

Project Effort: Teaching Responsibility Beyond the Gym

TOM MARTINEK DAN MCLAUGHLIN TAMMY SCHILLING

Throughout the impoverished areas of our nation's towns and cities, adult leaders struggle to understand why some youngsters seem to do well, while others fall prey to the deplorable conditions of their neighborhood. Within the last decade, much attention has focused on students "at risk" of dropping out of school. In a recent poll, it was reported that the national dropout rate is around 11 percent (Gage, 1993). In southeastern Greensboro, North Carolina, the rate increases to an alarming 40 percent. The dropout rate is especially high among African American and Hispanic youngsters. Other problems facing at-risk youths include frequent office referrals, poor grades, and various forms of criminality (Benard, 1993). The "resilient" kids are the ones who overcome challenging life conditions by gaining control over their lives and becoming responsible, productive citizens.

We believe that such resilience can be fostered through physical activity programs. While there is little that intervention programs can do to change the impoverished environments in which these youngsters live, giving children the support and the know-how to "bounce back" can enhance their future possibilities.

Project Effort was developed four years ago in response to requests by local school officials and teachers for alternative programs to help address the personal and social needs of their students. Oppositional behavior, once relegated to middle and high schools,

has become increasingly visible in elementary schools. In a survey by the Guilford County School System (in North Carolina), elementary teachers reported seeing more and more angry, violent children in their classrooms, even in kindergarten (Varela, 1996). This was found to be especially true in the underserved areas of the city. The ultimate goal of Project Effort is to get at-risk children to reinvest their energies in schooling and become healthy, competent young adults.

We believe that early intervention in the elementary grades can re-route potentially troublesome youths to become more productive students and citizens in their later school years. Because we also believe that a long-term commitment is essential for success, students who were in the elementary school program continue their participation in a separate program during their middle school years. Together, the two programs serve 35 youngsters who live in the "Grove" area of southeast Greensboro. This is a low socio-economic area of the city with one of the highest crime rates. Project Effort provides both an after-school physical activity program and an in-school mentoring program to both age groups, as well as periodic programs for the teachers and parents of the club members.

After-School Clubs

Two clubs make up the physical activity program of Project Effort. Students are bussed weekly to the Univer-

sity of North Carolina at Greensboro's (UNCG) Health and Human Performance Building for physical activity instruction. The "club" concept helps kids feel like they "belong" and provides a sense of ownership (Hellison, 1995). Members of the elementary children's Sports Club participate in a survey of sports, which includes basketball, volleyball, tennis, lacrosse, soccer, and fencing for three to five week units. The middle school Sports Club focuses exclusively on martial arts and basketball for longer periods of time. The authors provide instruction that is enhanced by the participation of university student volunteers.

Unlike most sport programs, the primary purpose of this program is not recreation or skill development. Rather, in our aim to foster resiliency, we teach kids to take more responsibility for themselves (e.g., staying out of trouble and setting goals) and to be more sensitive and responsive to others (e.g., helping classmates and negotiating conflict). These aims are pursued by capitalizing on the highly interactive and emotional character of life in the gym (Hellison, 1995).

We rely heavily on Don Hellison's Personal and Social Responsibility Model (Hellison, 1995). It has been used extensively with at-risk populations in Chicago and other urban and rural settings in America (e.g., Denver, Portland, Seattle, Grand Forks). The model consists of five basic levels of responsibilities, with each level having its own set of goals. These levels are:



Before beginning a day's activity, club members meet with a mentor to discuss their goals and associated behaviors.

- Level I—self-control and being respectful to others
- Level II—effort and participation
- Level III—self-direction
- Level IV—helping others
- Level V—the application of levels I through IV outside the gym

The levels serve as excellent reference points for developing learning experiences, creating awareness, and setting goals. A sample lesson plan for connecting the goals with our activities appears in table 1. It should be noted that Level I is emphasized throughout the program.

A typical day at the club begins with a short unstructured period of social interaction or self-directed sport activity (Level III). It has been our experience that the program runs much better when the children have a little time to “unwind” from their highly structured day in school. The club members and staff then sit in a circle in the center of the gym. We ask the members about the goals and specific behaviors associated with them and try to relate them to the upcoming activities. If we have been doing basketball and they warm up by doing a shoot-around, we may ask them what goal they were just working on (self-direction). We have also split the club

up and asked each group to briefly brainstorm for examples of helping others. These were written on posters and hung on a bulletin board in the gym.

Usually, the next activities are instructor-led, which allows the children to demonstrate effort (Level II). To focus on self-direction (Level III), members are sometimes allowed to choose a particular skill or how it is to be practiced. After skill practice, game-like activities usually occur. Helping others (Level IV) becomes more relevant because members are given increased responsibility for the experience. Coaches may be appointed to run a practice drill, assign positions, or delegate other responsibilities. To discuss problems that occur, we encourage the members to use “time-outs.” Even if an adult calls a time-out, we try to make the members responsible for solving the problem. Teamwork is emphasized, and sometimes the members are required to create rules (like an “all-touch” rule) to help ensure that everyone is involved.

At the end of our day, we meet in a circle again and both the members and staff share their evaluations of that day. We typically try to get the children's thoughts first. The staff tries to focus on positive, individual performances, but also comments on how

the club did as a whole. If “trash-talking” was particularly apparent that day, we say so and ask the members what needs to be done to eliminate it. Every other week, time is taken to have the members fill out a reflection form, on which they identify one specific time during that session when they were successful and/or unsuccessful with the goals. The form also includes space for writing a goal for the next week. Comment cards are written out by the staff and attached to the reflection forms. They provide both positive and constructive feedback and are returned at the beginning of the next meeting.

Self-control and respect for others (Level I) is expected from the club members at all times. Throughout the club session, club members are asked to help (Level IV) do such things as demonstrate skills, take attendance, collect equipment, and distribute snacks. Members who have demonstrated potential and are willing, have been given the chance to help teach other members and have done so successfully. Central to Hellison's model and our program is the notion of empowerment. We emphasize that participation is the choice of each child. We try to provide them with opportunities for choices, input, and problem-solving, and we often use their suggestions. At the end of each day, honest evaluation—whether it is with a “thumbs-up, thumbs-even, or thumbs-down,” or with the reflection forms—is up to each individual member, not to the staff or other members. For at-risk youth to become resilient, they must engage in self-development regardless of external forces that may significantly limit their vision and options for the future.

Mentoring Program

The second component of Project Effort is an in-school, one-on-one mentoring program. In general, we have found that the kids do well working on their own and staying clear of conflict during club activities, but many of them struggle with self-control and effort when in the classroom. Some of the kids in Project Effort have, to a degree,

