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Exploring Barriers to Exercise among Adolescents at the Burlington Boys and Girls Club

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Introduction

The Boys and Girls Club of Burlington (BGCB) is a non-profit that holds after-school activities for adolescents, including music, art, technology, and sports. The BGCB has struggled to encourage physical activity (PA) among many participants. We designed our study to identify deterrents to PA, as well as possible ways to improve participation.

Methods

We administered an optional, 10-question survey in a “check the box” format to 44 adolescents. Following the survey, participants were separated by gender for loosely-structured focus groups.

1. Survey topics included:
   - Participants’ preferred activities at the BGCB
   - Barriers to PA
   - Opinions of possible additional activities

2. Focus group topics included:
   - PA that kids participate in outside of the BGCB
   - Favored field trips and incentives

Determined statistics were calculated using SAS 9.3. The Wilcoxon rank-sum test was used to evaluate statistical significance.

Barriers to PA

Participants universally favored swimming activities. The Boys and Girls Club of Burlington (BGCB) is a non-profit that holds after-school activities for adolescents, including music, art, technology, and sports. The BGCB has struggled to encourage physical activity (PA) among many participants. We designed our study to identify deterrents to PA, as well as possible ways to improve participation.

Our study was limited by the fact we offered the survey in a “check the box” format to 44 adolescents. These students may have also been less likely to participate in PA, skewing our sample representation.

Our Recommendations

- Limit PA identified as requiring a higher skill level, such as basketball. Alternatives include kickball and dodge ball
- Expand popular existing activities, such as nature walks and capture the flag
- As swimming was favored by 100% of NGFY, consider efforts to expand pool access year-round
- Incorporate new activities with an emphasis on smaller groups (e.g. climbing, skiing, or ice skating)
- Increase safety measures during PA, perhaps by increasing staff supervision or non-contact sports
- Create incentives for PA by incorporating it into field trips, which have high popularity
- Continue to offer predominantly coed activities
- Continue to keep youth separated by age groups
- Next year offer a computer-based survey to better access the opinions of computer-favoring youth

Results

- Gym was the favorite activity among both boys and girls of all ages (64% of respondents) (Figure 2)
- 21% favored the Computer Room
- Non-gym-favoring youth (NGFY) were most worried about getting hurt (56.3%) and being watched (43.8%) (Figure 3)
- Younger group was more “worried about getting hurt” than older group (p=0.0095)
- Of current activities, NGFY like swimming (100%), nature walks, and capture the flag (Figure 3)
- Of potential activities, NGFY were most interested in rock climbing, ice skating, and skiing (Figure 4)
- NGFY preferred small groups over large groups by 3:1. Gym-favoring youth had no such preference
- 88% of NGFY preferred PA with both boys and girls

Discussion

- Many of our findings supported related literature:
  - Concern about being watched by others or lacking physical skills can be a barrier to PA.
  - While computers and technology serve as significant distracters from PA, many opportunities exist to harness it as an incentive as well.
  - Bullying can be a major barrier. Younger children preferred physical activity with same-aged peers, citing “meanness” and “nastiness” among older peers during focus groups.

Other findings were inconsistent with literature:

- The majority of children, including NGFY, preferred mixed gender activities, despite studies suggesting the presence of the opposite gender was a barrier.

Literature Cited


Our study was limited by the fact we offered the survey in an alternative to other free-time activities. Many students chose the computer room over the survey. This may have also been less likely to participate in PA, skewing our sample representation.

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