



Uptake of National AfterSchool Association physical activity standards among US after-school sites



Jean L. Wiecha^{a,*}, Georgia Hall^b, Michelle Barnes^c

^a RTI International, 1400 Main Street, Suite 310, Waltham, MA 02451, USA

^b Wellesley College, 106 Central Street, Wellesley, MA 02481, USA

^c RTI International, 3040 East Cornwallis Road, Research Triangle Park, NC 027709, USA

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ABSTRACT

Objective. In 2011, the National AfterSchool Association (NAA) adopted standards to guide delivery of physical activity (PA). We assessed after school sites' uptake of the five PA standards.

Method. We conducted a descriptive study in fall 2013. NAA emailed 14,000 members requesting that afterschool site directors complete an online questionnaire regarding site characteristics, awareness and use of the standards, and implementation. We calculated implementation scores for each standard by summing points for their component best practices, and examined associations among site characteristics, implementation scores, and awareness and use of the standards.

Results. Among 595 respondents, 60% were aware of the PA standards and 43% used them for program planning. Awareness and use were significantly higher among NAA members and among sites that were accredited, licensed, or operated by a parent organization. PA content and quality scores were higher among those aware of and using the standards ($p < 0.01$) and correlated with scores for staff training and for program, social, and environmental support ($p < 0.0001$).

Conclusion. We observed high recognition and use of the NAA PA standards in a national convenience sample of afterschool programs. Their uptake and use are promising lever for increasing the quality of PA in the afterschool setting.

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Introduction

The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans Midcourse Report (2012) found limited evidence that community and out-of-school time program (OST) settings increased youth physical activity (PA). A small number of peer reviewed journal articles show modest program- and individual-level improvements in PA (Barbeau et al., 2007; Gambone et al., 2009; Gutin et al., 2008; Melnyk et al., 2007; Robinson et al., 2003; Weintraub et al., 2008; Yin et al., 2005). Outside of the research realm, a growing number of organizational policy, service and program initiatives are underway in OST. One initiative designed to influence program improvements involves the recent national voluntary quality standards for healthy eating and physical activity (HEPA) in OST (Wiecha et al., 2012). In 2011 the National

AfterSchool Association (NAA) adopted 5 PA and 6 HE standards developed by field leaders participating in the Healthy OST Coalition (HOST) (National AfterSchool Association Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Standards). The 5 PA standards include 26 best practices and were developed to foster uniform messaging about content, quality, and infrastructure to support a robust and effective PA effort within an OST program. NAA participates in HOST and is the largest OST professional membership organization in the US. Since 2011, NAA and HOST have disseminated the HEPA standards through member websites, peer reviewed publications, conference presentations, trade journals, newsletters, and at the NAA annual convention.

The current study sought to assess the impact of the HEPA standards dissemination efforts. Our specific objective was estimating awareness, use, and implementation of the NAA PA standards among afterschool sites accessible through NAA and located throughout the US.

Methods

Design

Our descriptive, cross sectional study used a convenience sampling approach.

Abbreviations: HEPA, healthy eating and physical activity; NAA, National AfterSchool Association; OST, out-of-school time: before, after school and vacation programs, including summer camps; PA, physical activity.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: jwiecha@rti.org (J.L. Wiecha), ghall@wellesley.edu (G. Hall).

Participants

Our sampling goal was to survey NAA members that were afterschool site directors. We recruited respondents through the NAA membership email list. The NAA distribution list is not sorted by member characteristics, so the number of afterschool site directors in it was unknown. We focused on sites, that is, individual addresses, rather than “programs”, a term that can indicate multiple sites operated by a single entity.

Procedures

NAA embedded the survey invitation in its regular newsletter which was emailed to 14,920 addresses in October 2013. The invitation stated in part “Please participate in an online survey about physical activity in your afterschool program site” and, in order to minimize self-selection, it did not mention that the purpose of the survey was to assess familiarity with the standards. One reminder was emailed and the survey closed after six weeks. We asked recipients to forward the link to appropriate respondents. We invited one response per site for an opportunity to win one of four prizes valued at \$100. The IRBs at RTI International and Wellesley College approved the protocol.

Measures

The survey contained 55 questions. We assessed site characteristics and respondents’ awareness and use of the five NAA PA standards at their sites. Respondents reporting that they had prior familiarity with the standards segued to a contingent question asking if they were using one or more of them for program planning. All respondents, regardless of prior familiarity, saw questions regarding implementation of best practices for each standard. Standard 1 addresses content and quality of PA and has 9 best practices. Standards 2 through 5 address program capacity for developing and sustaining high quality PA. Standard 2, staff training has 3 best practices; Standard 3, social support and Standard 4, program support each have 4; and Standard 5, environmental support for PA, has 6. We asked respondents to use a 4 point Likert-type scale to describe their sites’ implementation of the best practices. Respondents were asked to indicate how “true” each best practice statement was for their afterschool site: Never, Sometimes, Usually, or Always.

Data analysis

For standard-specific “implementation scores,” we assigned points to the Likert-type responses, and summed these within each standard. The positive response terminus was four points. Maximum scores for each standard were thus four times the number of best practices; e.g., Standard 1’s maximum was 36. We conducted all statistical analyses with SAS version 9.3 (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC). Because the underlying scoring was ordinal, we used non-parametric tests to examine the relationships between site characteristics and summary implementation scores. We conducted Mann–Whitney tests using the *proc npar1way* procedure with the Wilcoxon option. For a small number of comparisons that did not meet the assumption of equal variance, we also conducted the median test using the *proc npar1way* procedure with the median option. For clarity of presentation, and because the results of the median tests were essentially equivalent to those of the Mann–Whitney tests, we present only the Mann–Whitney results in Table 2. We used chi square tests to identify characteristics associated with awareness of and use of the standards. We used nonparametric Spearman tests to examine the correlation between scores for content and quality (Standard 1) and scores for the other PA standards, testing the hypothesis that higher implementation would be associated with higher site capacity.

Results

We received 689 responses and eliminated 94, almost all of which appeared to be “false starts” by individuals who abandoned their survey and forwarded the link to another person. We analyzed 595 responses from 44 states. Respondents were primarily the program director/coordinator/manager (40%) or site director/coordinator/manager (52.3%) (Table 1). Although we recruited through the NAA distribution list, only about half (49%) of respondents indicated NAA membership at their site, although we did not ask them to specify if they or someone else at the site was a member. This reflects how

Table 1

Characteristics of respondents and their afterschool sites (N = 595), 2013.

	N	%
Respondent job title		
Program director, coordinator or manager	239	40.2
Site director, coordinator or manager	311	52.3
Physical activity specialist or coordinator	9	1.5
Other title	36	6.1
National AfterSchool Association (NAA) membership	294	49.4
Respondent was familiar with NAA PA Standards prior to survey	355	59.7
Site uses one or more NAA PA standards to guide program delivery ^a	257	43.2
Facility type		
Community-based organization	86	14.5
School	401	67.4
Other	84	14.1
Site is operated/managed by a parent organization	173 ^b	29.1
Grades served by afterschool sites		
Elementary or primary (K–5)	547	91.9
Middle school or junior high (6–8)	241	40.5
High school (9–12)	89	15.0
21st Century Community Learning Center	159	26.7
Licensed OST provider	191	32.1
Accredited by the Council on Accreditation and/or NAA	89	15.0

Abbreviations: NAA = National AfterSchool Association; PA = physical activity.

^a “Uses standards for program guidance” question was contingent on respondent answering “yes” to prior familiarity.

^b Parent organization categories were: not specified (62 sites); YMCA (51); Boys and Girls Clubs (29); school district (15); Parks and Recreation Department (12); 4-H (3) and military (1).

recipients received the link; while 311 (54%) received it from NAA, the remainder received it from a colleague (177, 30%), another organization (66, 11%), or from some other source. This concurs with our request that recipients forward the link to an appropriate respondent.

Site characteristics

The typical respondent’s site was located in a school (67%), was not affiliated with a parent organization such as a YMCA (71%), served elementary aged children (92%), and was unlicensed (68%) and unaccredited (85%) (Table 1). About a quarter (27%) of sites were funded by the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program. This program provides federal funding for enrichment and other services in the OST hours to students attending low income, low performing schools (U.S. Department of Education, 21st Century Community Learning Centers).

Implementation scores

Implementation scores varied with site characteristics (Table 2). Mean and median scores for each standard were about 75% of the maximum possible. Many differences in means and scores were modest (under 10%) but statistically significant. For example, PA content and quality scores had a mean of 28.7 and median of 29 out of 36, with 21st Century Learning Center sites having significantly lower PA quality scores than other sites ($p < 0.001$). Being part of a parent organization was associated with higher scores on four of the standards. Accreditation was associated with higher scores on two of the standards, NAA membership with two, and location in a school with one. Licensure did not improve scores on any of the standards.

Awareness and use of NAA PA standards

Sixty percent of respondents reported they had seen the NAA PA standards prior to viewing them in the questionnaire (Table 1). Almost three quarters (72%) of respondents familiar with the standards reported using one or more of them to guide PA delivery (43% of the

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