

Getting girls going

A study on engaging adolescent girls in physical activities

THE PROBLEM

Many teenagers are not meeting physical activity recommendations of at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise daily¹ and research consistently reports lower physical activity levels among adolescent girls than adolescent boys². To address these issues, university researchers in partnership with industry conducted the following study.

A POSSIBLE SOLUTION

Researchers had several schools trial a program where school-based physical education was delivered in a more encouraging way for adolescent girls, while simultaneously encouraging them to seek other physical activity opportunities outside of school, through links with sport clubs and leisure centres.

Physical education teachers participated in professional development on Game Sense, which emphasises game strategy over drills or technical skill and has been shown to make classes more enjoyable for adolescents of mixed abilities³. These teachers then delivered units of tennis and football (soccer), while leisure centre activities including zumba and gym circuits were made available through local providers⁴.

The study examined the reach, effectiveness, adoption, implementation and maintenance of this program in low-socioeconomic regional and rural areas of Victoria, Australia. Year 7-9 girls from seven schools completed the program in 2011. Another eight schools did not participate but provided the control group. Five tennis clubs, eight football clubs and five leisure centres adopted the program and offered outside of school programs linked to the school program. A total of 45 teachers participated in workshops on how to apply the Game Sense approach to teach tennis and football.

Game Sense is an Australian derivative of the Teaching Games for Understanding approach pioneered by Bunker and Thorpe⁵. Since being released by the Australian Sports Commission and Australian Coaching Council in 1997 Game Sense has been applied to physical education and coaching in many sports⁶.

POSITIVES

Positive outcomes included better physical and mental health, increased confidence and awareness of physical activity opportunities in the community.

These can be summarised as:

- Participants who completed both the in-school component and outside of school community component showed improved intra-personal capacities (i.e. self-efficacy, self-management, perceived behavioural control) and inter-personal factors (i.e. support from family and friends).
- Participants maintained their physical and mental health ratings, whilst a decrease was observed in the control group.
- Teachers and students reported positive changes in terms of perceived student learning and physical activity behaviour. One school reported that the program had an impact on student willingness to participate in school sport and a Year 7 girls' football team was formed for the first time.
- Teachers felt student confidence in activities increased and were surprised at the high level of skill developed during the school component. Teachers attributed the increase in confidence to the Game Sense approach.
- Students reported learning about the different types of sports and physical activities available in the community. Recreational activities such as zumba, aerobics and fitness circuits organised by the leisure centres were enjoyed as something different from team sport.
- Some students said single-sex classes contributed to building confidence in sport and physical activity, especially among girls who were less competent in sport.
- A quarter of the intervention group (25.1%) joined a community program at a tennis club (7.7%), a football club (7.7%) and/or a leisure centre (17.4%) during the program.

THE BARRIERS

Barriers to the program's success included teacher buy-in, capacity in local sport clubs and poor communication.

These can be summarised as:

- Lack of capacity, particularly in terms of staffing and staff experience among some community sport and recreation providers to engage girls in school-based activities.
- Understanding of and commitment to the intentions of a Games Sense approach by some teachers and coaches who emphasised performance discourse as they felt students' fundamental motor skills were low.
- School timetable constraints and marginalisation of PE within the broader school curriculum.
- Administration barriers and communication breakdowns between school, coaches and instructors, which resulted in a small number of sessions being rescheduled or cancelled.
- Dissemination of information to attend after-school program was not well planned by some community sport and recreation providers, which may have impacted on attendance by girls.
- Key reasons given by those deciding not to attend the voluntary out of school community programs were that they disliked the activity, they had no-one to go with them, it was too hard to get to and/or home from or that they had other sport activity commitments. Cost was the least reported reason.

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THE KEY LESSON

Linking school and community physical activities produced health benefits for adolescent girls. The key to success lay in contributions from the girls to inform program design and in the capacity and willingness of partner organisations to develop and deliver the program.

The Triple G 'Girls Get Going' study was conducted by Meghan Casey, Amanda Mooney, Rochelle Eime, Jack Harvey, John Smyth, Amanda Telford and Warren Payne.

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- 3 Mandigo, J., Holt, N., Anderson, A., & Sheppard, J. (2008). Children's motivational experiences following autonomy-supportive games lessons. *European Physical Education Review*, 14(3), 407-425.
- 4 Casey, M., Mooney, A., Eime, R., Harvey, J., Smyth, J., Telford, A., & Payne, W. (2012). Linking Physical Education With Community Sport and Recreation: A Program for Adolescent Girls. *Health Promotion Practice*, 14(5), 721-731.
- 5 Bunker, D., & Thorpe, R. (1982) A model for teaching games in secondary schools. *Bulletin of Physical Education*, 18, 5-8.
- 6 Tinning, R., Macdonald, D., Wright, J., & Hickey, C. (2001). *Becoming a physical education teacher: Contemporary and enduring issues*. Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson Education Australia.

For details: Meghan Casey, School of Health Sciences, Federation University: m.casey@federation.edu.au