1-20-2016

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Andrea Blood
Shannon Brady
Liam Donnelly
Do young Gwak
Charlotte Hastings

See next page for additional authors

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Recommended Citation
Blood, Andrea; Brady, Shannon; Donnelly, Liam; Gwak, Do young; Hastings, Charlotte; Roper-Batker, Astia; Sarabakhsh, Kasra; Shenouda, Stephen; Graham, Justin; and Contompasis, Stephen, "Implementing a Fitness and Nutrition Program for Special Olympics Athletes" (2016). Public Health Projects, 2008-present. 235.
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Implementing a Fitness and Nutrition Program for Special Olympics Athletes

Blood A1; Brady S1; Donnelly L1; Gwak D1; Hastings C1; Roper-Batker A1; Sarabakhsh K1; Shenouda S1; Graham J2; Contompasis S, MD1
University of Vermont College of Medicine1; Special Olympics Vermont2

Introduction

• Only 17-30% of individuals with ID meet the recommendations for daily exercise [1].
• Populations of individuals with ID have higher BMI, lower cardiovascular fitness and lower muscle strength compared to the general population [2].
• Individuals with ID also have many dietary challenges necessitating nutritional education and interventions [3].
• One study following four athletes with ID, showed that pairing athletes with and without (unified sports) resulted in a positive change in social self-concept for athletes with ID [4].
• Given the above, we:
  • Created a 6-week pilot training and nutrition program for Special Olympics Vermont (SOVT).
  • Paired athletes with ID with college athletes without ID to promote wellness during the athlete’s off season.

Methods

• Paired 23 undergraduate students (14 UVM/9 Castleton) with a SOVT athlete in their community.
• College and SOVT athletes met for weekly wellness meetings, followed a daily exercise plan and had a weekly check-in phone call for a total of six weeks.
• A training manual was created to standardize the weekly activities.
• Our study investigated the feasibility of pairing SOVT athletes with college athletes and the outcome of the weekly wellness meetings which consisted of daily exercise plans and dietary counseling.
• Surveys assessed the college student’s pre- and post-attitudes towards working with individuals with ID, SOVT athlete pedometer data, and challenges experienced with the program.

Paired athletes with ID with college athletes without ID to promote wellness during the athlete’s off season.

Results

• Due to small sample size and data collection issues, we were unable to perform quantitative analysis and tests for significance.
• Although 23 pairs started the program, only 7 completed the full program with pedometer data, suggesting an overall lack of adherence (Fig. 1).
• The majority of 11 mentor respondents to our post-program survey agreed with the usefulness of the handbook and having adequate support. However, they had a more neutral attitude towards the level of orientation training (Fig. 2).
• Mentors perceived a positive effect on SOVT athlete’s fitness, diet and emotional health. This suggests that this has the potential to be a successful program for long-term implementation and adherence (Fig. 2).

Discussion

• Research:
  • Collect height and weight data for BMI calculations, as an alternative to using pedometer data.
  • Improve and consolidate data collection techniques.
• Programming:
  • Implement program into a college course curriculum.
  • Have a mandatory pre-program orientation to explain data collection.
• Start with a larger sample size to accommodate for pairs who drop the program or are lost to follow-up.

Suggestions for Future Directions

References