



Staff's perceptions of the use of evidence-based physical activity promotion strategies for promoting girls' physical activity at afterschool programs: A qualitative study



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ABSTRACT

There is a need to improve girls' physical activity (PA) in afterschool programs as girls' PA levels are consistently lower than boys'. An evidence-based professional development framework, the 5 Ms, has been effective in helping staff to improve PA in both girls and boys but further improvements in girls' PA are needed. Little is known about staff's perceptions of using PA promotion strategies to promote girls' PA. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore staff perceptions of the use of evidence-based PA promotion strategies for promoting PA in girls. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff from three community-based afterschool programs located within a school setting ($n = 18$). Data were analyzed using the process of immersion/crystallization. A majority of staff had some knowledge of PA promotion strategies but few staff consistently utilized these strategies and a majority felt several strategies were unnecessary (i.e., having a PA policy). Newer staff reported depending on senior staff to promote PA in girls. Overall, findings suggest that staff's perceptions may impact their use of PA promotion strategies. The results of this study will contribute to the enhancement of an existing staff training framework (the 5 Ms) to improve girls' PA in afterschool programs.

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1. Introduction

Physical activity (PA) offers many physical and psychological benefits to children (Biddle & Asare, 2011; CDC, 2011; USDHHS, 2008). Despite these benefits, a majority of children are not meeting the PA recommendations (60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous PA (MVPA) every day) (USDHHS, 2008; Troiano et al., 2008). Research in the U.S. has found girls especially are consistently less active than boys, regardless of race, parental income level, weight status, or age (Belcher et al., 2010; Troiano et al., 2008; Whitt-Glover et al., 2009). In fact, only 35% of 6–11 year old girls currently achieve the recommended 60 minutes of daily MVPA as compared to 48% of boys (Troiano et al., 2008).

Few interventions have been successful at meaningfully increasing MVPA in girls across a variety of settings (e.g., afterschool programs (ASPs), community, family, and school) (Beets, Beighle, Erwin, & Huberty, 2009; van Sluijs, McMinn, & Griffin, 2008). In interventions targeting boys and girls, several studies have shown greater improvements in boys PA as compared to girls (Huberty, Beets, Beighle, & Welk, 2011; Magnusson, Sigurgeirsson, Sveinsson, & Johannsson, 2011; Ridgers, Stratton, Fairclough, & Twisk, 2007; Rosenkranz, Welk, & Dziewaltowski, 2011). Unfortunately, interventions that specifically target girls have not been any more successful at improving girls' MVPA than studies targeting both boys and girls (Klesges et al., 2010; Kumanyika, Obarzanek, Robinson, & Beech, 2003; Robinson et al., 2010; Webber, Catellier, Lytle, Murray, & Pratt, 2008). There is a need for novel interventions to increase PA in girls.

ASPs are a prime opportunity to increase girls' PA (Afterschool Alliance, 2009; Beets et al., 2009; Beighle et al., 2010; Pate & O'Neill, 2009; Webber et al., 2008) and have been called upon to do so (Beets, Huberty, & Beighle, 2013). ASPs are defined as programs

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that take place immediately after the regular school day (approximately 3–6 pm), are available daily throughout the academic year (Monday through Friday), and provide a combination of scheduled activities such as a snack, homework assistance/tutoring, enrichment activities (e.g., arts and crafts, music), and PA (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). In the U.S., over 8 million children attend ASPs every year and according to findings from a survey conducted in a nationally representative sample, an additional 18.5 million children would attend if an ASP was available (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). Previous research in ASPs has found that interventions targeting PA can improve children's PA levels; however, more comprehensive assessments are needed (Beets et al., 2009; Pate & O'Neill, 2009). Future research is needed on the type and variety of activities offered, content and frequency of trainings, and staff perceptions of these programs as well as the specific components of ASPs that best promote PA (Beets et al., 2009; Pate & O'Neill, 2009).

A critical component to the success of ASPs is staff. Staff are especially important for the successful implementation of an environment conducive to opportunities for PA (e.g., organized games, participation in free play). This may be especially true in girls. A recent study found girls were most active at ASPs when staff were actively promoting PA and MVPA increased with each PA promotion strategy that was implemented (i.e., staff verbally promoted PA, staff organized PA) (Huberty, Beets, Beighle, & McKenzie, 2012). Unfortunately, few staff are trained in PA promotion, especially PA promotion for girls (Ajja, Beets, Huberty, Kaczynski, & Ward, 2012; Huberty et al., 2012). Interventions are needed to train staff to serve as active role models by engaging in PA, supporting PA, and facilitating opportunities for girls to be active (Ajja et al., 2012).

One promising ASP staff training framework focused on teaching staff how to effectively promote PA is the 5 Ms (Weaver, Beets, Webster, Beighle, & Huberty, 2012). The 5 Ms is an evidence-based professional development framework that has been effective in helping staff to improve PA in the afterschool setting (Beets et al., 2013; Huberty, Beets, & Beighle, 2013). A policy-level intervention targeting improvements in girls and boys PA where staff were trained in the 5 Ms yielded increases in vigorous activity and walking and decreases in sedentary time for both girls and boys (Beets et al., 2013). However, the percentage of girls participating in walking and vigorous activity was still less than the percentage of boys (31% vs. 35% and 17.9% vs. 24.5%). No interaction effect was reported based on gender; however more research is necessary about how to train staff to improve PA in girls specifically.

An area that has received little attention is the perceptions of ASP staff related to promoting PA utilizing evidence-based strategies. This information may be a critical component to the development of ASP staff trainings aimed at improving PA in girls'. For example, in the school setting even though PE teachers were aware of better strategies to motivate children to be active, perceived time constraints and cultural norms (i.e., appropriate methods for interacting with students) impacted the motivational strategies PE teachers used to encourage participation (Taylor, Ntoumanis, & Smith, 2009). Other research in school settings has suggested that obtaining an in-depth understanding of teacher's perceptions of children's behaviors and interventions greatly contributed to knowing how to improve staff trainings and teachers desires to use these interventions (Dutton, Varjas, Meyers, & Smith Collins, 2010; Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, & Goel, 2011). Considering the potential impact of staff's perceptions on their use of PA strategies, conducting a formative qualitative evaluation to better understand staff's perception is imperative to the modification of an existing staff training framework. Findings can be used to ensure that potential barriers due to staff perceptions are addressed prior to the implementation of a newly developed staff training.

To date, no studies have explored ASP staff's perceptions of evidence-based PA promotion strategies and their current use of PA promotion strategies. A better understanding of staff's perceptions may be essential elements to inform the modification of staff trainings to improve PA in girls. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to explore staff perceptions of the use of evidence-based PA promotion strategies (based on the 5 Ms) for promoting PA in girls. The results of this study will contribute to the enhancement of an existing staff training framework (the 5 Ms) to improve PA in ASPs specifically related to girls.

2. Methods

This was a qualitative study with a collective case study design. A collective case study uses multiple programs or sites (ASPs) to illustrate the exploration of a specific topic (i.e., PA promotion strategies) (Creswell, 2007). The boundaries of this study were staff at community-based ASPs located within a school setting. ASPs that focused solely on a single activity such as tutoring or specifically promoted PA (e.g., Girls on the Run, intramurals) were not included in this study. All data were collected at ASPs in a Midwestern city in the U.S. during February/March of 2013. This particular Midwestern city was chosen because ASPs in the area serve a diverse demographic of children (55% African American, 23% Caucasian, 10% Hispanic/Latino) and the researchers previous work in ASPs within this community have indicated that girls PA accumulation is lower than boys (Deichert, Rolf, & Smith, 2007; Huberty et al., 2012). The study was approved by an Institutional Review Board at a Medical Center.

2.1. Participants

Participants were staff recruited from three community-based ASPs located within three separate schools. An overview of site recruitment is available in Fig. 1. Sites were excluded if they did not meet five days a week, were not located within an elementary school, had received similar PA training, and/or district research offices did not approve the study. Sites were contacted until an appropriate sample of ASPs serving various race/ethnicity and income levels agreed to participate. There were no major differences between the ASPs who did and did not agree to participate. All staff at recruited ASPs were invited to participate in the study. The population of children at one site was primarily African American (site 1) and the populations at the other two sites were primarily Caucasian (sites 2 and 3). Enrollment of children at the three sites ranged from 59 to 134. The principal investigator received referrals of potential ASPs from community organizations and then contacted the organizational and site directors to explain the study. Once approved by the directors, the principal investigator met with staff to explain the study. At this time staff were provided with the informed consent and encouraged to take up to one week to review the form and decide if they wanted to participate in the study. All staff members who volunteered to participate completed an informed consent and a short demographic questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire included questions on age, gender, race/ethnicity, whether they were currently enrolled in school, number of days in the last week they were active for at least 30 minutes/day, and how long they had been employed at the ASP. After the informed consent and demographic questionnaire were complete, staff took part in a semi-structured interview.

2.2. Data collection

Semi-structured interviews with staff explored staff perceptions of the use of PA promotion strategies and their current

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