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Promoting Physical Activity in Youth Development Programs

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Introduction

Physical activity has been linked with a range of health benefits including reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, obesity, and type II diabetes (Warburton, Nicol, & Bredin, 2006). However, recent estimates suggest that over 80% of adolescents worldwide are insufficiently active to acquire these benefits (Hallal et al., 2012). Community-based youth development programs are uniquely positioned to increase youth physical activity (Pate & O'Neil, 2008) because a) millions of young people already attend these programs every year; b) young people attend some services, such as summer camps, over long periods of time; and c) flexible schedules and long-term attendance make it easier to develop new habitual activities (Jago & Baranowski, 2004). The purpose of this research brief is to offer best practices for promoting physical activity in youth development programs.

Research to Practice Points

1) Allocate daily time for participant involvement in physical activity.
2) When pursuing daily physical activity goals, organize activities in a way that keeps participants active.
3) Employ shorter physical activity breaks to build up to recommended allowances.
4) Encourage staff to be active with youth participants.
5) Create a positive social climate for physical activity involvement.
6) Encourage youth to be active with their families and in the community.

Details on Research to Practice Points

Allocate daily time for participant involvement in physical activity.
Current guidelines recommend 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity daily for children and early adolescents (Strong et al., 2005). To achieve this goal, time for physical activity should be built into program schedules. Examples of moderate physical activity include walking, hiking, roller skating, dancing, volleyball, archery, and badminton. Examples of vigorous activities include competitive sports (e.g., soccer, flag football, and basketball), jogging, rock climbing, canoeing, and swimming (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services et al., 1999). Although precise monitoring of activity levels to meet the guidelines requires costly technology and therefore may be impractical in most programs (Pate & O'Neil, 2008), periodically scanning activity areas to ensure that youth are active at the recommended level may be an important first step toward promoting physical activity.

When pursuing daily physical activity goals, organize activities in a way that keeps participants active.
When designing activities, practitioners should aim to maximize the amount of time youth spend being

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active (Beets, 2012a, 2012b). For example, some activities involve more continuous physical activity than others. Sports like kickball or softball often do not lead to high levels of physical activity since much of the game involves standing or sitting, while soccer or basketball encourage more continuous activity. Similarly, participants in a game of hide-and-seek spend most of their time being sedentary whereas a nature hike keeps all youth continuously active. Other activities can be modified to increase participants' activity levels. For instance, rather than require the 'hiders' in hide-and-seek to remain hidden, challenge them to sneak back to a predetermined point without being seen and award points for how close they get. Practitioners should also avoid games in which young people can get 'out', such as tag games that require youth to stay frozen or dodge-ball games in which youth who are hit are eliminated. If such games are included, rules can be modified to keep those who are 'out' active. For example, consider asking youth who are 'out' to complete ten jumping jacks before returning to the game (or to do a lap or complete ten sit-ups, etc.). This will not only keep young people active longer, but may reduce problem behaviors that can arise when youth get bored watching their peers complete the game.

Employ shorter physical activity breaks to build up recommended allowances.
Keeping young people active and interested in a single activity for sixty consecutive minutes is a challenging task for any youth development practitioner. Additionally, program time may not be conducive to including long blocks of physical activity. Instead, practitioners can employ shorter activity breaks by dividing their daily physical activity goals into three or more sessions. Activity breaks in school-based settings have been linked with significant increases in overall physical activity (Barr-Anderson, AuYoung, Whitt-Glover, Glenn, &Yancey, 2011) and may both increase students' attention to their work and reduce problem behaviors. Furthermore, integrating physical activity into daily routines is a no-cost, sustainable method of health promotion and should be strongly considered by youth development practitioners.

Encourage staff to be active with participants.
Safety concerns among parents have helped increase supervision of youth activities, but evidence suggests that supervision may decrease overall activity levels (Salmon & Timperio, 2007). For example, adult supervision was negatively associated with youths' park-based physical activity levels in one study (Floyd et al, 2011). Supervision may improve parents' perception of the safety of recreational environments, but some youth report disliking the feeling of being 'watched' (Moore et al., 2010). With that in mind, practitioners are advised to be active with youth participants rather than just to passively supervise them. Practitioners who are active with young people may enhance the engagement of participants while modeling desired behaviors.

Create a positive social climate for physical activity involvement.
Early adolescence is an important time for young people to have positive experiences with physical activity because they are beginning to develop long-term physical activity habits (Kropski, Keckley, & Jensen, 2008). Thus, practitioners should work to ensure that many of the same features that make everyday activities successful carry over into physical activity programs. For instance, research has shown that peer support is an important correlate of physical activity involvement (Van der Horst, Paw, Twisk, & van Mechelen, 2007), suggesting that practitioners should work to create a supportive peer culture in all activities. Practitioners might also employ mentorship programs between older and younger youth or peer-led activities as means for developing a positive recreational climate (Shaya, Flores, Gbarayor, & Wang, 2008). Peers can also function as friends with whom to be active (Moore et

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al., 2010) and youth development programs may be important sites for youth to develop friendships that facilitate an active lifestyle. Finally, fun has been linked with perceived competence in an activity (Humbert et al, 2008). In order to build up participants' perceived competence and contribute to enjoyment, practitioners should aim to strike a balance between individual skill levels and the challenges within an activity.

Encourage youth to be active with their families and in the community.
Physical activity in the context of youth development programs is important, but studies suggest that promoting a more active lifestyle among youths requires making it easier for them to active be with their families and in the community (Sallis et al., 2006). For example, schools that involved parents in obesity interventions helped increase health-related knowledge at home (Shaya, Flores, Gbarayor, & Wang, 2008). Furthermore, both motivational and instrumental (e.g., transportation to and from activities) support from parents has been linked with increased youth physical activity levels (Trost et al, 2003). Practitioners should therefore consider recruiting parents as allies in their health promotion efforts through parental educational programs that address health-related topics. Additionally, periodic activities that involve family members (e.g., family Zumba class or family Olympics) can be fun ways to engage youth and families.

Access to safe, attractive recreational facilities such as parks and trails has also been linked to increased physical activity among young people (Sallis & Glanz, 2006). Although resources to construct new facilities are severely limited in many communities, youth development practitioners may still enhance awareness and knowledge related to physical activity sites. For instance, practitioners might offer an activity where young people map the sites available for physical activity in their neighborhood and discuss concerns related to using those facilities (e.g., safety). Programmers may also partner with other local organizations to offer more off-site activities (e.g., active transport to school programs) so that young people can enjoy positive physical activity experiences in diverse locations within their community. In addition, partnerships with local public health organizations or researchers may be a vital resource for training programs or knowledge concerning physical activity promotion (Moody et al., 2004).

Conclusions

Physical activity is a public health priority, and youth development programs are well positioned to contribute. Although the strategies identified above are promising routes to promote active lifestyles within youth development programs, physical activity is a goal, like any other, that must be carefully planned, implemented, monitored, and evaluated in response to local conditions. Practitioners must design activities that are culturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate as well as build in opportunities for youth input throughout the implementation process.

Future Research

Future areas in need of study include physical activity policy in after-school settings (Beets, Wallner, & Beighle, 2010) and environmental features of programs that promote activity. Longitudinal studies are also needed to explore correlates of and constraints to physical activity over time, particularly in relation to the development of an active lifestyle. Finally, further studies of physical activity correlates within subgroups of the population are needed to explore health promotion strategies with diverse groups (Ding et al, 2011).

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Resources

www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/physicalactivity/toolkit/userguide_pa.pdf *offers a toolkit for promoting youth physical activity.*

www.osnap.org *offers a variety of resources related to physical activity and healthy eating in out of school time programs.*

www.playworks.org/games *offers a search engine for activity ideas for multiple age groups.*

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