

Female Physical Activity And Sport Participation

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Aim

Females are more likely to participate in non-organised or informal sport as compared to traditional club-based sport. To address this trend, the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) in Australia is supporting six State Sporting Associations (SSAs) to design and deliver more flexible sport opportunities to engage inactive and somewhat active females in sporting activities. La Trobe University has partnered with VicHealth and the six SSAs on a two-year project, "Changing the Game", with the aim of developing a better understanding of the ways in which sport programs can be designed and delivered, in order to overcome barriers specific to females and establish how to best engage this segment of the population.

Background

Previous research into physical activity and sport participation has found that females experience greater barriers to activity than males and that these barriers need to be understood and addressed when developing physical activity interventions (c.f. Bauman, Reis, Sallis, Wells, Loos & Martin, 2012). Hanlon, Morris and Nabbs (2010) examined the factors that attract women to and then retain them within physical activity programs. A total of 60 women participated in focus groups from eight existing sport programs. The findings indicated that many of the factors influencing female engagement were similar to those reported in other studies not specifically related to women, but that the women emphasised some unique factors, such as having personal time and activities that were not demanding in terms of cost or equipment; inhibiting factors were often external, such as illness, work commitments and child care duties. The current study expands on this literature by considering the process of designing a specific sport program targeted at inactive or somewhat active females; the effectiveness of these programs at engaging this target market; and the design principles that should be used to underpin further program development.

Research design

A mixed method approach was taken to collect data from multiple stakeholders (numbers in parentheses below are data collected to date):

- Surveys of female participants pre and post program (N = 2,575);
- Semi-structured interviews (N = 61): Inactive female program participants;
- Semi-structured interviews (N = 18): SSA program designers and managers;
- Semi-structured interviews (N = 16): SSA program deliverers;
- Semi-structured interviews (N = 11): Third-party deliverers.

Standard qualitative and quantitative analysis procedures were conducted.

Results and implications

The six sports followed various paths to designing and delivering their female-targeted programs, and preliminary results indicate that across these programs, some were more successful at attracting and retaining inactive and somewhat females than others. Participant surveys and interviews further revealed that specific program elements and design features were more effective at overcoming their barriers and engaging the inactive and somewhat active. Based on these findings, eight design principles have been developed that should be considered when designing a sport based physical activity intervention targeted at less active females:

1. Employ strategic program development, through which activities are designed, refined and piloted, with feedback loops that include program deliverers, participants and the target market (inactive and somewhat active females);
2. Partner with stakeholders to increase available resources and program reach, such as local government (or area) marketing;
3. Consider injury prevention in program design because of the higher risk in this cohort;
4. Facilitate innovative program design to overcome common barriers to physical activity, such as cost, time constraints, family commitments and low perceived self-efficacy;
5. Align programs to common motivations, such as having fun, being social and getting fit;

6. Vary exercises or activities so that participants can adjust to their skill, ability and fitness level in each session (as opposed to ceasing the activity or the program);
7. Design activities to improve the skill levels of participants, thereby increasing their perceived self-efficacy;
8. Develop pathways for participants to transition as their skills, physical activity and/or interest increase.

The findings from this study have directly informed further program development of the six sports and provided VicHealth with a knowledge base to further develop policy in this area. Longitudinal findings from this study to be collected in 2017 will determine how successful the funded programs have been at supporting sustainable physical activity and sport participation in inactive and somewhat active females.

References

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