



## The therapeutic benefits of sport in the rehabilitation of young sexual offenders: A qualitative evaluation of the Fight with Insight programme

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** Abuse of children is a concerning issue in South Africa, particularly the percentage of sexual offences committed by children and youth. Fight with Insight (FWI), which forms part of a 12-week diversion programme, combines boxing and cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), and is intended for child and youth sexual offenders. The aim of this evaluation was to qualitatively evaluate the FWI programme. The evaluation was intended to achieve the following outcomes: 1) a description of FWI (including outcomes and mechanisms); 2) understanding of perceptions of FWI's effectiveness; and 3) insight into factors influencing programme effectiveness.

**Design:** A case-study approach was used to conduct this qualitative evaluation.

**Methods:** Focus groups were conducted with FWI participants ( $n = 17$ ), parents of FWI participants ( $n = 7$ ), and a comparison group of youth offenders who had only participated in CBT sessions ( $n = 10$ ). Key informants interviews were conducted with programme staff ( $n = 6$ ).

**Results:** The main outcome was identified as a reduction in recidivism, along with other intra- and inter-personal outcomes. Participants were generally positive about FWI and its effectiveness, and these views were reinforced by key informant and parents' perceptions. FWI (compared to comparison) participants tended to be more specific about changes and learning they experienced as a result of the programme. A conceptual model highlights that it is the interplay between the boxing and the themes addressed within the CBT that contributes to FWI's effectiveness.

**Conclusions:** This study has provided insight into FWI's outcomes and mechanisms, factors influencing its effectiveness, and the kind of change that it helps to bring about in its participants.

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### Introduction

The abuse of children is a concerning issue in South Africa. Research conducted by Collings and Wiles (2004), as well as Jewkes, Levine, Mbananga and Bradshaw (2002) has rated South Africa as having amongst the highest rates of sexual crime in the world. In 2002, the ratio of females raped in the 12 to 17 year-old category was over twice the national ratio of all females raped (471 versus 220 per 100,000) (Collings & Wiles, 2004). It has also been reported that almost half of all victims of sexual abuse in South Africa are children (Waterhouse, 2008). In South Africa, the statistics on rapes committed by juveniles are still somewhat inaccurate due to a lack of recording and under reporting (Stout,

2003), however there have been various reports that estimate that 42% of sexual offences are committed by other children (Vanzant 2004).

Interventions with the perpetrators of child abuse, especially young offenders, are vital in order to break the cycle of abuse. Conventional methods to treat young offenders within the justice system, such as punitive correctional facilities, have not been proven to be effective in the reduction of recidivism rates amongst these youth, as this system is only able to keep youth offenders from committing crimes for a specific period of time (Fortney, Levenson, Brannon, & Baker, 2007). It has been argued that these types of interventions may do more harm than good, as they do not address the psychosocial needs of these youth that led them to the commission of a crime/s, which can negatively impact the identity of these youth as well (Fortney et al., 2007; McAlinden, 2008; Perry & Orchard, 1992).

In contrast to these conventional methods, psychosocial and cognitive-behavioural therapies have been recommended in the

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treatment of youth offenders (Izzo & Ross, 1990; Shaw, 1999), and a combination of these treatments is often used in diversion programmes for the rehabilitation of youth offenders (MacKenzie, Stevens, & Swart, 2005). Cognitive-behavioural treatments are commonly used with sexual offenders (Moster, Wnuk, & Jeglic, 2008), with the primary goal being a reduction in recidivism. While some have associated such a reduction with cognitive-behavioural treatments (Hanson et al., 2002; McGrath, Cumming, Livingston, & Hoke, 2003; McGrath, Hoke, & Vojtisek, 1998; Nicholaichuk, Gordon, Gu, & Wong, 2000), others have found no significant effect (Marques, Wiederanders, Day, Nelson, & van Ommeren, 2005), or have highlighted the need for more conclusive and consistent evidence for the effectiveness of this treatment (Marques, Day, Nelson, & West, 1994; Polizzi, Layton MacKenzie, & Hickman, 1999; Rice & Harris, 2003).

Apart from these therapeutic methods, various alternative activities have been incorporated into the rehabilitation of youth offenders, such as sport (Andrews & Andrews, 2003; Astbury, Knight, & Nichols, 2005; Meek, 2012; Nichols, 2007). Sport has been acknowledged as a valuable tool for bringing about positive personal and social development, especially in youth (Morris, Sallybanks, & Willis, 2003; Sandford, Armour, & Warmington, 2006), although the lack of robust evidence to support such claims (and claims regarding the role of sport in reducing crime and social deviance) has been noted (Cameron & MacDougall, 2000; Coalter, 2007; Crabbe, 2000; Morris et al., 2003; Nichols, 1997). There has consequently been a call for more rigorous evaluation of these 'sport-for-development' programmes (Bailey, 2005; Cameron & MacDougall, 2000; Coalter, 2007; Morris et al., 2003; Nichols & Crow, 2004; Sandford et al., 2006). Criticisms of these programmes include the lack of clarity on outcomes and their measurement (Bailey, 2005; Crabbe, 2000; Nichols & Crow, 2004), and inadequate consideration of the conditions (particularly necessary versus sufficient conditions) for their effectiveness (Cameron & MacDougall, 2000; Coalter, 2007; Sandford et al., 2006). Furthermore, there is a need for a clearer understanding of the mechanisms through which this development occurs as a result of sport, as well as the context in which this development would take place, and with whom it would occur (Coalter, 2007; Nichols & Crow, 2004; Sandford et al., 2006). Sandford et al. (2006) recommend a focus on the "optimal combinations of individuals, activities and contexts" when evaluating the mechanisms and impact of sport programmes.

#### *Programme context: Fight with Insight*

The Teddy Bear Clinic for Abused Children (TTBC) is a non-profit organization based in Johannesburg, South Africa, that works to protect and rehabilitate children who have suffered any kind of abuse. Therapy and counselling services are offered, along with the on-going support needed by these children. TTBC also facilitates a 12-week diversion programme, SPARC (Support Programme for Abuse Reactive Children) for children and youth who have committed a sexual offence; many referrals to the programme are through the judicial system. SPARC aims to meet the demand for treatment models that take into account the needs of child or youth sexual offenders, considering that adult models have not shown to be adequate for these age groups (Bourgon, Morton-Bourgon & Madrigando, 2005). It aligns with steps taken to ensure that children finding themselves in conflict with the law are dealt with more appropriately, following the implementation of the new Child Justice Act (Act 75) of 2008 in South Africa.

The suggestion that therapies, such as cognitive-behavioural therapy, on their own may not be sufficiently effective (Dawes & van der Merwe, 2004) led to the incorporation of alternative treatment modalities into SPARC. Alternative treatments may

utilize the arts as a medium of expression, providing a creative and playful mechanism through which collective or personal identity is explored (Chodorow, 1999). Such an opportunity enables young sex offenders to identify with the more positive aspects of themselves as well as exploring emotions and experiences they may struggle to verbalize (Bunt, 1994; Doyle, 1990), ultimately contributing to the effectiveness of the rehabilitation programme.

Within SPARC, boxing is offered as an alternative treatment in the Fight with Insight (FWI) programme. FWI is implemented by trained facilitators and boxing coaches, and has two complementary components that run back-to-back within the same day (once day per week): participants attend a boxing session and then move on to a cognitive-behavioural group therapy (CBT) session. Those who complete the full 12 weeks are then able to join the Box Office Boxing Gym programme (in Johannesburg's southern suburbs). Support groups are also offered at TTBC for parents of FWI participants. The content of the CBT sessions (for youth) include the themes listed in Box 1, and these are also integrated into the boxing sessions.

#### *Research aim*

While some internal monitoring and evaluation of the FWI programme had taken place, the programme had yet to be formally evaluated. Therefore, the aim of this evaluation was to qualitatively evaluate the FWI programme using a case-study approach (Stufflebeam, 2001). It was hoped that the findings of this evaluation would provide insight into the effectiveness of FWI, as well as programme outcomes and mechanisms. This insight is valuable for FWI stakeholders, those implementing and managing FWI, and others who may be planning or currently implementing similar programmes.

#### **Methods**

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Cape Town (REC REF 245/2011). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and youth (under the age of 18 years) gave assent for their involvement in the study.

#### *Study design*

According to Stufflebeam (2001), programme evaluation using a case-study approach involves an in-depth analysis and description of a particular programme, considering its context. It examines programme outcomes, and the inputs and processes used to achieve these, as well as programme participants' needs and the extent to which these are effectively addressed by the programme. Information is gathered from various sources, and interaction with programme stakeholders is key, extending to their involvement in the planning of the study and the interpretation of the findings.

Taking into consideration the aim of the evaluation and the case-study approach, the evaluation of FWI intended to achieve the following outcomes:

- 1) A description of FWI, including its outcomes (in the context of the programme, beyond a reduction in recidivism), and perceptions of the mechanisms through which outcomes are achieved;
- 2) Understanding of perceptions of FWI's effectiveness; and
- 3) Insight into factors influencing this effectiveness.

It was also anticipated that these outcomes could clarify *how* FWI is effective, and not just the extent to which it is or is not effective. This would help to address the importance of elucidating the mechanisms (or processes) of sport-for-development

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