

Dissertation submitted to obtain the degree of Doctor of Health Sciences

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Laura Maenhout (°1994) combined her studies in Special Needs Education and a deep interest in the field of sports and exercise into a doctoral project at Ghent University with the support of Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO). At the Department of Movement and Sports Sciences, she passionately investigates the promotion of physical activity among individuals with intellectual disabilities.



## GET IN TOUCH

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# THE PROMOTION OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN YOUTH WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

# BACKGROUND

Youth with intellectual disabilities (ID) experience more health issues than their peers without ID. Being active can help address these issues, but only 9% of people with ID meet recommended physical activity levels. There is a need to improve activity levels, yet many current interventions are not effective.

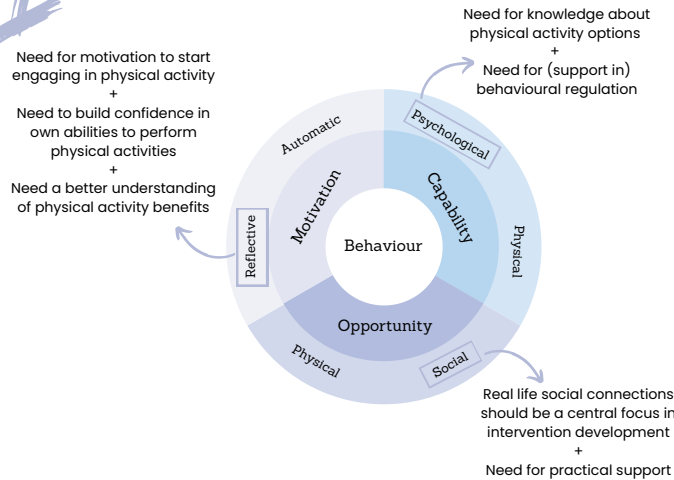
# CHALLENGES

Creating successful physical activity interventions for youth with ID involves tackling four key challenges:

- 1 Interventions are often created without a strong guiding theory.
- 2 People with ID are rarely asked for their opinions during the development process.
- 3 We do not fully understand the key factors that should be included in interventions.
- 4 We lack understanding of what works for whom, under which circumstances and why.



**1 STUDY 1** established the theoretical basis for the intervention using the COM-B model.



→ Intervention = buddy + supporting app

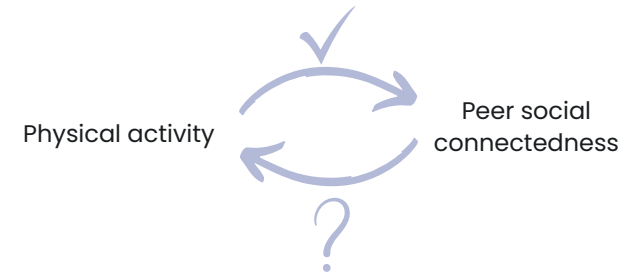
**2 STUDY 2** detailed the co-creation process with youth with ID and identified seven key lessons learned.

- Involve the caregivers in the process
- Start with building rapport
- Empower participants in decision-making
- Consider the impact of varying group dynamics
- Adapt questioning
- Use innovative and creative working methods
- Essential co-researcher traits include enthusiasm, patience, flexibility and openness

→ These principles serve as a blueprint for co-creating with this target group.

**3 STUDY 3** compiled evidence on the link between peer social connectedness and physical activity in youth with ID.

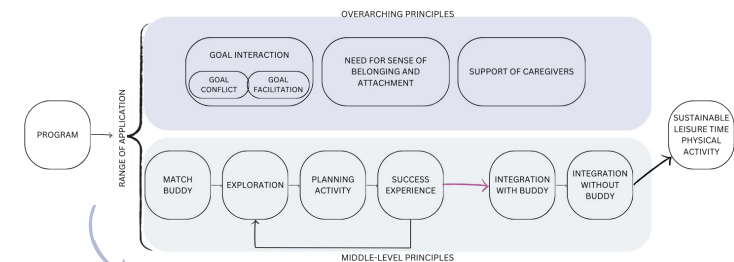
The literature lacks a clear definition and measurement instrument of peer social connectedness in the context of physical activity.



→ Future research should explore if strengthening peer social connectedness leads to increased physical activity among youth with ID.

**4 STUDY 4** used a theory-based evaluation approach to closely examine seven individual cases and assess how well the intervention worked.

✓ Effective in 2 cases ✗ Not effective in 2 cases  
? Insufficient data in 3 cases



Causal model shedding light on individual intervention mechanisms

→ A dyadic approach showed promise for youth with ID, who prioritised social connections over physical activity, but more research is needed to fully realise its potential.