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# Teachers' and Parents' Perspectives on Promoting Primary School Children's Physical Activity at School: A Qualitative Study

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**Abstract:** Lack of children's physical activity remains a relevant problem that urges the need to find solutions. As physical activity starts to decline already in primary school, this study explores the possibilities of promoting physical activity at school. Specifically, this study aimed to gain an understanding of teachers' and parents' perspectives of promoting children's physical activity in primary school. Five semi-structured focus groups were conducted with primary school teachers ( $n = 31$ , aged 30–62) and five with the parents of primary school children ( $n = 25$ , aged 31–48). The data from the focus groups were analyzed using thematic analysis. Six main themes emerged from the study, reflecting teachers' and parents' perspectives on promoting primary school children's physical activity at school: physical and psychological changes of children's, parents' attitudes towards physical activity, adapting school facilities for children's physical activity, organization of the physical education process, teacher's personality, teachers', and parents' partnership. The findings revealed the most significant barriers to promoting physical activity among primary school children as perceived by teachers and parents and the opportunities for not only overcoming these barriers but also increasing children's physical activity at school.

**Keywords:** physical activity promotion; primary school teachers; parents; qualitative research



**Citation:** Guzauskas, D.; Sukys, S. Teachers' and Parents' Perspectives on Promoting Primary School Children's Physical Activity at School: A Qualitative Study. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 13287. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132313287>

Academic Editors: Dario Novak, Brigita Mieziene and Branislav Antala

Received: 11 October 2021

Accepted: 29 November 2021

Published: 30 November 2021

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## 1. Introduction

Increasing children's physical activity has become a widely recognized goal as regular physical activity is associated with various positive health outcomes. Previous reviews have shown that physical activity can help to promote cardiovascular and skeletal muscle health [1,2] and reduce overweight and obesity [3,4]. However, the benefit of children meeting physical activity guidelines also beyond improvements to their physical health. Recent studies have shown positive effects of physical activity on mental health [4] and overall health-related quality of life [5–7]. Other systematic reviews assessing the effect of physical activity on academic-related outcomes found a positive association between physical activity and cognitive function and school children's academic achievements [8,9]. However, many of these benefits could be observed if children achieved the recommended physical activity level. The World Health Organization (WHO) [10] recommends that children aged 5–17 years should accumulate an average of 60 min of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity daily.

Despite the mentioned evidence about various physical activity benefits for children, the current situation of children's physical activity is not very optimistic. The data from a nationally representative study of 7–8-year-old children in the United Kingdom demonstrated that only 51 percent met the recommended amount of physical activity [11]. A similar study with a representative sample of 6–11-year-old children in the United States showed that 42 percent of children met the recommendation for physical activity [12]. Recent Global Matrix 3.0 results from 49 countries showed that, on average, from 27 to 33 percent of 5–17-year-old children met the overall physical activity recommendations [13].

Another recent study aiming to analyze the variation in physical activity and sedentary behavior in European children and youth found that a maximum of 29 percent of children was categorized as sufficiently physically active [14]. However, these studies have also shown that there are differences when comparing children's physical activity in different countries.

The studies mentioned above suggest that many children are physically inactive. However, it is worth noting that physical activity has begun to decline already in primary school [15–18]. Longitudinal studies of primary school children in the United Kingdom have revealed significant negative changes in both children's physical activity on weekdays and at weekends [15] and an increase in sedentary behaviors [16]. Other longitudinal studies have shown that physical activity changes little before 8 years of age, but it begins to decline progressively starting from 9 years of age [17]. Other studies show that children's physical activity begins to decline from around the age of school entry [18]. A study aiming to assess the variations of objectively measured physical activity across Europe also found that time spent in moderate to vigorous physical activity progressively lower to increase from 6–7 years [14]. In addition, a five-year study in Lithuania revealed that the number of insufficiently physically active first graders (in Lithuania children of 7 years of age have to attend the first grade) is increasing every year [19]. The mentioned studies suggest that the promotion of physical activity in children should start earlier than it begins to decrease dramatically. In other words, to develop lifelong habits rather than short-term ones, it is important to form positive attitudes towards physical activity at the earliest possible age [20,21].

Although it is essential to encourage children's physical activity at the earliest possible age, we aim to focus on primary school children. As children start school, their daily routines and the nature of their activities change. Instead of active games, children spend a large part of the day at the school desk, which negatively affects their physical activity [22]. Given that children spend about half of their day at school, school is identified as one of the most important contexts for promoting physical activity in children [9,23,24]. It should be noted that over the last two decades, a number of studies have been carried out using various interventions to promote physical activity in primary school. The goal was to increase children's physical activity by changing the content of physical education [25], adding additional physical education classes per week [26,27], integrating physical activity into the teaching of academic lessons [28–30]; increasing children's physical activity during the break time [31]; including exercise breaks in the classes [32], and adapting recreational areas around the school [33]. Promoting active commuting is also considered a good strategy to improve physical activity [34] and physical fitness [35]. However, the more interesting data are those from systematic or meta-analyses on the effectiveness of various interventions to promote children's physical activity at school. Systematic reviews found evidence that such interventions could be effective while increasing children's physical activity levels [36]. Other systematic reviews and meta-analyses aiming to evaluate the overall effectiveness of school-based physical activity interventions on accelerometer-assessed daily physical activity have found that these interventions have a small effect on increasing children's accelerometer-measured daily physical activity [25,37,38].

Focusing on school-based physical activity interventions, the role of teachers is one of the most important [39], especially when dealing with the problem of promoting physical activity of primary school children because the teachers working with them (as in Lithuania) generally teach all subjects of the primary curriculum (including physical education). Therefore, these teachers spend most of their school time with children. Some scholars claim that it should be the teacher's interest to motivate children's physical activity and incorporate physical activity into their school routine [9]. However, some researchers claim that it is because of teachers' lack of skills and abilities to integrate and adapt physical activity interventions at school that the latter are not successfully implemented [40]. Research also reveals that teachers believe in the benefits of physical education. However, they would rather teach other subjects due to lack of confidence, time, or equipment [41].

They are not quite sure how successful they are in implementing physical education programs [42]. These studies focused more on teachers' curriculum preferences and physical education in primary school [41] and teachers' perceptions of physical education benefits [42]. To our knowledge, several studies aiming to analyze teachers' perceptions of physical activity promotion in the academic classroom were also conducted [43–45]. However, to better understand how to promote children's physical activity, it is important to consider the whole school context. On the other hand, we lack evidence on how teachers themselves perceive the possibilities of promoting children's physical activity at school.

Research has also revealed an important role of parents in promoting children's physical activity at school [46–48]. Although we can find data on how parents perceive the factors that encourage and limit children's physical activity [49], we lack research on what parents think about the opportunities to promote physical activity in children at school. We believe that the knowledge from the perspective of teachers and parents of how they perceive opportunities to encourage children's physical activity at school is vital for a better understanding of what hinders and what and how can help realize the benefits of physical activity.

In summary, our study aimed to gain an understanding of teachers' and parents' perspectives of promoting children's physical activity in primary school. To pursue this aim, a qualitative research strategy was adopted, which enabled uncovering the main barriers, challenges, and ways of improving the promotion of children's physical activity at school.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Study Setting

In Lithuania, the content of physical education for primary school children is regulated by the *General Curriculum for Primary and Lower Secondary Education* approved by the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania. The national schools provide two weekly physical education classes for primary school children. Following the Order of the Minister of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania "On the approval of the General curriculum of the primary, lower secondary and secondary education for the school years 2021/2022 and 2022/2023" of 3 May 2021 [50], starting from the year 2021/2022, primary school children have three physical education classes per week. Primary school children are taught physical education by primary school teachers (in rare cases, the school establishes a position for a primary school physical education teacher using its own financial resources).

### 2.2. Study Design

To explore teachers' and parents' perspectives on promoting physical activity in primary schools, qualitative data were collected using focus group discussions.

### 2.3. Study Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants who could provide varied and detailed insights into promoting children's physical activity in primary schools. A total of 31 primary school teachers (29 women and 2 men) aged 30–62 ( $M = 49.4$ ) participated in the study. The teachers reported having 7–37 ( $M = 25.7$ ) years of teaching experience. Of the 31 participants, only two were physical education teachers (40 and 58 years old and having 14 and 35 years of teaching experience). The study also involved 25 parents of primary school children (20 mothers and 5 fathers), aged 31–48 ( $M = 38.05$ ), having on average 2.16 children (12 parents had younger children who were not yet at school). All parents in the study had a higher education and job at the time of the survey.

### 2.4. Procedures

Before the study, approval from the University Social Research Ethics Committee was obtained (No. SMTEK-20, 21 May 2019). Upon obtaining approval, the first author

contacted the schools' administration to obtain permission to share information with the invitation to this study. Invitations to teachers were posted on school noticeboards. It was agreed with the school administration that the teachers' choice to participate in the study would depend solely on their free consent, without any additional authorization from the administration. Invitations were sent to parents of primary school children by email; they were also invited during parents' meetings. The invitations included the information about the aim and nature of the research, i.e., that they were invited to a group discussion. As personal communication with each person invited to the group discussion is essential [51], each potential respondent was separately provided with information about the study and its process. All participants who agreed to participate in the study signed an informed consent form. Following these consent procedures, participants also completed a short demographic questionnaire. Next, the participants were emailed information with the date and place of the interview. Focus group interviews were conducted in school, with permission of school administration, after working hours. Before the focus group interview, participants were again informed about the aim, content of the study, the recording and transcript of interviews, and the storage of the study data. They were also reminded that they have the right to withdraw at any time.

### 2.5. Focus Groups

The research data were collected during group discussions. The focus group was chosen not only to collect a broader range of responses but also to encourage the participants to raise questions and stimulate discussion [52]. This data collection method is useful when the research is oriented to a particular field of focus [53], which is typical for our study as it focuses on promoting physical activity in school. As during a group discussion, unlike in individual interviews, participants interact with each other, it requires interviewing and focus group guiding skills. Therefore, a pilot group discussion was first conducted with four primary school teachers. However, the data from this pilot group discussion were not included in the analyses.

In total, 10 group discussions were conducted. To obtain the wealthiest possible research data, it is essential to involve all participants in the discussion as much as possible, and the homogeneity of the group is vital for this [51]. When discussing the promotion of children's physical activity at school, parents may view teachers as more excellent experts and may be less inclined to express their views in teachers' presence. We, therefore, formed separate groups of teachers and parents. As large groups can be challenging to moderate [54], each group was limited to 10 participants. Five focus group discussions were conducted with teachers ( $n = 5$ –12 participants), and subsequently five group discussions with primary school children's parents ( $n = 6$ –7 participants).

The study was preceded by an introductory talk, once again explaining the nature of the debate, its aims, the rules of the discussion, the ethics of the conversation, and the participants. The focus group discussion started by encouraging people to say what they thought about physical activity in general and their personal opinion about physical activity among children. From the very beginning, the participants were asked to comment, encouraged to speak up without being afraid to ask each other questions. This introductory part allowed the participants to feel free and interact by asking questions, commenting, and sharing their experiences. In addition, it provided the focus group moderator with information about how much the topic of physical activity, especially children's physical activity, is important to them. Following this opening discussion, a series of key questions about the physical activity of primary children in school, encouraging children's physical activity, the existing constraints, and the possibilities available at school were asked. The discussion also included questions on how parents can contribute to promoting physical activity in school (see Table 1). At the end of the discussion, the participants were also asked to speak up if they wanted to add anything that might not have been asked, discussed publicly, or privately. Furthermore, we made summary notes immediately after the discussion. A similar focus group format was maintained for talking with both parents

and teachers. The difference was that, when discussing some issues, teachers had more to say (e.g., curriculum, content).

**Table 1.** Questions for focus group interviews.

Categories	Questions
Introductory questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What do you think about physical activity in general and in person?</li> <li>- What is your opinion about the importance of physical activity for the children?</li> </ul>
Key questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What do you think about the physical activity of primary children?</li> <li>- What can you say about the physical activity of primary children at school?</li> <li>- What is your opinion about parents' attitudes towards physical activity and their importance to children's physical activity?</li> <li>- What are the challenges and difficulties in promoting children's physical activity at school?</li> <li>- What do you think about the focus on children's physical activity in the whole school?</li> <li>- What are the challenges and difficulties faced by primary school teachers while organizing physical education?</li> <li>- What do you think about the amount of time per week assigned for physical education lessons?</li> <li>- What do you think about introducing a position of a physical education teacher in school?</li> <li>- What activities could help the school to promote physical activity among learners?</li> <li>- What good personal practices can you share in promoting physical activity in children (a question for teachers)?</li> <li>- What do you think about the possibilities for parents to contribute to the promotion of physical activity at school?</li> </ul>
Ending questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Is there anything else you want to say about any other factors related to promoting children's physical activity at school?</li> <li>- Do you have any additional comments?</li> </ul>

The duration of each discussion ranged from 54 min to 1 h 30 min. The talks were tape-recorded with the consent of all the participants. It was emphasized that the data would be used only for the purposes of the research and summarized (without revealing the participants' identities or personal information) and, once the data had been processed, the recordings would be destroyed.

## 2.6. Data Analysis

The audio recording of each group discussion was transcribed verbatim. Before the data analysis, all participants' names were replaced by pseudonyms. The data analysis was carried out immediately after the group discussion to identify potential errors and ambiguities as soon as possible to avoid them in subsequent group discussions. Both researchers carried out a thematic analysis of the data following the recommendations of Braun and Clarke [55]: familiarization with data, initial code generation, searching the data for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and naming them. It should be noted that before the data analysis, we consulted an experienced qualitative research expert to ensure that we had a good understanding of the procedures of the thematic analysis. We began the analysis by familiarizing ourselves with the data by reading the transcripts several times, summarizing notes after each discussion, and listening to the audio recordings. In this way, we sought to go into the details of the debate making rough notes. The meaningful segments of the data were then coded. The codes were juxtaposed, combined, and initial themes were developed. In this process, we used a "thematic map" that helped visualize the initial themes identified, which were later reviewed, compared with the transcript, and assessed to see if they meaningfully differ. The identified themes were then named and defined. Parents' and teachers' data were analyzed separately; then, the themes were

combined. While doing this, the themes were revised and renamed or redefined, which allowed identifying the whole picture of promoting children's physical activity in school.

### 2.7. Ensuring Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the following strategies have been addressed: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To enhance the credibility of the data, the first technique of triangulation involving teachers' and parents' informants was applied. This allowed getting a much richer picture of the attitudes, experiences, and ideas. Moreover, triangulation within several institutions was used, i.e., teachers from different schools and parents of the children of various schools took part in group discussions. This reduced the impact of school-specific factors. Moreover, the participants were given the freedom to refuse to participate in the study, and their confidentiality was guaranteed. Therefore, they could speak freely, without fear, about the problems that exist while promoting physical activity among children at school and express their views on how to address them. In addition, an opportunity was provided to express their ideas privately at the end of the group discussion. Moreover, member checking was used to ensure that the results represented what the respondents wanted to say during the debate. We sent a summary of the findings to six participants (three teachers and three parents). Then, the first author phoned them and asked them to comment on the results. Confirmability was strengthened by applying an audit trail that was performed by an experienced researcher in qualitative research. Additionally, regular debriefings between researchers of this study were organized to analyze the course of each group discussion and overall step-by-step procedures.

All research procedures, data collection methods, and analysis were described in detail to ensure dependability. Finally, transferability was ensured by describing the current situation of physical education in primary schools in Lithuania, which helps readers understand the actual situation and overall findings better.

## 3. Results

The research results showed which factors teachers and parents consider having an impact on the physical activity of primary children at school. Specifically, six main themes were identified, which covered the children themselves, their parents, and the broader school environment: (i) physical and psychological changes in children's, (ii) parents' attitudes towards physical activity, (iii) adapting school facilities for children's physical activity, (iv) organization of the physical education process, (v) teacher's personality, and (vi) teachers' and parents' partnership. It should be noted that the analysis of the data highlighted not only positive but also negative factors related to children's physical activity.

### 3.1. Children's Physical and Psychological Changes

In addition to pointing out that children's physical activity is declining, the participants in the research also remarked that children are less physically fit nowadays, and the number of such children is increasing. The fact that children are unable to run during physical education lessons, do other exercises, and cannot even reach specific standards poses some challenges. Teachers also notice that every year there are more and more pupils with poor health.

*"Physical ability is definitely declining. I don't need any studies; I can see it for myself. The exercises we used to assign 15 years ago can't be given now. Of course, there are exceptions, but it is terrible. Complete decline." (Teacher, FG1)*

*"We don't see medical statements now, but there used to be only 5–6 children in a class who were completely healthy. Others usually have some kind of pathology: visual, spinal, circulatory disorders." (Teacher, FG2)*

The majority of teachers in the study noted that children's physical activity and preferences differ by gender. As a result, the means of promoting physical activity also differ. Boys are



more physically active, like sporting, and prefer sports games, while girls prefer dancing and walking. Thus, teachers choose different forms of physical activity during the physical education lessons.

*"I have 15 boys in this class. It's a day in, a day out that they follow the ball from the first grade whatever the weather. But with the girls, it's different, they want to sit."* (Teacher, FG2)

*"... most of the girls just want to dance. They have a penchant for dancing. In the class, the children are split. The boys follow the ball, the girls go to the dance hall."* (Teacher, FG2)

Gender differences also emerged while assessing physical activity during parents' discussions, especially when they talked about their daughters and sons:

*"I have a sleeping beauty too, she sleeps and sleeps. I say, let's go somewhere, but there is zero physical activity, none at all. My son is more active. I don't even have to encourage him to play in yard."* (Parent, FG4)

When talking about the differences in physical activity, physical fitness, or health between current and previous generations of children, the participants also pointed out different priorities for physical activity, which leads to changes in the content and formats of physical education

*"I had pupils who were interested in basketball only. But this class has only been playing football since the first grade."* (Teacher, FG1)

*"We once wound up both various exercises and games in physical education lessons. But now children, especially fourth graders, already want just to play games, and to play just what they like."* (Teacher, FG4).

The teachers' talks highlighted the challenges in promoting physical activity that are related to children's personalities. The teachers pointed out that children are emotionally susceptible nowadays. As a result, they are not only sensitive to failure but also tend not to tolerate any pain. They also lack stubbornness, perseverance, are often afraid to try, and lack self-confidence.

*"... I can tell that the children are more sensitive. They are catching the ball, and they are crying all the time. They hurt their finger, and they sit down on the bench <...> They have tears in their eyes, and they'll have to tell their mum."* (Teacher, FG1)

*"... when the tasks need to be done with a bit of sweat or correctly, they are not happy."* (Teacher, FG3)

*"I think children's self-esteem needs to be higher in some cases. They are brave when they don't have to be. They can say anything. But when kids need to be brave, they don't have the courage."* (Teacher, FG3)

The teachers also pointed out that in addition to these qualities, children are anxious to be winners—they want to win. However, this desire is often linked to the desire for a quick result. Moreover, as the quotes below illustrate, children tend to lose interest very quickly, especially when their first attempt is not successful.

*"If they say it's hard, they failed, they don't want to try a second time. Many of them are anxious to succeed the first time, which is impossible."* (Teacher, FG3)

*"...because if they lost today, they are not interested anymore. If they failed an exercise, kids don't want to do it. They won't go to the class."* (Teacher, FG3)

### 3.2. Parents' Attitudes towards Physical Activity

The research revealed that primary children parents' attitudes towards physical activity are fundamental and can have both positive and negative effects on children's physical activity and teachers' efforts to promote physical activity in school. Parents emphasized

the importance of positive personal attitudes, especially a personal example, in promoting children's physical activity.

*"Children need that presence of someone close to them, encouragement, a walk together, a game. They are still at an age where an example is necessary."* (Parent, FG4)

*"If there is no push, no personal example, they will sit in front of the computer or mobile phone all the time."* (Parent, FG2)

However, talking about the importance of a personal example in promoting children's physical activity, parents did not strongly relate it to children's physical activity at school. However, this effect was indirectly revealed in the teachers' discussions. The teachers shared their experience that the more parents are aware of the importance of physical activity, the more they demonstrate it by a personal example, the more physically active their children are. Such children are more active, motivated, and engaged in various forms of physical activity in physical education classes. Moreover, aware of the importance of physical activity, parents make sure that even at home, their children do the exercises that need to be demonstrated in PE classes.

*"If parents encourage and motivate, children are more active. Parents play a significant role here too."* (Teacher, FG2)

*"I have noticed that if parents encourage their children to attend training sessions, such as swimming, then the children do it. Besides, no children bring a request to be excused from a physical education class. The parents' attitude is essential."* (Teacher, FG2)

As the following quotes from the discussions illustrate, the parents' attitudes towards children's physical activity can pose significant challenges for teachers. The teachers shared negative experiences when parents justify their children's reluctance to be physically active rather than encourage them. There is also a tendency for parents to overprotect their children, guard them, and justify their unwillingness to attend physical education classes or poor activity during them. The teachers attributed parents' over-obedience to children's wishes to a lack of attention to children's physical activity at home. They shared their experience that the children whose physically passive leisure time at home is not restricted are less likely to engage in physical activities (play, exercise) at school. The teachers also believe that parents encourage physical inactivity simply by dropping their kids off at school and picking them up home.

*"...sometimes parents are just looking for some reason to console their kids for a difficulty, any pain. Come, I'll carry you."* (Teacher, FG1)

*"After school, I heard a child in my class call, 'Mum, the lessons are over, come and pick me up.' The mum says, 'I won't; you can walk, the weather is nice.' 'No, come, come.' The mum says, 'OK', and she comes."* (Teacher, 4FG)

The teachers said that the schools and their ability to encourage children's physical active-ness are sometimes limited by the lack of parents' support. Especially when parents not only refuse to support teachers' efforts to promote physical activity in their children but do the opposite, trying to over-protect their children and find excuses to keep them out of physical education classes.

*"Now imagine a mother who did give permission. She allowed her child to go to the swimming pool. But the child comes to the pool with rubber slippers. Still, you have to get into the pool barefooted. She told me that the child came back barefooted on the edge of the pool. She was suggested buying special slippers that the child could swim with. Then she got a medical statement, and the child never swam again. <...> That's it, we didn't do anything, and the child stopped swimming. The medical statement was followed by another statement and so on."* (Teacher, FG5)

*"This is supplemented by parents' overprotection and the continuous 'the child has a cough, won't participate in the PE class'... Children catch on to this very quickly and use it."* (Teacher, FG1)



### 3.3. Adapting School Facilities for Children's Physical Activity

In their discussions about the factors related to children's physical activity in the school environment, both teachers and parents mentioned infrastructure. Not only equipment but also an adequately adapted physical environment and its use can help to promote children's physical activity during both classes and breaks. However, the outdoor and indoor environments are assessed differently. The parents in particular note that more investment is being made in upgrading outdoor playgrounds to accommodate children's physical activity:

*"When you come to pick up your children, they are not sitting, they are busy with something. Those playgrounds are tidier now. There used to be big mud and twice as big mud."* (Parent, FG3).

However, the internal school spaces are assessed rather critically because of the problems with the layout of the buildings. In particular, teachers noticed that narrow never renovated corridors not only made it difficult to find ways to encourage children to be physically active during breaks but also made them more likely to sit in the classroom.

*"First of all, some buildings should not accommodate a school at all because they look like prisons."* (Teacher, FG1)

*"Now, this is where let's be poor but fair. When you go into the school corridor, it's empty. And if it's winter, or it's raining, and the children can't go outside, then what the activity could you expect during the breaks."* (Teacher, FG1)

The research participants also pointed out that primary schools are often located in kindergartens, where sports halls are too small, corridors are narrow, there is a lack of space, and there are no opportunities to create physical activity areas. As a result, physical education classes are sometimes held in corridors:

*"...there were times when we had to have PE classes in corridors."* (Teacher, FG3).

The parents pointed out that the absence of changing facilities is one of the reasons for bullying. Primary children often dress up together in the same classroom before physical education.

*"And those kids, they have to dress up. That's when the bullying starts. When our son comes, for sure, he brings some comments. Then we sit down and talk. How can you say this one is fat? How can you say that this one is this or that?"* (Parent, FG5)

On the other hand, creating even minimal spaces for physical activity can quickly make children love them. However, the teacher's encouragement and instruction are beneficial:

*"There was a tennis table, but nobody used it <...> They didn't know how to play maybe <...> I taught them a little bit, and I don't know what happened this year, but it's always busy."* (Teacher, FG1)

### 3.4. Organization of the Physical Education Process

When it came to promoting physical activity among children at school, the organization of the physical education process was a particular focus of the participants in the research. The absence of a unified assessment system was mentioned as one of the negative factors affecting children's physical education. The teachers felt that in the absence of a unified approach, each teacher could pursue completely different aims of physical education.

*"Those who compose the curriculum, the textbooks should sit down and do it in unison."* (Teacher, FG1)

*"It shouldn't be the case that each school sets its own standards. There should be scientifically based requirements."* (Teacher, FG4)

During the discussions on the need for a unified assessment system, teachers shared their insights into the challenges of assessing children's achievement in physical education

classes. Children have different abilities, and, not to reduce their motivation for physical activity and avoid bullying by classmates, it is significant to assess the effort they show rather than the results they (under)achieve.

*“...not to humiliate, not to make fun. How to measure without offending because there are children with some physical problems. This is a challenge for teachers.” (Teacher, FG3)*

*“I assess children positively for their effort. There are those norms, but a lot of kids don’t even achieve them. And if you assess just as satisfactory for something the child will never achieve, he/she will never want to do sport.” (Teacher, FG3)*

In their statements, the teachers highlighted a lack of diversity in the content of physical education. Often children have too few choices during physical education classes and breaks. They do not find physical activities at school that meet their needs. The physical education lessons are formalized and, therefore, neither engage nor involve. For primary children, a variety of physical education is particularly important.

*“Children nowadays are allowed everything at home; they are given choices. At school, they don’t find it; there are no choices, they are not allowed. We give everything at home, but it’s the same for everybody at school; there is no choice. The same is with PE. For kids, PE is a servitude, I think. That’s why parents take them to all those clubs, to make them feel better, express themselves.” (Teacher, FG2)*

Diversity in physical education can be increased by organizing classes outside school. The teachers and parents responded particularly positively that physical education lessons take place in environments adapted to specific sports (e.g., swimming pools). This solves the problem of the physical facilities of a school, adds variety to physical education classes, and also gives children more opportunities to try a broader range of sports. Furthermore, such classes are taught not by a primary school teacher but by a specialist in the sport, sometimes more than one. For the children, this instructor is often an authority, engaging them in physical activity.

*“The fact that the school doesn’t have a sports gym is sometimes an advantage rather than a disadvantage. Sometimes the municipality finances swimming.” (Teacher, FG2)*

*“Children get five sports. And they try them.” (Teacher, FG2)*

*“There are two coaches in swimming for the second grade. Sometimes they divide the class into two groups. This is a huge advantage.” (Teacher, FG2)*

*“It’s great that they let them try karate, and swimming, and tennis. There will be gymnastics; maybe in four years, we will find something else.” (Parent, FG2)*

However, physical education classes cannot always be transferred to other environments. Teachers need to ensure that children have the opportunity to try out different forms of physical activity in the class and offer them options. It is also important to choose the forms of physical activity that allow children to experience success:

*“If children love it, if they get excited about it, then, you know, no matter whether they are one hundred per cent able to do it or not, they are eager to try. It depends. In short, they love the part of the class when they can choose sporting activities.” (Teacher, FG4)*

The parents also stressed the importance of having a variety of forms of physical activity, especially appropriate to the children’s age range. They consider that team games are particularly important, as they not only increase children’s motivation for physical activity but also foster team spirit and a sense of shared responsibility for the outcome.

*“At least at primary level, it is the relays that make them go crazy. They want to do it; they want to race. And the tasks are different, not just one, not just a Lithuanian Dodge ball, not just a run <...>, it really encourages movement.” (Parent, FG2)*

*“Those PE classes can be seen as more than just sporting. <...> Now, the vast majority of children tend to be individuals. I do, I go, I go in for gymnastics, I do this or that. And*

*in PE, <...> there's a Dodge ball, there are those team games, relay, where everybody is responsible for their teams. I mean, physical activity can also be like developing child's psychology. <...> And you are not the only one who is responsible for the result of your team. <...> By combining games, you can even kill several birds with one stone."* (Parent, FG5)

The participation of professional athletes or well-known coaches in the class can also be an effective tool to encourage and motivate children to be physically active. The teachers and parents shared their experience that it helps even the most passive students to become more involved in physical activity. On the other hand, it is certainly not easy to invite them frequently, and not all teachers can manage it. However, teachers shared their experience that mentoring by a more experienced pupil can also motivate children in physical activity classes.

*"And it's quite different when it's a child-to-child interaction. I also use it so that the one who knows more can show the other. The child likes it when a pupil teaches and not the teacher."* (Teacher, FG1)

Making the most of information technologies to promote children's physical activity is important. Not only is this attractive to learners, but it also provides more opportunities for physical activity both during classes and breaks. On the other hand, not all teachers have such options.

*"We have long active breaks. We have yoga classes, dancing... We switch on YouTube programmes for children to move. They offer half dance, half move with music, show the movements, and the kids repeat them."* (Teacher, FG3)

*"Oh, for sure, it's super. If only we had it, we'd be up for it."* (Teacher, FG1)

Both teachers and parents said that primary school children should be physically active not only during physical education classes and breaks but also in other lessons. It should be noted that the teachers see the integration of physical activity not only as a means to mobilize children but also as a means to help achieve lesson objectives.

*"We also adopted the practice of integrating physical education classes with the lessons of other subjects. I did it with Mathematics and Lithuanian; it is a kind of diversification. Children get bored of the same activities very quickly, and physical activity adds variety to the lesson."* (Teacher, FG3)

*"It triggers the whole activity, and the children even jump from their seats, so it's positive even for thinking."* (Teacher, FG5)

*"I think that some more integration of these sports activities in all the lessons would be an advantage."* (Parent, FG5)

The research revealed that both teachers and parents would agree for physical education classes to be taught by a physical education teacher rather than a primary school teacher. A physical education teacher has more knowledge and skills to organize and manage not only physical education classes but all physical activities at school.

*"And it's actually much more interesting when it's a different teacher, because you see the same teacher during the day. A different person, a different face is probably more interesting."* (Parent, FG4)

*"A physical activity specialist takes it all very differently. We know a lot and superficially, and they know a little and deeper."* (Teacher, FG2)

*"But I don't like physical activity. I don't like the rules, I'm not a PE teacher, and I don't want to be one. I don't like it even now. I do it differently. Physical education classes have to be taught by a physical education teacher who really understands; it's his/her fad."* (Teacher, FG2)

However, it is worth noting that a few teachers expressed some doubts regarding a physical education teacher. They argued that teacher changes in the first or second year could cause children additional stress:

*“For a primary school child especially, it is one teacher that is important, not a lot of them. It is better for us primary school teachers to consult a specialist than to have a lot of specialists coming in to teach different subjects to that kid.”* (Teacher FG3).

On the other hand, the parents expressed other possible reasons why primary teachers might not want a different physical education teacher:

*“it obviously depends on teacher’s workload. If a primary teacher doesn’t want to share the workload, then they have to conduct the classes themselves.”* (Parent, FG5).

The parents feel that it is not only a physical education teacher who is important but also a health professional. Such a specialist would help teachers to target physical education better considering children’s disorders:

*“... If there were or could be a physiotherapist to assess the posture, see what could encourage kids to make some effort, parents would like it. They would appreciate such educating of a healthy child; everybody would benefit.”* (Parents 2 FG).

The parents’ comments about the need for a separate physical education teacher and support from other professionals are complemented by their comments about the complexity of a teacher’s work. The parents feel that it can be difficult for teachers to ensure the quality of children’s physical education, as they have to simultaneously provide the proper implementation of the curriculum, integrate physical education into other lessons, organize children’s safe physical activity during breaks, and carry out other functions that are not directly related to children’s education (e.g., arrange meals for children). In this case, the teacher needs help to ensure that children are sufficiently physically active at school.

*“They have a certain number of working hours per week at school, and they have to meet those standards, which are high enough. Like all mothers, I don’t know if you agree, for Lithuanian, Mathematics there is such a load, so the teachers put most of it in those lessons. And then during the breaks, I feel pity for the teacher, because she has to partly prepare for the next lesson, help the children during the long break when, well, there is no time for sports. To get them all lined up in the canteen, most of them. Some with vouchers, some with money, but she takes them to the canteen together. Thus, to organize extra sports activities in an orderly way, it would practically require a separate teacher.”* (Parent, FG5)

The parents also expressed concern that the number of PE classes is significantly too low. However, it was also pointed out that more classes do not necessarily ensure a better quality of physical education. Especially if all physical activity at school is concentrated in a few weekly classes, and these are joined.

*“Yes, it would be good to have more physical education classes.”* (Parent, FG5)

*“Well, they would get more, be that time logically divided. They should do more than two hours of sport a day in a week, another hour on the way home. More should be organized here. Once a week, well, that’s not logical.”* (Parents, FG2).

### 3.5. Teacher’s Personality

Discussions between teachers and parents revealed that the teacher’s personality is significant in promoting children’s physical activity and organizing the process of physical education. A teacher must be able not only to impart knowledge and teach how to perform various exercises or use game elements correctly. Even more importantly, teachers must be able to find their way into the child, see their talents and help him/her disclose them.

*“But it’s still up to the teacher <...> The most important thing is for the teacher to be able to communicate with the child because not every child will come and open up. The*

*teacher's motivation alone is not enough. He/she has to find a niche to get in. Not everyone can do that, no matter how old the child is." (Parent, FG1)*

*"I told the primary teacher that we have certain problems, but I didn't restrict anything. The child didn't know that he couldn't do something. I said do as much as you can. If something happens, tell the teacher. And now he plays volleyball, football. But it was the teacher who did all that. He opened him up; he found that vein where he could do something. You can, Luke." (Parent, FG1)*

Getting children interested and involved in physical activities in the classroom and beyond also depends on the teacher's personal example. Therefore, the teacher must be prepared for the lesson, do the exercises with the pupils, and engage in the games as far as the teacher's age and state of health allow. Children are more likely to copy the behavior of the teachers who are physically active themselves.

*"Personally, I go in for gymnastics and swimming twice a week, and I exercise at home. The pupils know this, and I do some balance exercise with them during breaks. The children notice it." (Teacher, FG2)*

During discussions, the parents spoke negatively about the teachers who are less fond of physically weaker children or focus on more athletic ones. Such a practice creates a sense of fear of participating, a fear of making mistakes, and an atmosphere of rejection, which does not contribute to increasing children's motivation for physical activity. Neither it helps tackle the problem of bullying physically weaker peers.

*"PE teachers don't like non-sporty children; in fact, most of them don't. And that's why it happens, like with my son: well, you're a faggot, you're gay, that's the kind of words that come up." (Parent, FG2)*

*"And now the problem is what's happening. My husband and I were both diligent learners, and we have a son. For most of the boys, it's basketball, it's football, and for my son, it's a paintbrush. But what can I do if he is an artist? And that's a problem with boys because bullying starts as he doesn't know how to play that football." (Parent, FG2).*

### 3.6. Teachers' and Parents' Partnership

The teacher-parent partnership is also crucial for children's education to be successful. In the discussions among the participants, it was emphasized that cooperation between teachers and parents allows for a better understanding of children's needs and abilities, individualizing physical education, and achieving balanced physical activity for children inside and outside the school. According to the parents, the success of communication and cooperation depends mainly on the teacher's ability to communicate with parents and build a constructive relationship with them. However, it is teachers who miss closer cooperation and understanding of parents. The teachers' discussions revealed that parents are not greatly interested in physical activity. Therefore, they miss parents' understanding that promoting physical activity in children is a common goal. The teachers observe that parents are more interested in their children's exemplary academic achievements, and physical education is seen more as an additional activity. However, if teachers and parents have a common understanding of the importance of children's physical education, better results can be achieved in promoting children's physical activity.

*"We like dancing, we like walking, and we involve parents in physical activities. If you get the children fired up, if the conditions are good, children are willing to do sports. And if there is an agreement between parents and teachers that physical education is as important as maths or any other subject." (Teacher, FG3)*

In their discussions about cooperation, both teachers and parents stressed the importance of parental involvement in school sports events. This importance is twofold. One, it is significant for communication between teachers and parents. Secondly, the opportunity to compete together with parents, participate in events and school trips creates a sense of

security for children, increases their confidence, and at the same time encourages physical activity. It also strengthens the relationship between children and parents.

*“But I would say, for a child, to see their dad doing sport, wow, the nose is in the air—there’s my dad, I can do it with him, I’ve run with him, you know. I would say, to encourage parents, that’s the best way to do it with your parents.”* (Teacher, FG4)

*“Exactly the same example is when we do autumn or spring festivals with parents. It is usually a sporting level of such an example, where the parents think of the relays, think of the tasks themselves, so again that’s what activates the children.”*

(Teacher, FG4)

*“Usually everyone is busy, with little time to play together. It’s good to have those sporting events at school when you can compete with your child . . . and it is quite a different way of communicating with the teacher.”* (Parent, FG3)

However, when it comes to joint events with parents, the teachers pointed out that such events are often episodic and lack consistency:

*“But as you say, quite episodic. We have some traditional sporting events, so to say that they happen every day is not really the case.”* (Teacher, FG1)

This makes it difficult for teachers to strengthen their cooperation with parents who are not interested in physical activity. Such parents are generally less likely to be involved in the events organized. When discussing the situation where parents are not sufficiently aware of the importance of physical activity and physical education, the parents suggested a comprehensive solution to this problem. It is not only the responsibility of the class teacher to solve this problem. They should be supported by other professionals working in the school.

*“There is a social pedagogue; there is also a nurse and, I think, there are psychologists in schools. Then it is a team effort. You call the dad if it is just a problem of the parents who are worried that the child might fall and, God forbid, get hurt . . . And that’s where the whole school team, which is supposed to deal with such cases, should come in.”* (Parent, FG5)

#### 4. Discussion

This research aimed to gain an understanding of teachers’ and parents’ perspectives of promoting children’s physical activity in primary school. The findings revealed which factors the teachers and parents consider hindering or helping promote physical activity at school. The study found that teachers’ efforts to promote physical activity are affected by a general decline in children’s physical activity, deteriorating child health, and an increase in the number of overweight children, which is mirrored in the research on children’s physical activity [15,16,56]. This poses a challenge for the direct organization of physical education classes, as it is necessary to look for ways of adapting the content to physically weaker children. The teachers’ discussions highlighted the challenges in promoting physical activity among children related to children’s personality traits. The teachers pointed out that children are susceptible emotionally nowadays. As a result, they are not only sensitive to failure but also have very little tolerance for pain. They also lack stubbornness and perseverance, are often afraid to try, and lack self-confidence. However, the teachers and parents also pointed out that children want to be winners—they want to win. Still, the teachers stressed that these wishes are often linked to a desire for a quick result. Moreover, children tend to lose interest very quickly, especially when their first attempts are not very successful.

The analyses of the research findings reveal the importance of parents’ role in children’s physical activity [57,58], as reported by both parents and teachers during the discussions. However, in the context of our study, the importance of parents’ attention to children’s physical activity, in general, is also relevant to children’s physical activity at school. The teachers shared their experience that the more parents are aware of the im-



portance of physical activity, the more they demonstrate it by personal example, the more physically active and the more active and motivated in physical education classes their children are. Such children more easily engage in various forms of physical activity. However, the opposite is true in the schools where parents tend to be overprotective, patronizing, and justify their children's reluctance to attend PE class or lack of their activity during them. Excessive parental care and, at the same time, tolerance to children avoiding physical activity are related to children's commuting to and from school. Previous studies highlighted that commuting to school may provide an opportunity to increase the level of daily physical activity [34,59]. The study conducted in Lithuania revealed that 58.7 percent of children walk or bike from school and, respectively, 45.5 percent to school [60]. Therefore, a relatively large number of parents try to take their children to and from school. The reasons for such parental behavior may be related to safety criteria (road safety, traffic flows, crime rate at the place of residence) [61,62]. However, more than half (62.2 percent) of parents in Lithuania stated that the possibilities of commuting to school are safe [60]. The reasons may be important, but the teachers' statements suggest that sometimes parents tend to simply satisfy their children's desire not to be physically active. In addition, this may be more related not to the safety, distance from home to school but the parents' attitudes to physical activity.

The importance of the existing good school physical activity environment for pupils' physical activity was revealed. Other studies in different countries have shown that good infrastructure is very important for children's physical activity [63,64]. However, in terms of the school environment, research has revealed some specific problems. The outdoor playgrounds near the schools are in good condition, and most schools have recently renovated them. However, many schools are located in old buildings, where the indoor spaces are not well adapted to organize physical activities for children during breaks, especially when the weather conditions are not favorable for outdoor activities. This problem is particularly acute when primary school children are taught in the premises of kindergartens. In such cases, another problem is the lack of separate changing rooms, which raises the problem of bullying, one of the most relevant problems among Lithuanian pupils for several years compared to other countries [65].

Although compulsory physical education classes represent only a fraction of the amount of daily physical activity pupils engage in [66], their quality is one of the most critical factors in promoting children's physical activity [67]. Our research has highlighted the existing problems related to physical education classes, the promotion of physical activity in schools in general, and the opportunities to address them. The teacher's competence, both in motivating children and using different forms and methods, is crucial to the quality of physical education classes. The teacher's creativity is also important while promoting children's physical activity during breaks and integrating physical activity into other subjects. On the other hand, teachers are faced with a lack of unified documents and a unified framework for organizing physical education. This poses challenges regarding what physical education aims should be pursued and what standards should be used to assess children's achievements. Teachers are particularly concerned with the assessment of children's physical fitness. The discussion of the evaluation of physical fitness is explicitly a topical issue in more than one country. Recent Global Matrix 3.0 results from 49 countries showed that 27 out of 49 countries did not provide evaluation for the grade related to physical fitness [13]. On the other hand, in Lithuania, at the end of 2019, the Minister of Health of the Republic of Lithuania approved the *Description of the procedure for determining learners' physical ability* (including primary school children), which provides for the use of a unified physical ability methodology in schools.

It has already been mentioned that the lack of adequate school resources for physical activity is a barrier to implementing mandatory policies regarding the minimum accumulated time of intensity of school physical activity opportunities [43,68]. However, the organization of physical education classes outside the school can help to address these issues. A good practice identified by the participants in our study was the national program

for teaching primary school children to swim, conducting physical education classes in a swimming pool. In addition, teachers and parents can work together to transfer physical education classes to other sports facilities. However, this may require additional financial resources. Furthermore, when PE lessons are delivered by a coach in a particular sport, the coach's pedagogical competencies are essential, especially when working with primary school children.

Research evidence shows that increasing the number of physical education classes is an important strategy for promoting physical activity [48]. The participants in our study also expressed positive views on the increase of the number of physical education classes (it should be mentioned that after the study was carried out, the order of the Minister for Education, Science and Sports of the Republic of Lithuania on three weekly physical education classes was issued). However, it was pointed out that it is not so much the number of classes that is important, but their quality. The quality of physical education classes, as well as the quality of a teacher's activities related to promoting students' physical activity outside the classroom, in other subject areas, strongly depends on the knowledge and competencies of the primary teacher concerning the promotion of physical activity, teachers' attitudes towards physical activity, and their personal physical activity [43,48]. In addition, challenges are also posed by the fact that primary school teachers are already challenged by other subjects that may be even more focused on than physical education [68,69]. This was partly confirmed by our research, especially by parents' statements emphasizing that primary teachers have many different roles to play already and need support. Even though teachers speak positively about integrating physical activity into other subjects, using information technologies to promote physical activity, they also admit that age and health conditions can make it difficult. This is not unexpected, as 57 percent of teachers in Lithuania are aged 50 or older, which means that the average age of teachers in the country is one of the highest compared to other European countries [70]. Some research found that many years of teaching experience could be one of the reasons for reluctance to implement classroom physical activity [43]. However, the study revealed that teachers could achieve diversity in children's physical education by involving other persons, for instance, prominent athletes. Indeed, attracting them is not easy, and their participation would be episodic. On the other hand, more physically active, sporting classmates can help the teacher motivate children to be physically active.

The study revealed that the teachers, especially the parents, were positive about having a specialist teacher teach physical education. Research shows that a specialist physical education teacher can significantly contribute to promoting children's physical activity at school and increasing physical fitness [71]. However, when analyzing the data from the teachers' discussion, we found out that some of them are skeptical about establishing a position of a physical education teacher in schools. The teachers feel that introducing a different teacher may cause additional stress for children, especially for the first graders. On the other hand, other factors, such as the fear of the decrease in the workload (which is primarily determined by the number of weekly lessons available), may also contribute to a negative attitude towards establishing a position of a physical education teacher. Thus, such a position in a school in Lithuania remains a rare exception that depends on the financial possibilities of the school administration and, potentially, on the attitude towards promoting physical activity. These opportunities, as well as perspectives, are not always favorable.

Systematic and scoping reviews suggest that a lack of support from school administrators for promoting physical activity in children at school is one of the factors that have a negative impact on the implementation of physical activity guidelines [43,72]. The parents' considerations regarding not only the physical education teacher but also other professionals such as the physiotherapist demonstrate their concern about their children's physical activeness. However, establishing new positions for professionals, especially physical education teachers, is not an easy process and depends on the overall national policy of promoting physical activity. In this respect, as already mentioned, it was political

decisions, based on the recommendations of researchers and practitioners, that led to the emergence of an additional physical education class at school. In the school context, it is not only teachers but also the whole school community that can contribute to promoting children's physical activity. The research revealed that—to address the problems teachers face in promoting physical activity—parents' involvement is also necessary. Systematic analyses demonstrate the importance of parental involvement in promoting children's physical activity at school [48]. However, our study shows that it is not easy to get parents engaged, especially those not interested in physical activity. Therefore, the attempt to change parents' perceptions is crucial. If this succeeds, then it is possible to achieve a much higher level of parents' involvement in promoting the overall physical activities organized at school. Moreover, such activities need to be effective and not episodic.

The research conducted helped reveal important insights from parents and teachers into promoting physical activity in primary schools. However, it has some limitations. The study involved working parents with a university education exclusively. It remains unclear what insights of parents from lower social backgrounds would be. The study also did not include discussions with school administrators, which would give a better understanding of how administrators perceive the promotion of physical activity at school and the possible reasons for the lack of attention to physical activity among learners.

## 5. Conclusions

The findings provide insights that a wide range of factors may limit or contribute to promoting children's physical activity at school. The main barriers include the lack of sports gyms, an overloaded curriculum, and missing clear documentation on children's evaluations. The teachers emphasize challenges related to children's personal traits and parents' negative attitudes to physical activity. Our results suggest that a teacher is a key individual that promotes physical activity at school during physical education classes, integrating physical activity into other subjects, or promoting physical activity during breaks. However, due to a large number of tasks performed, a lack of expertise in physical activity, the priority of other subjects, a limited focus on physical education, the quality of physical activity promotion is low. Thus, an increase in the number of physical education classes per week, establishing a position of physical education teacher was highly recommended as well as parents' involvement in promoting physical activity at school.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, S.S.; methodology, D.G. and S.S.; investigation, D.G. and S.S.; formal analysis, D.G. and S.S.; writing—original draft preparation, D.G.; writing—review and editing, S.S. and D.G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Lithuanian Sports University (approval number SMTEK-20, released on 21 May 2019).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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