

Advocating widespread dissemination of physical activity programs in the afterschool setting: The need for more evidence

Michael W Beets, MEd, MPH, PhD,¹ Jennifer Huberty, PhD²

¹Department of Exercise Science,
Arnold School of Public Health,
University of South Carolina,
Columbia, SC, USA

²Physical Activity in Health
Promotion,
University of Nebraska Omaha,
Omaha, NE, USA

Correspondence to: M W Beets
beets@mailbox.sc.edu

Cite this as: *TBM* 2012;2:286–287
doi: 10.1007/s13142-012-0128-5

KEYWORDS

Afterschool programs, Children, Physical activity,
Evidence-based

We would like to complement the recent article by Nigg et al. (2012) describing the dissemination of evidence-based physical activity and nutrition curriculum in the afterschool program setting–Fun 5 program. Such information is essential in the pursuit of translating effective evidence-based programming into general practice to improve the physical activity and nutrition of the millions of children enrolled in afterschool programs nationwide [1]. Additionally, this is particularly important given the number of recently introduced policies that explicitly focus on promoting physical activity and quality snacks for children within this setting [2, 3]. Yet despite this, several comments specific to physical activity need to be made prior to widespread adoption of the Fun 5 program.

The Sports, Play, and Active Recreation for Kids–Active Recreation (SPARK-AR) program is the center piece of the physical activity portion of the Fun 5 program. This program is an adaptation of the original SPARK program evaluated for the physical education setting. In the article, Nigg et al. [4] indicate SPARK-AR was effective at increasing activity levels based on previous pilot work (see p. 2 of 10). However, the authors state in the referenced source that activity did not increase in SPARK-AR afterschool programs compared to afterschool programs without SPARK-AR. This is further supported in a recent study by the same group where no changes in physical activity levels across all children were reported [5]. Though SPARK-AR may be evidence-based, the empirical evidence clearly does not indicate this program is effective at increasing children's physical activity over routine practice (i.e., evidence-supported). This dampens the promise of the public health impact of the Fun 5 program on children's physical activity.

Advocating afterschool programs uptake programs, such as SPARK-AR, too soon can have severe implications. Afterschool programs operate on a limited budget. Prepackaged commercialized

Implications

Researchers: Clarification of the actual effectiveness of a program and whether it is ready for widespread dissemination

Practitioners: Caution in purchasing programs that claim to be “evidence-based”

Policymakers: Recognition that additional work on refinement of existing programs, as well as, development of new programs is necessary

programs are expensive and time-consuming, considering program materials, staff training, and implementation. Perhaps the most detrimental outcome from advocacy of programs shown to be ineffective is the potential demoralization of afterschool program leaders and staff from the inability to change children's activity levels even after substantial investments in programming and training have been made. What we want to avoid is a scenario where afterschool program staff believe their attempts at increasing physical activity “do not work.”

We feel the evaluation and refinement of SPARK-AR and other existing physical activity promotion programs, as well as the development and evaluation of new programs, for the afterschool setting is a necessary and important area of research. Additional efforts also need to focus on working with afterschool programs to utilize their existing resources more effectively to promote physical activity [6, 7], rather than relying on purchased program materials. The identification of low-cost, scalable, and, importantly, effective, programs and strategies is essential, particularly, since policies have called upon afterschool programs to increase the amount of physical activity children accumulate while attending. Because of this, care needs to be given to the communication of findings that do not fully support the widespread adoption of programs.

1. Beets MW. Enhancing the translation of physical activity interventions in afterschool programs. *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine*. 2012. doi:10.1177/1559827611433547.
2. Beets MW, Wallner M, Beighle A. Defining standards and policies for promoting physical activity in afterschool programs. *Journal of School Health*. 2010;80(8):411-417.
3. Beets MW, Tilley F, Kim Y, et al. Nutritional policies and standards for snacks served in after-school programmes: A review. *Public Health Nutrition*. 2011;14(12):1-9.
4. Nigg C, Battista J, Chang JA, et al. Physical activity outcomes of a pilot intervention using SPARK active recreation in elementary after-school programs. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*. 2004;26(Suppl):S144-S145.
5. Iversen CS, Nigg C, Titchenal CA. The impact of an elementary after-school nutrition and physical activity program on children's fruit and vegetable intake, physical activity, and body mass index: Fun 5. *Hawaii Medical Journal*. 2011;70(7 Suppl 1):37-41.
6. Huberty JL, Beets MW, Beighle A, et al. Movin after school: A community-based support for policy change in the afterschool environment. *Childhood Obesity*. 2010;6(6):337-341.
7. Weaver RG, Beets MW, Webster C, et al. A conceptual model for training afterschool program staffers to promote physical activity and nutrition. *Journal of School Health*. 2012;82(4):186-195.