

Youth Development and Physical Activity

Linking Universities and Communities

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Serving Underserved Youth Through Physical Activity

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Kids in underserved communities don't have access to the programs and resources they need for their full development. Sometimes programs are available, but often they are underfunded or in need of reform. Sometimes there aren't any programs. Moreover, studies of the attendance patterns of children and youth in underserved areas show that as kids get older, they drop out, not only of school but of the available extended day programs as well. Yet these same studies (e.g., McLaughlin et al., 1994) point out that a few programs are oversubscribed, and that even gang members stand in line to join.

Guidelines for Youth Development Programs

Why do kids join some voluntary programs and not others? You might think that sport programs would pull kids in like a magnet; however, most "gym and swim" programs designed for underserved youth can attract younger but not older kids and cannot keep those who do show up. Certainly the influx of physical activity programs aimed at addressing the many social issues facing underserved youth, such as Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities, Midnight Basketball, and the National Youth Sport Program, have captured the attention of the media and funding

agencies and have provided some heated debates among politicians. However, the success of these programs varies. Table 3.1, drawn from several recent studies and scholarly analyses of current youth programs and policies, shows why (Hellison & Cutforth, 1997). These key criteria for state-of-the-art youth development programs describe a program that is, among other things, holistic in nature, suggesting that focusing on a single activity, even if it is basketball, is not enough to keep kids involved.

Although most or even all of these criteria may make sense to you, just the opposite takes place in most programs, perhaps even the ones you experienced as a preteen or teenager. Programs in underserved areas in particular tend to "blame the victim" by treating kids as if they are the causes of the problem, rather than placing the blame where it belongs, on community and societal economic, social, and political factors (Benson,

Table 3.1 Key Criteria for State-of-the-Art Youth Development Programs

1. Treat youth as resources to be developed. Build on the strengths they already possess, and emphasize their competence and mastery.
2. Focus on the whole person—the emotional, social, and cognitive as well as physical dimensions of the self.
3. Respect the individuality of youth, including cultural differences and developmental needs.
4. Empower youth.
5. Give youth clear, demanding (but not unreasonable) expectations based on a strong, explicit set of values.
6. Help youth envision possible futures for themselves.
7. Provide both a physically and psychologically safe environment.
8. Keep program numbers small and encourage participation over a long period of time; emphasize belonging and membership.
9. Maintain a local connection.
10. Provide courageous and persistent leadership in the face of systemic obstacles.
11. Provide significant contact with a caring adult.

Note: From Hellison, D., & Cutworth, N. (1997). Extended day programs for urban children and youth: From theory to practice. In Walberg, H., Reyes, O., & Weisberg, R. (Eds.), *Children and youth: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 523-249). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Copyright 1997 by Sage Publications, Inc.

1997; McLaughlin & Heath, 1993). Once program leaders and policymakers decide that kids are the problem, it is a short step to planning a program designed to control and "remediate" them. A common example of attempting to control youth is any program that has as its primary goal keeping kids off the streets. Remediation has many forms, basic academic skills instruction being one very familiar example. Of course, there is nothing wrong with programs that value safe, structured, enjoyable activities, and lots of underserved youth do need basic academic skills (just as all of us can make lists, sometimes long ones, of our own deficiencies). The point is that kids are most attracted to, and most supported by, programs that

- focus on their strengths;
- attempt to meet their emotional, social, and cognitive needs, not just their physical skill needs and sport interests;
- give them important decisions to make individually and collectively within a framework of clear expectations and values, instead of making all the decisions for them;
- respect not just their culture and gender but their individuality; and
- help them expand their possible futures and ways to get there.

Of course, the environment has to be a safe place, but that means not only physically safe but emotionally safe as well. Program participants must know they can show up without fear of being laughed at, criticized, or bullied. As table 3.1 shows, the most successful programs make participants feel as if they belong: a commitment to the program and to other members is part of the deal. Belonging and commitment, as well as the opportunity for the program leader and the kids to develop meaningful relationships, are greatly facilitated by the size of the group and the duration of participation. Not surprisingly, youth in smaller groups that stay together over several years tend to experience more benefits.

The program leader, who might be you, is crucial to making all of these things happen. Program leaders need to really care about kids and to support them continuously. They also need to confront and overcome the numerous obstacles involved in developing and sustaining a good program. Finally, they need to maintain a connection to the community. For example, I have run a before-school program in one of Chicago's most violent neighborhoods for several years. While exposing my students to the university environment and to various educational and career opportunities, I also help the principal with discipline problems, speak at graduation every year, and invite the principal and vice-principal to university meetings they might be able to contribute to and

enjoy. Your other authors have had similar experiences in Denver; Greensboro, North Carolina; Los Angeles; Greeley, Colorado; and rural North Dakota.

The Responsibility Model

Although these state-of-the-art criteria can open our eyes to what is missing in most youth development programs, they fall short of providing enough guidance to start a program. First of all, their advice is fairly general; they don't really give specific strategies. Second, the role of physical activity is nowhere to be found. And third, if the goal is to offer a variety of community programs, for example in school as well as after school, we cannot rely exclusively on small clubs to do so. Fortunately, these gaps can be filled by an approach to teaching physical activities that has been in existence for over 25 years. This approach is most commonly referred to as the responsibility model (and more formally as Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility).

The origin and early development of the responsibility model were primarily experiential and autobiographical, and this tradition continues today (Georgiadis, 1992). My teaching career began in physical education programs in inner-city high schools and a detention center in the early 1970s, followed by 10 years of teaching in alternative schools for court-referred and dropout-bound kids and 10 years teaching in a variety of extended day programs for inner-city children and youth. I spent my first few years trying to survive these experiences, while at the same time struggling to remain true to the holistic values and beliefs I brought with me from earlier experiences and reflections. This holistic perspective coupled with my students' needs, which just about screamed at me every day, led to the discovery of most of the program criteria in table 3.1 well before they were published.

But how could I convert physical activity into a vehicle to promote these holistic, student-centered state-of-the-art criteria? It seemed to me that the kids faced more choices—including some very problematic ones such as drugs and guns—and less adult guidance in all aspects of their lives than in the past (for a variety of reasons), and that a lot of the kids' interactions with each other and sometimes with me were defensive, aggressive, and sometimes overtly abusive. I experimented with this and that and over time focused more on shifting responsibility to my students for making choices that would enhance their own well-being as well as contribute to, or at least not harm, the well-being of others. This meant letting go of some of my authority and spending some time each day with them discussing and helping them reflect on their decisions,

including their attitudes and behaviors toward themselves and others. What gradually emerged was an approach that

- treats kids as whole people, with emotional and social as well as physical needs and interests, and as individuals, not just members of a gender or race or other group;
- empowers them to make decisions within an explicit set of life values;
- prioritizes both emotional safety and the need for a relationship with a caring adult; and
- accomplishes all of this through the medium of fitness, motor skill instruction, sport, games, and other human movement activities.

This model has been the focus of numerous teacher and youth worker workshops and publications, and, although it is not sweeping the country or world by any stretch of the imagination, it does have a presence in many states and Canadian provinces as well as in New Zealand (Creighton & Lee, n.d.), England (Smith, 1990), and other countries. These teachers and youth workers, joined by some faculty in higher education, have added their own spins to the model, creating new strategies and modifying the responsibility guidelines to better fit their situations. The model also has spread to public schools in relatively affluent communities, suggesting that many kids today are underserved and in need of help even if they aren't poor.

With the expansion to more affluent communities, people began to ask whether this is really a model for inner-city youth. The answer lies in the history of the model, which was developed by one person who wanted to contribute to the lives of kids he was working with. Whether the model could work elsewhere was, at least in the beginning, an open question. As practitioners working in suburban and rural areas began to adopt and adapt the model (e.g., Compagnone, 1995; Hellison, 1995), their work became examples of applications to other populations. That teachers and youth workers decide for themselves the relevance of these ideas for their settings and students is consistent not only with the origin of the model but with its empowerment emphasis.

Responsibility Model Goals and Strategies

In the movie *Creator*, Peter O'Toole tells his colleagues to keep an eye on "the big picture." Without some sense of the big picture, readers can

easily get lost in the details and nuances of any program model. So here is a glimpse of the big picture, which, together with the preceding description of the model's evolution, should help as you wend your way through the responsibility model's details and nuances. At its core, the model's premises are simple:

- It's relational. If the program leader cannot establish and maintain a relationship with students that honors their ability to take responsibility, nothing else will matter.
- It starts with a focus on physical activity and gradually shifts to an emphasis on life. The major message is not necessarily to maintain an active lifestyle throughout life but to live a personally and socially responsible life that prioritizes human decency and self-development.
- The responsibility for planning and carrying out the program gradually shifts from the program leader to the kids.
- Everything else, as they say, "is details." That includes how to develop relationships, how to teach about life through physical activity, and how to empower students.

Three steps are involved in developing and putting these premises into practice:

1. Kids have to be put first.
2. Guidelines that spell out what students need to take responsibility for have to be developed and then integrated into physical activity lessons.
3. Specific instructional strategies have to be implemented.

Putting Kids First

"Tennis is a way to reach kids and teach them things that are much more important than tennis." (commonly attributed to Arthur Ashe)

Putting kids first means just that. Although fitness and sport may be important, life skills and values matter more, especially given current social trends. Because physical activity is active, interactive, highly emotional, and attractive to many kids, it can become a vehicle for teaching life skills and values. Why role-play conflict resolution in the classroom when real conflicts begging for a resolution erupt all the time in the gym? Why teach self-esteem in the classroom and allow trash talk/in-your-face basketball in physical education? Of course, the subject matter cannot take a back seat in this relationship. Fitness, sport, and

other movement activities must be taught effectively and enthusiastically even if goals other than improved physical performance are sought. Although some tradeoffs do occur when the responsibility model is integrated with physical activity instructional strategies, a comment by an inner-city high school boy reflects this integration: "We learned basketball, but he also taught us the main points about life."

The integration of kids and content is an attractive idea to many physical education professionals. That's why we brag that "sport builds character." But if we are serious about putting kids first, such claims won't help much. We need to set a student-centered tone in our programs by adopting what Nel Noddings (1992) called a care ethic. This means subjectively caring about kids as people and being sensitive to their emotional, social, and cognitive as well as physical needs. In the words of a fifth grader, "This program is great because in here we're treated like people." The focus is on truly caring, not just teaching kids about caring. One way to do this is to prioritize the relationship with students. Although the phrase "programs don't change kids; relationships do" (Millikan, 1994, p. 60) may overstate the case, it correctly challenges the notion that any model can be successful just because it is based on good ideas. If the relationship with students is weak, the model will suffer. To develop that relationship, teachers need to genuinely and sensitively care about each student's emotional, social, and physical health and to develop a positive relationship with as many kids as possible.

Respecting one's students is at the heart of developing such a relationship. However, respect is a much used and perhaps much abused concept (in our everyday language and especially on the street). As program leaders using the responsibility model, we have learned, sometimes the hard way, that it is necessary to genuinely respect

- students' strengths (especially those that aren't very visible), rather than focusing on their deficits;
- not only their culture and gender but their individuality (treat them "unequal but fair," as Portland State professor Walton Manning used to say);
- their voices (they have a "side"); and
- their capacity for decision making (even though they may need practice to become more effective).

These last two, students' voices and their capacity for decision making, are particularly important in implementing the responsibility model. We have found that if we do genuinely respect students in these ways, they tend to give it back to us, to "respect us back." They often don't,

