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University of Ottawa
Doctoral Stipend 2006

A Promising Community-Based Hip-Hop Dance Intervention for the Promotion of Psychosocial and Physical Well-being Among Youth Living in a Disadvantaged Neighbourhood

Project Summary

This project involved a partnership between the University of Ottawa and three community partners: South-East Ottawa Community Health Centre (SEOCHC), Culture Shock Canada, and Heron Road Community Centre. Prior to implementing a new physical activity program in South-East Ottawa, an initial study sought to better understand the needs, barriers, and facilitators to youth participation in physical activity in order to conceptualize the new intervention. This study determined that the young people and parents were aware of the benefits to youth participation in physical activity but that contextual constraints need to be addressed. The second study of this project consisted of an implementation and outcome evaluation of a new weekly hip-hop dance intervention. The implementation findings demonstrated that the program reached the intended population and provided valuable feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of this new program. The outcome findings were mixed. In general, the quantitative results did not support the program objectives; however, qualitative findings were more positive, and suggested that the hip-hop dance intervention is a promising program for the promotion of youth well-being.

Research Methods

The intervention conceptualization study involved a literature review and three focus groups: seven male youth; 10 female youth; and 13 parents/guardians. Youth participants were 11 to 14 years of age. The evaluation of new intervention study, involved ninety-one youths 11 to 16 years old. The youths were socially and ethno culturally diverse; most were female (82.4%). The evaluation involved a non-experimental pre-test/post-test design from the perspective of youth participant, parent/guardian, and program staff. Mixed methods were used including document review, observation, interview, focus group, and questionnaire format.

The intervention studied was a new, free community-based hip-hop dance program, implemented in South-East Ottawa for young people between 11 and 16 years of age. The program was designed to break down some of the barriers to participation by providing a free, relevant, and supervised activity, in an accessible location, that included transportation assistance and participation incentives. Two program formats were offered, girls-only and co-ed, across two program sessions: a winter session (13 weeks) and a spring session (12 weeks); different young people participated in each session. A final showcase production was held one week after the final class of each session where participants performed in front of their families, friends, and other community members. The young people also attended pre- and post-program evaluation classes.

The program was delivered according to a structured intervention manual. Two dance instructors from Culture Shock Canada taught the classes at a local community centre. A balance between learning new hip-hop dance skills and fostering positive peer and staff relationships was sought in order to maximize youth involvement and positive outcomes. A youth coordinator and health promoter for youth were also staffed to

provide youth with transportation assistance, on-site supervision, and to assist with coordination and outreach.

Research Results

Findings from the first study demonstrated that the young people and parents were aware of the benefits of youth participation in physical activity programs. Hip-hop dance was reported as an appealing program option. Limitations of this study are the small sample size and the use of one method. Nonetheless, the intervention conceptualization study was important in informing program development and implementation, including decisions around offering co-ed and girls-only formats, program timing, participation incentives, and transportation assistance. Findings also demonstrated the importance of involving the community in developing and implementing new programs.

Findings from the second study demonstrated that program implementation was moderately satisfactory. Strengths included: accessibility, relevance and challenge in learning something new. In addition, the participants described a mainly positive/non-competitive environment and positive connections with peers and staff. Not unlike other community-based programs for youth and disadvantaged populations, almost 50% of the youths discontinued participation in the program. Other key areas of weakness included inconsistencies in the program timing, adult management of youth behaviour, and transportation, in addition to the short length of the program and unachieved outreach objective. Improving the program would likely improve youth retention and impact. Importantly, however, the youth participants in this program reflected the target population and reported overall satisfaction with the program. Participants, parents, and staff agreed that the program should be continued, with modifications, likely requiring new resources. A strength of this study was the use of multiple methods; however, low participation rates were problematic.

This program sought to promote positive development and well-being among youth living in a disadvantaged, multicultural urban community. In general, the quantitative results did not support these objectives except for a statistically significant improvement in perceived hip-hop dance skills, likely due to small sample size, high attrition, low intervention dose, and implementation problems. However, qualitative findings suggest that the intervention is a promising program for the promotion of youth well-being. More specifically, almost all the young people, staff, and parents reported an improvement in hip-hop dancing and/or other related skills, and in self-confidence. In addition, many described improved behaviours, an increase in participation in physical activity, trying new activities, and a transfer of skills to other activities, improved physical health, shyness, mood and relationships; some also described an increase in respect for others or for diversity. Less commonly, the youths and parents also indicated that health overall and/or attention improved; a few also reported improved school performance. These findings are consistent with other research on the benefits of participation in physical activity and positive youth development programs. Although these findings suggest a promising program, they need to be interpreted in light of certain limitations, such as the small sample size and non-experimental design of the research; as a result, we cannot attribute participant changes to involvement in this intervention per say.

Policy Implications

The study supports consideration of both environmental and individual level factors in the promotion of physical activity. Currently too much emphasis is placed on individual level factors; Further, additional

resources may be necessary to appropriately meet the needs of lower-income and culturally diverse young people.

The study suggested promise in offering weekly physical activity programming for youth living in a disadvantaged community. Two particularly important program-related factors were relevance (Hip-hop dance was reported as highly relevant for intervening with youth and accessibility (i.e., program cost, location, and transportation.). Promoters of physical activity should consider these two critical factors in the development and implementation of interventions.

The evidence supports collaborative, multi-setting interventions in adolescents. Attempts should be made to combine community-based interventions with those targeting other settings (e.g., school, home) as the problem of physical inactivity, health, and social problems, is complex. This research also demonstrated the importance of involving the community in developing and implementing new interventions.

Next Steps

A more rigorous study is needed to confirm the benefits of this and other community-based physical activity programs. Future intervention research needs to include more diverse and lower-income youth in order for findings to be generalizable, and to investigate a broader range of outcomes – beyond physical health. Studies investigating implementation and other dimensions of interventions are also critical to the effective study and dissemination of new programs.

Key stakeholders and benefits

- Public Health Agency of Canada, Health Promotion Branch
- Ontario Physical and Health Education Association
- Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care
- Active Healthy Kids Canada
- Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS)