Putting program evaluation into practice:
Enhancing the Girls Just Wanna Have Fun program

Key Details

KEY WORDS
process evaluation, female youth, qualitative methods, physical activity, community programming

POPULATION GROUP
Youth living in poverty

STEPPING UP THEMES
All youth; youth living in poverty

RESEARCH ORIGIN
Ontario

SOURCE
Academic

> "...to promote positive developmental outcomes for female youth, physical activity-based programs should make efforts to afford youth with unique experiences, offer formal and informal leadership responsibilities, and expose youth to positive adult role models."

1. What is the research about?

There have been a number of calls to increase youth development opportunities for female youth, particularly those that occur within a physical activity or sport context. Program models combine youth development and physical activity may address barriers to physical and emotional wellbeing experienced by female youth from low-income communities. This study responds to the need for evaluations of life skills focused youth programs. Building on previous research, the purpose of this program evaluation was to understand the ongoing successes and challenges within a female only physical activity-based life skills program and to examine findings from an initial process evaluation were applied. The researchers wanted to know how the adaptations made as a result of the process evaluation were perceived as impacting the program.

2. Where did the research take place?

This research took place in Eastern Ontario, Canada.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about female youth (age 11-16) and youth program leaders who were involved in a female only physical activity-based life skills program in Eastern Ontario.

4. How was the research done?

The researchers used an utilization-focused approach to evaluation because the process involves identifying stakeholders who will use the evaluation findings for future decision-making about the program, actively involving these individuals in the evaluation process, and helping them better understand the process of evaluation. This research used a qualitative approach whereby youth and program leaders were interviewed regarding their experiences over the course of one year in the program. Two of the five youth leaders were also researchers within this study and were involved in program implementation and evaluation. Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of the program (eight youth, five program leaders). The youth were asked about their experiences in the program (e.g., what they liked/disliked, experience working with leaders) and their perceptions of how participation in the program may have influenced their personal development. The program leaders were asked about their understanding of program implementation (e.g., successes/challenges, effective strategies) and program impact insights. Researchers conducted a thematic analysis of the interviews, data were organized into themes and sub-themes, and relevant quotations that supported each theme were identified.

5. What are the key findings?

Three main findings emerged from the interviews: (1) applying lessons learned can make a significant difference, (2) it is important to continually implement successful strategies, and (3) the program experienced ongoing challenges. Youth attendance and ability to engage in program activities improved by addressing challenges related to program space and transportation issues. Smaller youth leader to youth ratios enables better youth participation and fosters relationships. Providing opportunities for field trips and community engagement – for example, opportunities to volunteer at a local program for younger youth – enhances youth engagement. Another successful strategy includes having youth take formal and informal leadership roles. Three ongoing challenges included program time (because it was directly after school it competed with other extracurricular activities), youth use of electronic devices, and not enough time to accomplish programming goals.

6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

This research shows how a utilization focused process evaluation was used to improving youth program processes and participant outcomes. The approach additionally built program capacity around program evaluation and its usefulness for identifying areas that can be changed. Challenges in youth programming are a reality and cannot be avoided, but evaluation can support youth workers to identify and address these challenges. Researchers and youth workers must consistently evaluate physical activity-based programs and use the findings to adapt the program to better meet the changing needs of youth. This research demonstrated that the program under study benefited from addressing transportation and facilities issues. Program participants benefited from smaller adult-youth ratios, leadership opportunities, community engagement opportunities, and field trips. Program time can be shifted so it is not so close to the end of school and the program can either be extended to ensure that goals are met or program goals can be revised based on available time. Strategizing around how to address youth use of electronic devices will improve engagement and participation.

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