An Exploratory Study of Developmentally Focused Youth Sports Programs
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The primary goal of this study was to develop profiles of developmentally focused youth sports (DYS) programs and the organizations that support them. The Center for Youth Development and Policy Research at the Academy for Educational Development has defined a **DYS program as one that incorporates sports with a commitment to youth development in the mission and philosophy of the program. DYS programs go beyond “traditional” sports programs by focusing on a broader range of developmental needs.**

We began by identifying two questions: (1) How are urban communities promoting sports and youth development? and (2) What are the benefits of participating in DYS programs? We were particularly interested in how participation in DYS programs benefits youth of color and girls. To answer these questions, we collected programmatic information from 71 DYS programs in 15 cities and visited DYS programs, government agencies, and intermediary organizations in three of those cities.
Why Sports and Why Developmentally Focused Youth Sports Programs?

Many boys and girls find organized sports to be a safe and healthy alternative to risky behaviors during the afterschool hours, the peak times for youth violence and victimization, when many children and youth are unsupervised. For example, sports participation offers youth many of the qualities they seek when entering a gang: companionship, support, and social interaction. Effective sports programs should focus on meeting the physiological, cognitive, social, and behavioral needs of youth participants, even if the program focuses solely on sports and has no other components. Though the benefits of physical activity and sports are similar for girls and boys, many positive physiological and socioemotional effects are specific to females, including reduced risk of cancer, osteoporosis, and depression.

How Did We Study Developmentally Focused Youth Sports Programs?

We collected data for this study from three sources:

1. a scan of DYS programs in 15 cities that are affiliated with the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Making Connections demonstration project;

2. site visits conducted in three cities; and

3. focus groups with youth participants.

The Scan, the Site Visits, and the Focus Groups

In our scan of DYS programs, we collected information about sports and youth development components; demographic information about youth participants; hours of operation; staffing; and other descriptive information from 71 DYS programs in 15 cities around the country.

Our site visits included interviews with individuals from programs, intermediary organizations, government agencies, and other local key “players” in Boston, Detroit, and the San Francisco Bay Area. The 14 DYS programs we visited were selected based on recommendations of the intermediary organizations that helped us to arrange the site visits.

We conducted a total of six focus groups with youth participants in each of the three cities. Youth participants were asked:

• their reasons for participating in the program;

• how their program differed from other programs they participated in;

• how they have benefited from participating in the program;

• why they keep coming back to the program; and

• what they would change about the program, if anything.
Sports as a Hook

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What Did We Learn about DYS Programs?

In our exploration of DYS programs in Boston, Detroit, and the San Francisco Bay Area, we discovered an exciting array of opportunities for young people. The program staff and the individuals from intermediary and government organizations with whom we met are passionate about their work and believe that sports are the way to “hook” youth, especially youth who have become disconnected from mainstream clubs, centers, and programs. Said one San Francisco-based program director, “We have seen kids who... play basketball and that’s it... They are not in school a lot of the time. Now [they] have taken a leadership role in developing a business plan... It would not have been possible if we did not have the sports just to lead them in.”

SNAPSHOT OF DYS PROGRAMS FROM AROUND THE COUNTRY

(Based on results from analysis of fact sheets collected from 71 DYS programs in 15 cities)

• These programs predominantly serve youth of color ages five to 18.
• Basketball is the most commonly offered sport.
• Tutoring and social development are the most commonly offered developmental components.
• Most programs’ missions include character development and social growth.
• 54 percent of the programs use a curriculum.
• 55 percent of the programs are “traditional” DYS programs—they operate like most sports programs with a basic focus on the sport. The developmental component comes into play through the program’s coaching philosophy.
• 45 percent of the programs are dual-focused DYS programs—they have sports as their primary focus, but they also offer youth the opportunity to participate in an additional non-sport activity, such as creative writing, leadership training, community service, etc.

What Challenges Do DYS Programs Face?

Like youth-serving programs all over the United States, the DYS programs we visited face challenges in funding, facilities, staffing, and keeping youth engaged. Many of the programs are also addressing an image problem. As one Detroit-based program director said, “We have to continually get in front of policy makers and decision makers, and let them know what we’re doing...sometimes you get so busy building new programs that you just figure they know... Your program suffers because...you’re short on funding, short on fields, short on facilities, which could be there if you just more appropriately tapped into those assets.”

Despite these challenges, the programs have developed many innovative ideas to address their own specific needs and the needs of the youth and families they serve. These range from partnering with universities, parks and recreation departments, and professional sports teams, to developing videos and curricula. Programs also focus on the needs of girls and youth of color, and have opened up doors for youth that are often closed. Our conversations with program staff revealed a focus on inclusion and diversity. One director, in describing a contact game called elbow tag said, “We are intentional about pairing up children of different cultures so that they are standing there and touching each other and they are knowing that it is okay.”

How Have Youth Benefited from Participation in DYS Programs?

We discovered that youth have benefited from participation in DYS programs in a number of different ways. DYS programs provide a supportive climate in which young people can develop new skills and positive character traits, and healthy and safe environments in which youth are exposed to new opportunities. These programs also afford young people a forum to learn about and celebrate cultural diversity. Finally, girls who participate in DYS programs benefit from a focus on their unique strengths.
What Do These Results Mean for Programs, Youth and Families, and Others?

This study was exploratory and was not intended to demonstrate the overall effectiveness of these programs. Rather, it was intended to document the issues and challenges DYS programs face, and to describe the strategies programs have developed to overcome these challenges. Nevertheless, we believe that this study has implications for programs, youth and families, funders, and policy makers.

Programs

Most of the programs we visited have benefited from relationships with intermediary organizations, which provide such supports as technical assistance, mini-grants, opportunities for professional development, and marketing programs to the general public. We believe DYS programs also would benefit from the opportunity to network with each other and to share what they have learned about integrating sports and youth development with other youth-serving programs.

We were surprised to learn how disconnected sports programs are from traditional afterschool programs. Because DYS programs have a unique approach to engaging youth—especially older youth—during out-of-school hours, they should be considered part of the afterschool field. Resources available to afterschool programs, such as membership in a professional association, public and private funding opportunities, and the like, also should be made available to DYS programs. Since this study was limited in its scope because of its focus on urban communities, one suggestion for future research is to compare urban DYS programs with similar programs in suburban and rural communities. We wonder whether DYS programs in suburban communities have origins similar to those of their urban counterparts, and how their roots have affected directors’ decisions about structuring their programs.

Another direction for future research is to document the innovative curricula that are in the heads of the directors and staff. Because youth-serving programs generally face turnover and transition, we believe it is important to share these curricula with other programs in a more formalized fashion. Several program directors expressed an interest in taking their programs to scale by replicating their models in other urban communities. A documentation of these replication efforts would be another important future study.

Youth and Families

It is clear from our conversations with program directors, staff, and youth that they believe their programs are making a real difference in the lives of youth. The programs we visited also have the support of parents and other family members. Several directors and staff said it is important for girls and youth of color, in particular, to have adult role models from the same backgrounds. Future studies should focus on how participation in a DYS program and exposure to positive adult role models can benefit girls, especially girls of color, and help to dispel some of the stereotypes.

Funders and Policy Makers

More collaborative solutions and resources need to be developed to address the lack of well-maintained facilities and playing fields urban programs face. Funders and policy makers can support programs’ efforts to improve program quality by evaluating their programs. They can also assist in marketing DYS programs to a variety of audiences, including the education and afterschool communities, law enforcement officials, the corporate sector, and others.

Conclusion

DYS programs have given sports a new twist by incorporating youth development principles and practices. They provide young people with a fun and interesting experience as well as the supports and opportunities they need to attain their goals. We applaud these programs’ efforts and look forward to their evolution.

ENDNOTES

v President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, op cit.