expert, and supported by Ready Steady Mums.

The Ready Steady Mums team supports and engages with mothers in communities around the UK and online. To complement survey-based research, they have provided practice-based insight on motivations, enablers and barriers to exercise for women in pregnancy and beyond.
Many women suffer low self-confidence and feel negative towards their bodies. Juggling career and family can cause stress and inactivity. A third of mums never regain pre-pregnancy weight. Motivation is challenging with limited social life. Financial constraints can make self-care unaffordable. Stress and everyday pressure can lead to comfort eating. What is at stake?
Approach

• 500 mothers have taken part in some of all of:
  – A progressive online exercise programme – from pregnancy exercises; to gentle physical activity to aid recovery from birth (pelvic-floor muscle training, conditioning of the transversus abdominus, postural correction); to more advanced postnatal exercises
  – Informal weekly “Socialcise” sessions led by local mothers
  – Website, blog and social media forums for motivation, setting and sharing goals, asking questions of experts

• Data sources:
  – Survey of 100 mothers on attitudes and habits towards pre and postnatal exercise
  – Consultation with medical professionals (in midwifery, health visiting, physiotherapy, gynaecology, general practice)
  – Activity analysis of 200 unique users of the online exercise programme
  – Interviews with 20 women who have participated in one of 50 Socialcise groups
  – Comments via social media, email and phone by >500 mothers taking part in Ready Steady Mums programmes
Key Findings

• Mothers want to exercise and value the benefits

• However, most do not get enough physical activity and they perceive some big barriers to exercise

• Mothers want exercise to fit with every-day life

• Positive, specific goals can be very motivating

• Accessible, credible advice is essential

• Mothers can benefit from an online and community exercise programme
Mothers want to exercise and they value the benefits

### Which fitness goals motivate sustained exercise?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fitness Goal</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lose fat</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be toned</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be slim</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wear a bikini on holiday</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fit in a great dress</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look like a celebrity I admire</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role-model a healthy lifestyle for my family</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve long-term health</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve my mental wellbeing</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get a stronger core</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce physical pain</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make friends through exercise</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

91% found an **appearance goal** to be extremely or very motivating

95% found a **health and wellbeing** goal to be extremely or very motivating

"Exercise makes me feel relaxed and energised, it’s the only time I have for myself.”

"I love setting an example to my kids.”

"The best bit is the feeling afterwards of feeling well and released.”

Source: Ready Steady Mums Survey 2014 (100 mothers surveyed in September 2014, 82% with at least one child under 5)
Profile of a new mother who does recommended level of weekly physical activity

- 71% exercise with their kids
- 88% like or love exercise to be part of their daily routine
- 75% exercise with friends
- 96% exercise outdoors
- 79% have set a fitness goal

Source: Ready Steady Mums Survey 2014
However, most mothers do not get enough exercise

- Of mothers surveyed, 29% met the recommended weekly exercise level for adults.

Moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA)

Physical activity recommendation by the NHS for adults: at least 150 minutes of moderate or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity physical activity.

Source: Health Survey for England (HSE) 2012

Source: Ready Steady Mums Survey 2014
Mothers perceive some big barriers to exercise

**Which barriers stop you from exercising?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barrier</th>
<th>% Mothers who find barrier sometimes or always a major barrier</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low motivation</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sticking with my plan</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

>50% of new mums identify time as “always a major barrier” to exercise

“*I feel it’s just too much to fit my kids, cleaning and sorting my house and working out. I’m just exhausted by the time they are in bed.*”

“I am too exhausted looking after 2 toddlers. When I am not with them (which is rare) I just want to put my feet up!”

Source: Ready Steady Mums Survey 2014
Mothers want exercise to fit with every-day life

What do you do most often for exercise?
# times activity mentioned

- Walking 38%
- Exercise classes 17%
- Running 15%
- Others 15%
- Mind-body fitness (yoga, pilates, etc.) 8%
- Swimming 7%

How do you prefer to exercise?
# mums who like or love each form of exercise

- As part of day-to-day life – e.g., walking 94%
- Outside 87%
- With friends 76%
- In a formal exercise class 70%

“I want to exercise on my own terms.”

“Getting outside for fresh air is good for me and my daughter.”

“[I choose] running as it’s free and I can fit it around my family. Pre-babies, I loved doing classes.”

Source: Ready Steady Mums Survey 2014
Positive, specific fitness goals can be very motivating

Words most commonly used in mothers’ fitness goals

Race | 5km | Strength | Fitness | Half-marathon | 10km | Weight | Run | Compete | Gym | Walk | Classes

62% of new mums surveyed have ever set themselves a fitness goal

“I want to admit that my weight has gone up and do something about it.”

“When I commit to exercise with a friend I know I’ll actually show up.”

Source: Ready Steady Mums Survey 2014 (question – “A fitness goal is something you aim to achieve from doing exercise. Have you ever set yourself one? If so, what is your most recent fitness goal?”)
## Importance of each type of advice when considering pre and postnatal exercise

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Advice</th>
<th>% of Mothers Considered Essential or Very Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Easy to find and access</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear and simple to understand</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tailored to health needs</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence based</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tried and tested</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reassuring</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medically supported</td>
<td>46%</td>
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</table>

Source: Ready Steady Mums Survey 2014

“I was a bit apprehensive about exercise, I needed safe and reliable guidance.”

“The reassurance my midwife gave me about where to start and what was safe made me start and stick with [exercise].”
Mothers can benefit from an online and community-based exercise programme

Top Reported Benefits (ranked by frequency of mention) of participation in the Ready Steady Mums programme

1. Weight-loss
2. Increased self-esteem
3. Social capital
4. Improved core muscle strength (continence and posture)
5. Leadership confidence
6. Calmness as a mother

“The programme changed my life, my best friends are the ones I met in my exercise group and I have transformed my health.”

“We have made great new friends and so have our babies.”

“I didn’t know how I would be able to continue the outdoor activities that I loved so much after I became pregnant, but now I feel fitter than ever before, it has really helped me shape up to do exactly what I want to do and be a better mum.”

“I thought I couldn’t get my body back but I did, I am fitter now than I was before I got pregnant.”

“I love how the programme is tailored for me.”

“I wasn’t that fit before, Ready Steady Mums got me going.”

“I feel better as a woman and better as a mum.”

“[It was really hard for me to find time to exercise at first. I started out doing 15 minutes at a time at home while Tom was sleeping. It made me feel so much better.]”

Source: Ready Steady Mums Survey 2014, interviews with programme participants
Medical professionals have a role to play in helping mothers exercise safely

*How can medical professionals help?*
- Help mums set specific and positive goals
- Encourage goal sharing to increase commitment and motivation
- Recommend simple exercises for the early postnatal period: Pelvic floor muscle training; Posture correction; Breathing exercises; Balancing
- Reassure mothers that exercise does not reduce milk supply (although proper hydration is essential)
- Encourage new mums to set up social exercise groups together