



# Process evaluation of “Girls on the Run”: Exploring implementation in a physical activity-based positive youth development program



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## ABSTRACT

Many positive youth development programs rely on physical activity as a primary program component. Referred to as physical activity-based youth development programs, these program designs have great potential for promoting healthy youth development. This study examined how one such physical activity-based positive youth development program was implemented in order to identify design features critical to maximizing positive youth outcomes. This mixed method, multi-site process evaluation of Girls on the Run (GOTR) utilized focus groups, site visits, and self-report implementation checklists. Implementation scores were calculated to assess implementation fidelity across twenty-nine sites, and qualitative data were inductively analyzed to identify factors influential for implementation. Results reveal variability in how GOTR was implemented. Five themes emerged from the data that represented factors serving as facilitators or barriers to programmatic implementation. These included contextual/environmental factors (e.g., parental involvement, relationships with school personnel), organizational factors (e.g., implementation support and responsiveness of staff), program-specific factors (e.g., curriculum design), coach factors (e.g., existing relationships with participants, responsiveness to participant's needs), and youth factors (e.g., behavioral and discipline issues). Study findings have implications for improving the design of physical activity-based and other positive youth development programs, with relevance to evaluators, program planners, youth development leaders, and others working with children and youth.

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## 1. Introduction

Physical activity-based positive youth development programs, a unique type of program designed to promote healthy youth development and respond to emergent youth health priorities (e.g., childhood obesity), are growing in popularity (Anderson-Butcher, Riley, Iachini, Wade-Mdivanian, & Davis, 2011; Anderson-Butcher et al., 2013; Berlin, Dworkin, Eames, Menconi, & Perkins 2007; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Gould & Carson, 2008; Weiss & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2009; Weiss, Stuntz, Bhalla, Bolter, & Price,

2012). These programs use physical activity as a mechanism to foster youths' interest and engagement in physical activity, and also promote broader social, emotional, and psychological development among youth participants (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2011; Gould & Carson, 2008; Ullrich-French, McDonough, & Smith, 2012). Outcome evaluations continue to demonstrate, however, the differential effectiveness of these programs in achieving these important youth outcomes (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2013; Gabriel, DeBate, High, & Racine, 2011; Martin, Waldron, McCabe, & Choi, 2009; Ullrich-French et al., 2012). Process evaluations are critical to understanding how these programs are being implemented by program leaders and whether program implementation challenges may account for some of this variability in programmatic impact. Through a process evaluation, this study examines how one specific physical activity-based positive youth development program – Girls on the Run (GOTR) – was implemented in order to identify design features critical for maximizing positive youth outcomes. Implications of these

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findings are shared with relevance for those who design and evaluate physical activity-based and other positive youth development programs.

## 2. Literature review

Positive youth development programs are important contexts for addressing health priorities, as well as promoting social, emotional, and psychological development among youth participants (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Gavin, Catalano, David-Ferdon, Gloppen, & Markham, 2010). Different types of programs exist, and the extent to which they emphasize each of these areas through their programmatic designs differ (Catalano et al., 2004). Some promote emotional development through curriculum-based programs (e.g., Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS); Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995), and others foster psychological development through group design strategies (e.g., 4-H youth development programs; Hensley, Place, Jordan, & Israel, 2007). Yet others utilize sport or physical activity (e.g., LiFE Sports, The First Tee) as mechanisms to foster and teach social skills (Anderson-Butcher, Riley, Amorose, Iachini, & Wade-Mdivanian, *in press*; Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012; Weiss & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2009; Weiss et al., 2012). These latter types of programs, focused on in this study, are referred to by a variety of names indicative of the mechanism adopted within their design. For example, sport-based positive youth development programs refer to those programs that use sport (e.g., basketball, soccer) as the mechanism to promote healthy youth outcomes. Other programs are referred to as physical activity-based due to the use of different physical activities (e.g., running) to promote youth learning and development.

While collectively these sport- and physical activity-based positive youth development programs have expanded rapidly in number, research continues to demonstrate their variable effectiveness in improving youth outcomes (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2013; DeBate & Thompson, 2005; DeBate, Zhang, & Thompson, 2007; DeBate, Pettee Gabriel, Zwald, Huberty, & Zhang, 2009; Gabriel et al., 2011; Martin et al., 2009; Ullrich-French et al., 2012). For example, in a recent quasi-experimental study, minimal changes were found in psychosocial outcomes and no improvements were found in physical activity levels for girls participating in a physical activity-based positive youth development program (Gabriel et al., 2011). Likewise, another study reported mixed findings with participants reporting significant improvements regarding feelings of self-worth and competence, but no significant improvements in relationship to attraction to engage in physical activity (Ullrich-French et al., 2012). Other studies focused on sport-based youth development programs have found similar results (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2013, *in press*). Little is known, however, about how these programs are being implemented. To date, it is unclear whether these program designs need strengthening or whether variability in programmatic implementation can help explain why some of these programs lead to more or less positive outcomes for youth participants.

Process evaluations are critical to elucidate information on program implementation, and are thus needed within these programmatic contexts to help further contextualize these variable study findings. Specifically, process evaluations can be used to monitor programmatic implementation fidelity, defined as “the degree to which a program is implemented as intended by the program developers” (Sánchez et al., 2007, p. 96). Use of process evaluations to monitor fidelity also can help researchers avoid making Type III errors (Basch, Slipevich, Gold, Duncan, & Kolbe, 1985), as programmatic implementation has direct implications for interpreting changes (or lack thereof) in participant outcomes

(Durlak, 1998; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Fagan, Hanson, Hawkins, & Arthur 2008; Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005; Mihalic, Fagan, & Argamaso, 2003). Unfortunately, only a few studies on physical activity-based and sport-based youth development programs monitor and examine implementation as part of their evaluation design (Rajan & Basch, 2012; Robbins, Pfeiffer, Wesolek, & Lo, 2014; Wright & Burton, 2008).

Process evaluations also are instrumental in identifying key factors that might contribute to stronger or weaker programmatic implementation (Basch et al., 1985). Research suggests a myriad of factors can influence how a program is implemented. For example, organizational (e.g., administrative support) and programmatic factors (e.g., program adaptability), along with staff attitudes and beliefs, can all influence program implementation (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Fagan et al., 2008; Fixsen et al., 2005; Mihalic et al., 2003). Research on these factors is limited with regard to physical activity-based and sport-based youth development programs. One exception is the work of Rajan and Basch (2012), who explored potential implementation determinants within a physical activity-based youth development program for girls. In their study, curriculum-related factors, program space, and relationships with parents all were influential in program implementation. Uncovering such factors within physical activity-based youth development programs is critical for building the research base in this area. It also is important for program leaders, planners, and evaluators as they aim to improve program implementation, and ultimately, maximize positive youth outcomes.

### 2.1. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to examine program implementation and factors influencing program implementation within one physical activity-based positive youth development program – GOTR. As physical activity-based, sport-based, and other positive youth development programs continue to expand their reach and impact, it is imperative to develop the research base on how best to design and structure these programs to maximize their contribution to positive youth development (Rajan & Basch, 2012). Using a mixed-method, multi-site evaluation design, this study addressed the following two research questions: (1) To what extent is GOTR being implemented with fidelity? (2) What factors influence how the GOTR program is being implemented by GOTR program leaders?

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Context of study

Girls on the Run (GOTR) is one of the most widely disseminated physical activity-based positive youth development programs available across the United States (US) and in Canada. GOTR is a 12-week (2 days/week) running-based program designed for girls in 3rd to 5th grade (Gabriel et al., 2011; *Girls on the Run*, 2014). The program is offered twice per year (i.e., fall and spring) and includes girls' participation in physical activity through training for a 5K running event. GOTR also simultaneously addresses the unique psychological and social development needs of girls through a three-stage curriculum focused on self-care, connectedness, and empowerment. The curriculum is organized into 24 lessons, with each lesson including a discussion of the topic for the day, a warm-up and workout, group processing activities, and a closing. Please see Gabriel et al. (2011) for a more detailed description of these lessons. Also, as part of GOTR, a “Grown Up Guide” is distributed to parents in either hard copy or electronic form. This guide provides an overview of each GOTR lesson and offers strategies for parents to help reinforce lesson topics at home.

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