



Experiential Learning through Community Service: **Training Teens as Child Educators**

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ABSTRACT

Enhancing young children's knowledge about healthy eating and exercise is an unmet need in many urban, low-income communities. In this paper, we summarize a unique partnership between a community service organization with service-learning programming for high school students (the Mayerson Foundation in Cincinnati, Ohio), a Boys and Girls Club in the downtown area of Cincinnati, and a professor in Health Promotion and Education at the University of Cincinnati. This program was designed to prepare high school students to implement health- and nutrition-related programming at an urban Boys and Girls Club. Teenagers learned how to coach young children about healthy eating and the importance of daily exercise. In this paper, the authors describe the program and training of high school coaches in an effort to share information about the program with others who may want to implement similar programs.

INTRODUCTION

Improving young children's knowledge about healthy eating and exercise is an unmet need for many African American children residing in urban areas (Kumanyika et al., 2014; Taveras et al., 2013). Economically disadvantaged children may benefit from exposure to healthy eating and exercise instruction, and summer programs offer unique opportunities to provide health education without interrupting the school day. Through community collaborations, it is possible to provide educational programming inexpensively, and to address unmet needs. This paper describes the implementation of a healthy eating and exercise program in which high school students served as nutrition and exercise coaches to children at a local Boys and Girls Club. The high school coaches were trained to use motivational interviewing to engage children in developing goals to improve their healthy eating and exercise behaviors. Motivational interviewing is a client-centered approach used to enhance intrinsic motivation through exploration of roadblocks to personal change (e.g., the children's daily goals) and ideas for overcoming these roadblocks to achieve progress in reaching one's goals (Resnicow, Davis, & Rollnick, 2006). Having children develop their own goals and improving their self-confidence for reaching their goals was an important component to a program philosophy hinging on the importance of child agency and their voices as being important as they develop their behaviors and construct their actions in the world (James & Prout, 1997; Morss, 2002).

The teenagers who were coaches for children were participating in a service program conducted by a local community service organization, the Mayerson Foundation in

Cincinnati, Ohio. A staff member from the Mayerson Foundation (the third author) teamed with a professor from the University of Cincinnati (the first author) and a graduate student (the second author) to develop the Children's Healthy Eating and Exercise Program (CHEE Program, Nabors et al., 2012, 2013, 2015) to be delivered to elementary school-age children at a local Boys and Girls Club in an urban area over a short summer camp program. The professor and director of the service program met through the Service Learning Coordinator at the University of Cincinnati. They discussed ways to implement the CHEE Program to help children in the community. Dr. Nabors has expertise in child health and had been implementing the CHEE Program for the past four years and the second and third authors have expertise in service-learning programming and implementing health programs with children. We partnered with the director and staff at the Boys and Girls Club through a series of meetings and staff at the Boys and Girls Club approved the new program and provided feedback at the end of the program.

The program consisted of eight hour-long modules in which the teen health coaches led group activities and exercise sessions. They also provided health education and worked individually with the children to develop daily nutrition and exercise goals. The healthy eating goals were developed to "fit" with the healthy foods the children had in their refrigerators and pantries. Exercise goals were developed after learning what was feasible for the child and family. Two sets of teen coaches implemented the program; with each group providing four modules. A total of 47 teenagers and 65 children participated.



THE CHILDREN'S HEALTHY EATING AND EXERCISE PROGRAM

As mentioned, the CHEE Program was developed by the first author and her and colleagues (Nabors et al., 2012; 2013), and was adapted cooperatively by first and third authors of this article into a short manual for the high school coaches. The manual addresses the need for healthy eating and reviews the "Stop or Traffic Light Diet" (Epstein, 2005). This diet was developed by a national expert, Dr. Leonard Epstein, and it was designed to teach children to limit their intake of "red" or high fat and sugar foods; to eat "yellow" foods with moderate levels of fat and sugar in moderation; and to eat "Green" foods (which include many fruits and vegetables) frequently (Epstein, Gordy, et al., 2012; Epstein, Wing, et al., 1984; Epstein & Squires, 1988). The manual also incorporates information about portion sizes, how to review food labels and MyPlate (<https://www.choosemyplate.gov/>). The high school coaches also taught the children about the importance of 60 minutes of exercise per day and participated in physical activities with them every day. The revised manual is available from the first and third authors.

During the first week of the program, twenty-three teenagers from four high schools taught the children about the Stop Light Diet or Traffic Light Diet (Epstein, 2005). Children reviewed magazine pictures to identify red, yellow, and green foods. They drew pictures to represent the contents of their families' refrigerators, and then they discussed with their coaches what healthy foods they could eat at home and different exercises they could do at home. Children completed a healthy food maze and talked with coaches about healthy eating as they completed it. This health

coaches also taught the children how to set a daily healthy eating and exercise goal and checked in on their progress toward the goal each day. During physical activity time the children and teenagers played large-group games such as tag, relay races, and kickball. The children really enjoyed the activity time and asked to repeat games and play each day.

Beginning in Week II, a new set of twenty-four teenage instructors began their experience at the Boys and Girls Club. During the first lesson the children at the Boys and Girls Club reviewed what they had learned about healthy eating with their new coaches (twenty-four new high school coaches from four different local high schools) and got to know each other. Other lessons reviewed in week two involved learning about healthy and unhealthy snack foods, the importance of eating healthy snacks, how to eat a healthy breakfast, ideas for ordering a healthy meal at a restaurant, a review of MyPlate, ideas to reduce television and "screen" time, and ideas about key food groups (e.g., grains and proteins). There were a variety of physical exercises including tag, basketball, jump rope, dodge ball, and several types of relay races. During inclement weather, indoor games (such as Telephone or Duck, Duck, Goose) were substituted. The teenagers mentioned that they really enjoyed the activities and opportunities to lead a program while, themselves, learning new tips about eating more fruits and vegetables.

THE HIGH SCHOOL COACHES AND THEIR TRAINING

The volunteer health coaches were participating in a summer service learning program that focused on poverty and homelessness. Volunteering with the children attending the Boys and Girls Club was one stop in their



all-day service program, which included stops at multiple nonprofit locations. Their supervisors from their high schools and the director of the project from the Mayerson Center had time to discuss key issues related to diversity, equity and service learning at the start and end of the teenagers' service as well as each night at the end of daily activities.

High school coaches prepared for coaching and training by reviewing the entire manual with the first and third authors as group leaders before the project began. The university instructor and program lead from the service organization went over the activities for the day with the high school coaches each day for a 30 minute period before they worked with the children. The supervising teachers and the authors were available to support and provide information for the teenagers as they worked on activities with the children.

Each high school coach worked with one to three children. During their lessons, the high school coaches consulted the manual, and the first and third authors and supervising teachers were also present for questions or support. In addition, four to five staff for the Boys and Girls Club were available on site. As the week progressed, the volunteers became proficient at coaching and the staff members from the Boys and Girls Club were able to focus their attention elsewhere. In fact, the staff members and director mentioned that a key benefit of having the program "on site" was freeing up their time for collaboration and planning. The staff at the Boys and Girls Club reported that they valued the program, and invited the team back the next summer to deliver the program. The staff at the Boys and Girls Club mentioned that the teenagers were

very "real" and "important" figures for the children, providing role models for the importance of helping others.

LESSONS LEARNED DURING PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

It was important to teach the coaches additional games and activities for working with the children, should they finish an activity early. The high school students reported that they needed extra games to keep active youngsters engaged while they waited for other peers to finish. It also was important to encourage high school coaches to take ownership of the curriculum so that they could deliver the lesson. The teenagers stated that they benefitted from and enjoyed their leadership roles. Many of the high school coaches emphasized that having ice breakers (games to get to know one another and have fun) was important for each lesson to allow them to re-establish a positive and fun relationship with the child before they began talking about healthy eating. Roughly 50% of the high school coaches participating in this project reported that they learned new things to improve their own eating habits. Thus, learning about healthy eating was important for improving teenagers' health as well as helping them learn to coach the children about eating nutritious snacks and meals. Fifteen to thirty minutes of debriefing followed the teaching sessions with the children. Allowing the high school coaches time to debrief and process the lesson, immediately after working with the children, also was critical as this allowed the high school coaches to reflect on what the service meant to them and about their relationships with the children they coached.



DISCUSSION

This healthy eating and exercise program allowed the teenagers to have a structure and a purpose when interacting with the children. The teenagers reported really enjoying leading the program. Emphasizing a spirit of owning the program and making it their own allowed the teenagers to feel more confident in their role as coaches. Ultimately, we believe it fostered relationship building with the youth and allowed the teenagers to feel comfortable and have a purpose for their role with the children. Both the children and the teenagers reported learning more about nutrition and becoming more “psyched” or motivated to engage in daily physical activity. Programs, such as the one described in this paper, can be run on a shoe-string budget, and are a mechanism for providing critical services to youth and fulfilling service opportunities for teenagers. The university professor donated her time and the graduate student received a

this project. Staff members at the Boys and Girls Club were compensated, but they felt that the program was successful and held a staff meeting toward the end of the program, because they had confidence in the volunteers. Having different groups of teenagers was not stressful for the children. They bonded with teenagers each week. Also, the children enjoyed teaching the coaches for week two about the Traffic Light Diet and the other things they had learned about healthy eating and exercising. The staff at the Boys and Girls Club said that they had confidence in the teenagers and their supervisors and their abilities to work with the children. Ultimately, the partnership between universities, community organizations, and high school service programs can fill a gap in services for children during summer programs, benefiting all involved.

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small stipend for her efforts. The high school supervisors received a stipend and the leader of the program from the Mayerson Center completed her activities as part of her position at the center. The Mayerson Center paid for supplies and transporting the children and the university professor also donated supplies for



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