

Engaging Australian adolescents to prevent non-communicable diseases: participation their way

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ABSTRACT

Background: Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) pose a significant health burden in Australia, with adolescents being a key demographic affected by preventable risk factors. Despite their importance, adolescents are often excluded from health promoting activities that directly impact them. This study aimed to evaluate adolescents' perspectives, experiences, perceptions, and preferences regarding their participation in NCD prevention activities.

Methods: A mixed-methods study design was employed guided by the community-based participatory research approach, incorporating a cross-sectional survey and focus groups. Participants were adolescents 13-18 years and residing in Australia. Methodological integration through merging quantitative and qualitative data was employed. A weaving approach through narrative was used to report the findings. Adolescent researchers were actively engaged throughout all phases.

Results: 501 participants completed the survey (mean 16.0-years, SD 1.2) and 19 participants participated in the focus groups (mean 17.0-years, SD 0.9). Participants perceived mental health disorders to be the most significant health issue facing adolescents. Participants with prior volunteer experience were more likely to engage in health-promoting activities. Overall, participants perceived participation in health-promoting activities as beneficial. Participants recognised the importance of their role and influence was perceived as a key enabler for prompting change in health outcomes. They emphasised the importance of visibility, flexibility, and authenticity in engagement. There was also strong willingness among participants to engage in future activities, with preferences for collaborative team environments and choice in their level of participation. Despite willingness, barriers such as a lack of opportunities were noted, highlighting the importance of providing varied engagement options to accommodate individual preferences.

Conclusions: This study highlights the importance of adolescent engagement in NCD prevention activities and highlights the need for effective strategies to overcome barriers to participation. Recommendations include widely and equitably promoting participation of adolescents in decision-making, enhancing accessibility to opportunities, and fostering collaboration between decision makers and adolescents.

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