Putting Program Evaluation into Practice: Enhancing the Girls Just Wanna Have Fun Program

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Abstract

In recent years there has been a call for increased community physical activity and sport programs for female youth that are deliberately structured to foster positive developmental outcomes. In addition, researchers have recognized the need to empirically evaluate such programs to ensure that youth are provided with optimal opportunities to thrive. This study represents a utilization-focused evaluation of Girls Just Wanna Have Fun, a female-only physical activity-based life skills community program. A utilization-focused evaluation is particularly important when the evaluation is to help stakeholders utilize the findings in practice. The purpose this study was twofold: to gain an understanding of ongoing successes and challenges after year two of program implementation and to examine how the adaptations made based on feedback from the first year evaluation were perceived as impacting the program. From interviews with youth participants and program leaders, three main themes with eight sub-themes emerged. The main themes were: (a) applying lessons learned can make a significant difference, (b) continually implementing successful strategies, and (c) ongoing challenges. Overall, this evaluation represents an important step in understanding how to improve program delivery to better meet the needs of the participants in community-based programming.

Keywords: evaluation; female youth; qualitative; physical activity; community programming
Introduction

This study represents a utilization-focused evaluation of the Girls Just Wanna Have Fun (GJWHF), a community-based female only physical activity-based life skills program. Patton (1984; 2002) has advocated for the use of utilization-focused evaluation which involves identifying individuals who will use the evaluation findings for future decision-making about the program, actively involving decision-makers in the evaluation, and helping them better understand the process of evaluation. Utilization-focused evaluation has been successfully applied to youth programming. For example, Armstrong (2009) applied the principles of utilization-focused evaluation to YouthNet, a mental health program that applies youth engagement strategies. They were able to meaningfully engage stakeholders including the youth participants, communicate findings in a timely manner, and adapt the program goals to better fit stakeholder needs. Moreover, in terms of utilizing evaluation findings to adapt programming, Durlak and DuPre (2008) discussed the importance of balancing program fidelity with adaptation. Based on their review, they outlined that a program has both core and non-core components (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Further, they asserted that programs can and should be adapted over time, but that such adaptations should focus on non-core components, those that are not central to the program, rather than the theoretically important components on which a program is based.

In recent years, there have been a number of calls to increase programming opportunities for female youth, in particular, physical activity-based programs that use a Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework. Such calls are due to the research showing that adolescent females, particularly those from low-income families, have the lowest rates of physical activity (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2014) and score consistently lower on all indicators of well-being
compared to male youth (Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC], 2004), including lower rates of self-esteem and higher rates of depression (Diseth, Meland & Breidablik, 2014; Hyde, 2014). For example, beginning in grade six, levels of self-confidence markedly decline so that by grade 10 only 14% of females report that they believe in themselves (PHAC, 2004). In addition, a number of studies have indicated that females from low income families have a greater risk of dropping out of school, mental health problems, difficulties with the law, and risk-taking behaviour (Bowlby, 2005; PHAC, 2004).

The PYD framework is a strength-based approach to youth development and puts forth the notion that it is possible to optimize the relationship between individuals and their ecologies (Ford & Lerner, 1992; Lerner, 2012). A particular focus of a number of PYD programs, predominantly those that are based on physical activity or sport, has been the development of life skills (Danish, 1997; Gould & Carson, 2008; Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005). Life skills have been defined as “those skills that enable individuals to succeed in the different environments in which they live such as school, home and in their neighborhoods” (Danish, Forneris, Hodge, & Heke, 2004, pp. 40). These authors stated that life skills can be behavioral (communicating effectively), cognitive (making effective decisions), interpersonal (being assertive) or intrapersonal (setting goals). Within both the PYD literature and the applied field, helping youth develop life skills has become a promising practice (e.g., Fredricks & Simpkins, 2012; Kingsnorth, Healy, & Macarthur, 2007; Mueller et al., 2011). Therefore, programs that combine both physical activity and a PYD approach such as life skills (e.g., goal setting, emotional regulation, leadership, confidence) may serve to be important opportunities for closing the gender gap on both physical and emotional well-being.
In addition to providing increased PYD and physical activity opportunities for female youth, researchers have recognized that there is a need for more empirical evaluations of life skills programs (Brown & Fry, 2013; Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Hodge, Danish, & Martin, 2013). Researchers recognize that in early years of implementation a focus on understanding successes and challenges, as well as using the information collected to improve the program may be more pertinent than examining overall impact of the program (Chen, 2005; Patton, 2008). Epps and Jackson (2000) also suggested that evaluations are only effective if the findings are used in a meaningful way for program improvement. To achieve meaningfulness, Patton (2008) emphasized the importance of creating research questions, methods, and communications that are tailored to program needs and requirements. For example, for programs that are in the early stages, it is important for evaluations to capture lessons learned to be able to make adaptations so that the program can be tailored to the context and improved in future iterations.

Therefore, in order to improve the implementation and effectiveness of a program such as GJWHF program, evaluations should be conducted in the early years of implementation so that the program improvements can be made to better meet the needs of the organization and participants. Therefore, the purpose this study was twofold: to gain an understanding of ongoing successes and challenges after year two of program implementation and to examine how the adaptations made based on the evaluation conducted after the first year of implementation were perceived as impacting the program. The overall aim of the research was to be able to help stakeholders at a local Boys and Girls Club use the findings to facilitate sustainability of the GJWHF.

**Program Description**
As mentioned above, the GJWHF is a physical activity-based life skills program for female youth. The program was offered to female youth from a local Boys and Girls Club clubhouse in a city in Eastern Ontario, Canada. The program ran from September to May with one 75 minute program session occurring every week. GJWHF was designed to be youth-driven, which emphasizes the facilitation of meaningful youth involvement (Coakley, 2011; Education Alliance, 2007). Consequently, this program was developed using specific PYD models that have been applied in both physical activity and sport-based interventions: the Teaching Personal Social Responsibility (TPSR) model (Hellison, 1995, 2011) and Sports United to Promote Education and Recreation (SUPER) (Danish et al., 2004).

The TPSR model was the primary model used to develop the structure of GJWHF while the strength of SUPER, the secondary model for GJWHF, is that it offers numerous specific life skills activities that not only help in teaching youth about life skills, but also have the youth practice the life skills. The rationale for using these two frameworks is that such frameworks are considered complimentary as they both utilize explicit life skill programming to foster youth development (Holt & Jones, 2008).

The TPSR model was used as the primary framework because the key principles of this model support the elements of a youth-driven program which include: providing the youth with voice, using a strong instructor-participant relationship that allows for the gradual empowerment of youth, and providing intentional opportunities for leadership (Hellison, 2011). To provide youth voice in the program they were involved in the planning of the program. Two months prior to the start of the program a day long retreat was held for female youth from the Boys and Girls Club that would be interested in attending the GJWHF program. At this retreat the youth engaged in a number of activities designed to gain an understanding of what they wanted in a
program (e.g., collages of words that describe the life skills they would like to develop; a brainstorming activity of ideas for the different types of physical activity to incorporate). From this retreat, the leaders developed a master list of life skills and physical activities that could be incorporated into the program and subsequently prepared a leader manual based on the TPSR model and SUPER life skills activities. Once the program started, the leaders continued to provide youth voice by having them choose the physical activities they wanted to engage in and the leaders then integrated life skills activities that were outlined by the youth in the day long retreat that could be taught and then reinforced with the physical activity (e.g., when the youth had decided they wanted to play basketball the leaders chose the life skill of teamwork as it was believed basketball is a good sport to foster this type of skill).

The second key principle of having a strong instructor-participant relationship was fostered by ensuring a small ratio between leaders and youth and also by having structured time for the leaders to connect and build rapport with the youth in every session (please see details below under ‘Relational time’). The third key principle was integrated by providing two specific intentional leadership opportunities. The first was having the youth be mentors to elementary children at a local weekly afterschool program called ‘Running and Reading’. The youth helped the children improve their literacy skills and be more active. This program took place on a different day then the GJWHF program so that it would not take away from GJWHF program activities. The second intentional leadership opportunity occurred at the end of the program where the youth were responsible for planning and implementing their own life skill and physical activity session to a younger audience of Boys and Girls Club members.

Each GJWHF session followed the TPSR model where each program session began with 5-10 minutes of relational time; a time where leaders check in with the youth to see how things
are going in their lives. Within the GJWHF program, the ‘Rose and Thorn’ activity was used
during the relational time which involved breaking into small groups and then each youth sharing
one rose (something positive that happened that week) and one thorn (a challenge that happened
that week). The relational time was then followed by an awareness talk. The awareness talk (20-
25 minutes) focused developing a variety of life skills including goal setting, confidence and
courage, respecting others, and seeking help from others. It was for the awareness talks that
program material from SUPER was integrated as there is a lack of specific details or activities
for this portion of a TPSR program within the current literature. As a result, workshop activities
from SUPER were integrated to provide leaders with resources for teaching and enable the youth
to practice the life skills. The awareness talk was followed by the physical activity plan (20-25
minutes) which was time that the youth engaged in a sport or form of physical activity. As
mentioned, the youth were very involved in the decisions regarding the types of physical
activities incorporated into the program. At the beginning, the leaders asked the youth for a
general list of physical activities that they wanted included in the program. Once the leaders had
this list, the participants were asked every two weeks what activity they wanted to engage in
next. Finally, a group debrief (5-10 minutes) occurred at the conclusion of each session where
the leaders and youth discussed progress that had been made in the program session that day, as
well as challenges or difficulties faced. During this time, the leaders also emphasized to the
youth how the skills developed in the program could transfer to other domains. For a more
detailed description of the program, see Bean, Forneris, and Halsall (2014).

In terms of Durlak and DuPre’s (2008) program components classification that was
previously described, the core components of GJWHF are: a) youth are provided with voice
within the program, b) there is an emphasis on relationship building between leaders and
participants, c) there are opportunities for youth to take on leadership roles, d) youth have opportunities to be physically active, and e) youth are able to learn and practice life skills.

**Summary of Year One of the GJWHF Program Evaluation.** The purpose of this study was to evaluate the second year implementation of the GJWHF program based on program evaluation findings from the first year implementation. Therefore, it is necessary to restate the main findings from year one. There were a number of successes and challenges which are outlined in Table 1 along with the actions taken to improve implementation in year two. A full summary of the year one evaluation can be found in Bean, Forneris, and Halsall (2014).

**INSERT TABLE 1**

**Methods**

**Participants**

**Youth participants.** Female youth between the ages of 11 and 16 ($M =13.13$, $SD= 1.45$) from three Boys and Girls Club locations attended the GJWHF program. The girls were from low income families in a city in Eastern Ontario. Free transportation to the program was provided to the participants for the duration of the program. On any given night, there were between seven and 16 youth present for the program, with the mean attendance rate being 9.48 ($SD=4.29$). There were eight consistent participants who attended the program on a regular basis (attended more than 75% of the sessions), while six other participants attended the program on a less consistent basis (attended less than 50% of the session). A goal of this study was to interview both individuals who participated on a regular basis, as well as individuals who participated inconsistently or dropped out to evaluate all participants’ experiences regardless of their program dosage (Philliber, Kaye, & Herrling, 2001; Weisman, Soulé, & Womer, 2001). However, the individuals who did not participate on a regular basis were from a clubhouse that
shut down during the summer months and, as such, the researchers did not have access to these individuals once the clubhouse closed. Therefore, only the eight participants who attended the program on a regular basis were interviewed. Five of the participants were participating in the program for a second year, while three youth were participating in the program for the first time. The overall length of involvement in the Boys and Girls Club ranged from one month to nine years.

**Program leaders.** The GJWHF staff consisted of five individuals: four students from a local university (two graduate students and two undergraduate students all in the field of Human Kinetics) and one senior youth worker at the Boys and Girls Club (who had worked with the organization for more than three years). All of the leaders ranged in age from 21 to 24 years old ($M=22.2, \ SD=1.2$). Two of the five leaders participated in year one of the program, while three leaders were new to the program. The leaders completed volunteer training with the Boys and Girls Club as well as attended two training sessions on implementing the program prior to commencement of the GJWHF. In these two training sessions the leaders were provided with a leader manual that outlined how the TPSR structure would be implemented into the program (e.g., the first 5-10 minutes would involve the leaders placing the youth in small groups to discuss how things were going using an activity called ‘Rose and Thorn’ where the youth would each share something positive as well as something challenging they had experienced in the past week). The leader manual also included a large repertoire of life skill activities with specific instructions of how to implement the activities (some of these activities were taken from SUPER). The training also involved discussions on how to introduce the life skills and engage the youth in the activities. Once the program started, the leaders continued to meet with the professor who conducted the training, every two weeks to debrief and to specifically plan the
next two upcoming sessions based on what the youth participants had decided regarding the
physical activity. Further, the leaders met 15 minutes before the start of each program session to
set up and finalize the plan for the session, as well as for 10 minutes at the end of each session to
review what went well and what could be improved for future sessions. All five leaders
participated in this study.

Procedure

Many studies within the realm of youth programming have researchers acting in dual roles:
leaders and researchers (Hellison & Walsh, 2002; Ward & Parker, 2012). This study used this
approach as both the first and second authors were involved in the program implementation as
program leaders and also aided in the program evaluation. More specifically, the youth
participants’ interviews were conducted by the first and second authors as it has been
documented that youth are often more likely to open up to an individual with whom they know,
have interacted with and trust, rather than an independent interviewer (Heath, Brooks, Cleaver,
& Ireland, 2009).

A total of 13 individual semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of the
program with eight youth participants and five program leaders. Youth were interviewed within
two weeks of the program ending for the summer months; these interviews were conducted at the
youth’s home clubhouse during free time. The leader interviews were conducted by the fourth
author who was not involved in program implementation; these interviews were conducted
within three weeks of the program ending either on the university campus or at the Boys and
Girls Club.

Prior to conducting interviews, participants were reminded of their rights to confidentiality
and anonymity. Parental consent forms were distributed by the Boys and Girls Club staff prior to
the start of the program and assent forms were distributed to all youth participants at the
beginning of the first program session. Leaders provided written consent prior to their
interviews. All procedures were approved by the Research Ethics Board at the authors’
university.

**Interview Guide**

Two different semi-structured interview guides were created: one for the youth participants
and one for the program leaders. The interview guide for the youth included questions related to
their experiences in the program (e.g., ‘What did you like/not like about the program?’, ‘Is there
anything you hoped would have happened in or after the program that did not happen?’, ‘What
was your experience like working with the leaders?’, ‘What do you think would make the
program better?’) and their perceptions of how participation in the program may have impacted
their personal development (e.g., ‘What did you learn by being involved in the GJWHF?’, ‘What
skills, if any, did you learn through participation in the program?’, ‘Do you plan to use these
skills in other areas of your life?’). However, it should be noted that this study focused on the
questions related specifically to their experiences and the data from questions related to
perceived impact were used in a different analysis.

The interview guide for the program leaders was composed of questions related to
understanding their thoughts about the implementation process (e.g., ‘What successes and
challenges did you experience related to implementing the GJWHF program?’, What strategies
were the most effective for keeping the youth engaged?’) as well as their insights of program
impact (e.g., ‘How was the GJWHF program perceived by the youth?’).

In both the youth and leader interviews probes such as “can you tell me more about...” or
“do you have an example to share about...” were used to follow-up and explore participants’
experiences further. All of the interviews were digitally recorded. The youth interviews ranged from 26 to 45 minutes (M=31:33) while the leader interviews ranged from 28 to 50 minutes (M=36:39).

**Data Analysis**

An inductive-deductive thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guidelines. As this paper highlights the importance of program adaptation and development, GJWHF process evaluation results from the first year of implementation (described in Table 1) were used to guide the deductive analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that using a thematic analysis allows for flexibility when analyzing the data as it allows for the triangulation of perceptions from several types of participants. Analysis began by transcribing the interviews verbatim, resulting in 154 pages of transcripts (12-point font, single spaced). Based on previous recommendations (Sandelowski, 1994; Weiss, 1994), researchers engaged in minor editing to participants’ transcripts to clearly represent the full and intended meaning of the participants’ communications (e.g., filler words such as ‘um’ were removed). This was then followed by a complete review by reading and re-reading all of the youth and leader transcripts. Following the readings, the data were broken into smaller meaning units and organized into preliminary themes. The next step involved organizing these themes and identifying relevant quotations that supported these themes. The data were organized using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo (Qualitative Solution and Research 2012, version 10). Creswell (2013) highlighted that using computer assisted qualitative data analysis software enables the researcher to quickly locate themes, categories, and make comparisons between passages in transcripts, which ultimately helps to facilitate the researcher’s ability to perform a thematic analysis. Identification codes were created for each quotation as a means to identify the participants’ role in the program.
(Y = youth participant; L = leader). Numbers were assigned to each participant in the order in which they were interviewed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality (e.g., Y-3 represents a youth participant that was interviewed third).

Trustworthiness of the data was assured through a collaborative approach to analysis (Creswell, 2013). Transcripts were analyzed by the first and second authors independently within the first round of analysis. Both of these authors were program leaders and conducted the youth interviews as they were familiar with the program and the youth involved. Small discrepancies between researchers in this initial analysis process were identified (e.g., under which theme some of the quotes fit best) and discussed until agreement was reached. Results of the initial analysis were then shared with the other two authors. One of these individuals had conducted the leader interviews, but had not been involved in the program as a leader and the fourth individual was an independent auditor, a graduate student who was not involved in the program or data collection but was familiar with thematic analysis. Her role was to verify that the themes and categories were coded accurately and represented the data and to ensure that the quotations selected supported the themes sufficiently. The initial results section was written by the first author and was then read on multiple occasions by the co-authors until agreement was reached with regard to the presentation of the results.

Results

The following section is divided into three main themes: 1) applying lessons learned can make a significant difference, 2) continually implementing successful strategies, and 3) ongoing challenges. Each theme has sub-themes which are displayed in Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 2.

Applying Lessons Learned Can Make a Significant Difference
From the program’s first year evaluation, several lessons learned were identified. The programmers used these strategies to adapt and improve GJWHF for its second year. Feedback from youth participants revealed several successes in year two of program implementation that built on lessons learned after the program’s first year of implementation.

Finding optimal space and improving transportation for the program had a positive impact. The GJWHF program was held at the same clubhouse as the first year of program implementation, yet was run on evening where the clubhouse was closed to all other Boys and Girls Club members. It was recognized by both the leaders and participants that making this change led to better physical space, by having access to a classroom and a gym, as well as better psychological space with fewer distractions for the program. This adaptation made to the program was recognized by participants as positive. One leader stated: “It was awesome that we had the facilities open to us, the whole clubhouses…the facilities they give us are awesome” (L-3). Another leader shared “Having the clubhouse to ourselves was a huge bonus because there were no distractions from other programs going on and other youth in the clubhouse, so that was really good” (L-1). As mentioned above, the new, improved space for the program also helped the youth in particular feel more at ease. One youth participant discussed how she felt emotionally safe in this environment because GJWHF was the only program within the club: “I didn’t have to impress anybody because it was all girls and everything” (Y-2).

As mentioned, having reliable transportation represented a challenge during the first year of GJWHF. To address this concern in year two, the Boys and Girls Club bus was hired to pick the youth up from their home clubhouse, bring them to the GJWHF program site and drop the youth back off at their home clubhouse once the program was over. This was noted as improving accessibility to the program and adding value, which is evident by this leader’s statement:
Some of the difficulties that we had were with transportation last year. This year we were lucky enough to get the bus from the Boys and Girls Club and that helped out because the bus was reliable and came on time, so the girls could attend every session. (L-1)

One youth participant discussed that because of the reliable transportation, she believes more youth regularly attended the program: “I liked that the people who were committed were actually committed, they didn’t just come and then stop coming” (Y-4). One of the benefits of having a clubhouse bus pick-up and drop-off program participants was offering the program to more than one Boys and Girls Club clubhouse. The bus would pick up participants from one or two clubhouses (depending on the week) and drive the youth to the program location. One leader mentioned how she felt the girls benefited from this opportunity: “I did like the idea of different clubhouses…I think having that opportunity of meeting other groups of girls, different girls, is a good opportunity for them and to learn how to react around new people” (L-2). This quote reinforces that having reliable transportation made the program more accessible since more participants were able to attend on a regular basis. Further, staff perceived that this added value because it created more group diversity and helped the girls meet and learn how to interact with new youth.

**Breaking the larger group into smaller groups for different activities led to better opportunities to participate.** From the year one evaluation, it was determined that often the group size was too large (e.g., one large group of 12-15 youth) to facilitate appropriate activity management and foster strong leader-participant relationships, one of the core principles of the TPSR model and GJWHF program. For the second year of implementation, the set-up of the program was modified slightly to better utilize the five program staff. Instead of having one large group with five leaders, the girls were divided into two or three smaller groups (depending on
participation rates during the session) and were paired with one or two leaders for the relational time, awareness talk, and debrief. The youth were brought together into either one or two larger groups for the physical activities. Not only did the small groups provide a greater opportunity for youth and leaders to develop closer relationships, as discussed by this leader: “The small group is awesome and when you have a small group you can really get to develop strong relationships with each of them [youth]” (L-5), but also allowed for more introverted participants to have the opportunity to share and contribute in a smaller group. This was highlighted by one leader:

For some of them [youth] who were extroverts, they naturally wanted to share everything. But for those that were introverts, some would share in Rose and Thorn in the smaller groups and I think that was better…it seems the group size made a difference; not too big but not too small. (L-3)

The benefits of smaller groups were also noted by a youth participant:

I don’t like talking with big groups of people…the group of people has to be small or I feel like what’s the point of you [leaders] talking to all of us, if half of us don’t hear what you’re saying or…people aren’t getting the message clearly. (Y-2)

**Continually Implementing Successful Strategies**

Findings from the program’s first year evaluation revealed that the youth enjoyed and benefited from activities that helped to facilitate relationships and leadership opportunities. This was done by not only applying a youth-driven approach, but also having engaging activities for the youth. As these elements were pertinent in successful program implementation in year one, the leaders continued to utilize these strategies in the second year and the data indicates that persistence with such strategies were again perceived as having a positive impact. Three sub-themes emerged from the analysis which were: providing the opportunity for field trips, having
youth engage in leadership roles through formal and informal activities, and ensuring positive adult relationships.

Providing opportunities for field trips and community involvement. Providing opportunities for the youth to travel outside of the clubhouse was documented as a major strength to the program. When asked what they liked most about the program, the girls typically responded with activities related to field trips that took place outside of the clubhouse. One youth stated: “We went on trips, we went to the canal...I liked the skating” (Y-1). Another opportunity that the girls were able to participate in was to attend a local overnight camp during the winter break. Two participants discussed the camp experience, while also emphasizing other unique opportunities: “For the camp we went for the weekend….and for swimming it was like two weeks in a row, which was fun!” (Y-3) and “I liked camp! That was fun! I really liked the ropes course. I also liked the walks and skating” (Y-2). These quotes reinforce that when asked to recall their favourite memories from the program, all of the girls discussed the unique opportunities that the program afforded them.

Similarly, the leaders discussed how this unique aspect of GJWHF helped to distinguish itself from other programming within the Boys and Girls Club. One leader said: “The girls talked about going on the bus as being a field trip in and of itself... I know not many other Boys and Girls Club programs do that; they're usually within their own clubhouse” (L-1). This same leader discussed how providing these opportunities helped to engage participants:

To foster participation numbers and keep the girls engaged, I think that the day trips and things that we did outside the gym really helped...these things are opportunities that the girls didn’t necessarily always have. It was cool for them to do something different...You
got to come to the program and you would have all these new opportunities afforded to you, so that encouraged engagement in these activities. (L-5)

One leader affirmed that the field trip activities enabled opportunities to try new things:

Some of the girls, for instance, had never skated before. Their parents have never brought them nor have the time to do it so and the club wouldn’t necessarily do that either…it’s kind of like an outlet for them to experience other things and not have to depend on their parents having the availability or the funding to do it especially for the girls. (L-3)

Lastly, unique opportunities provided to the youth through the GJWHF program also entailed more community involvement for the participants. As mentioned in the program description, in year two, the youth had the opportunity to be mentors in a local weekly afterschool program called the ‘Running and Reading’ program. One leader revealed how she believed that this community involvement impacted the youth. She said: “I think it had an effect in that they learned how to get involved a little more, whether it’s just in their everyday life or in their communities” (L-2). One leader discussed how she believed the youth participants enjoyed the opportunity to mentor younger youth. She said, “The girls that did go really enjoyed it [‘Running and Reading’] and came back the next week and talked about it and enjoyed working with the younger girls and boys from the program” (L-1). Likewise, a youth participant shared her experiences of ‘Running and Reading’: “I really enjoyed it…a lot of kids would run up to you ‘I wanna read with you, I wanna read with you’ and then you’d be like ‘okay I’ll read with you’” (Y-8). Finally, one participant discussed the benefits of becoming involved with one’s community: “Helping your community adds up, so then if you help your community a lot and everything… then you end up knowing a lot of people so they can be like ‘oh yeah this person did this, this, and this’” (Y-4).
Having youth take on leadership roles through formal and informal activities has a positive impact. As mentioned above in the program description, providing leadership opportunities for the female youth is one of the core principles of the program. The data analysis revealed that the leaders and youth perceived that the program participants had both formal and informal opportunities to be leaders throughout the GJWHF program.

**Formal.** Participants recognized the two different formal, deliberate, opportunities to take on a leadership role as having a positive impact. First, as mentioned in the program description, the youth took on leadership roles by becoming mentors in the ‘Running and Reading’ program described above. One youth described how through this opportunity she realized she could really help others: “We all got to hang out at the end and got to actually help kids because we thought we were just going to be sitting there reading with them, but they actually needed help, so we helped them” (Y-7). The second formal leadership activity, also described above in the program description, which involved the youth teaching a life skills and physical activity session to younger Boys and Girls club members was also perceived as having a positive impact. One leader commented that this activity allowed the youth to recognize that they can be leaders and enjoy this role: “The girls had to teach to the younger kids and they enjoyed it. It’s good for them to at the end of the program to see that they can be leaders too” (L-2). Similarly, one youth shared: “I liked being the leader because we got to see things and we got to show them that they could do it. I just felt really big. I felt like I had the power of being a leader” (Y-4). Another youth explained that although she enjoyed it she also recognized that being a leader was not as easy as she initially thought:

It was fun, but we now know that it’s not as easy as we think it is to lead an activity because some people really don’t listen and when it goes to a point when they just start
yelling and screaming then you have to excuse them out of the room, it’s actually a pretty
difficult situation. I learned that being a leader is not really easy. (Y-1)

This lesson was reinforced by a leader as she discussed the feedback she received from the girls
after the exercise: “It was good because they got to see the difficulties and successes of being a
leader. ‘The kids wouldn’t listen! Why aren’t they listening?!’ But they enjoyed—they definitely
liked it and would prefer to do that next year” (L-5). Lastly, one leader described how she
believed the youth participants experienced feelings of pride when organizing activities for their
peers. She stated that the youth participants were:

Really excited to do it in front of their peers and be in charge of their peers...They really
took a lot of ownership and they had practice and did a dry run through with the leaders
as the youth the week before and I think they really enjoyed that. (L-1)

Informal. The inductive analysis also revealed that the general activities of the program
such as having the opportunity to be in the program, having new youth join the program in the
second year and the relational time were perceived as opportunities for the youth participants to
develop and utilize leadership skills. One youth discussed how simple program involvement
helped to facilitate life skills including leadership:

It [the program] made me feel like I could be way more responsible and maybe I should
show that more, because sometimes, like I said I’m a little immature and taking
responsibility and stuff obviously makes you more responsible. It proves to you it’s
useful to use those abilities if you know them…It’s a good chance to help work on your
leadership and stuff. It’s just a good thing to do. (Y-5)

Further, one leader went on to discuss how the youth participants understood the importance of
the program and helped to not only recruit, but also mentor some of the new participants:
There’s a group of girls who were returning from last year and they understood what the program was so we would bring in other girls to the program or they would actually recruit girls from their own clubs to come in. They saw the value in the program and wanted more girls to get involved. (L-3)

Similarly, the ‘Rose and Thorn’ activity seemed to be a consistent opportunity within the program for some of the older girls to act as leaders. As mentioned, the ‘Rose and Thorn’ activity was used during the relational time of each session which involved youth sharing one rose and one thorn. One leader stated:

At the beginning they [the girls] were so used to having us facilitate the activity…it took a little time for someone to step up within the group, but two of the older girls, they just automatically said ‘okay I’ll start’…each week someone stepped up and took the leadership role. (L-1)

Finally, swimming was noted as a field trip outside of the clubhouse that helped to facilitate opportunities for participants to emotionally support their peers. A youth participant shared an example of how she provided positive encouragement to another girl:

Some girls who went there didn’t know how to swim, but having other girls there that could help you out because you’re gonna engage with them, you’re gonna be friends with them—they can help you out, maybe push you to—not beyond your points, but help you try and teach you how to swim, teach you and tell you ‘just try’ and then make them go beyond what you can. (Y-8)

Positive adult relationships. Another successful strategy that was noted in year one and reinforced in year two of GJWHF was the importance of establishing positive adult relationships
with the youth participants. Two leaders discussed how youth participants felt comfortable
confiding in the leaders:

I was always with the kids and I got really close with them at the end of the program…it
just gave them another person to talk to if they didn’t want to discuss it with their
teachers or their parents. It gave another set of ears to listen to. I also found that they
thought of us more of a friend than a teacher, which is good and they felt comfortable
talking to us. (L-5)

Another leader went on to say:

The dynamic between the leaders and the kids was great…it definitely makes them want
to be there. It changes how they take in the information…they would listen and engage in
the activities and had input and I think that relationship builds that participation. (L-4)

A youth participant reinforced this by indicating that the GJWHF program leaders were caring
and approachable, unlike other adult figures:

The leaders were fun; they were easy to talk to. You know how you have teachers;
they’re not always easy to talk to, but [the leaders] were…understood us and laughed
with us and that was really fun. (Y-4)

Another youth reciprocated the notion of having supportive leaders. She stated:

It actually looked like you guys enjoyed being there and everything so that’s what I
liked… they like, they encouraged people to talk about what’s happening, but like they
didn’t force you too…they weren’t the annoying adult figure, they were actually
fun…they didn’t act like they were better than us like a lot of people do…they did their
leader thing and then participated like everyone else. (Y-2)
Moreover, one youth discussed how she felt the leaders supported her sense of autonomy: “they would let you vote on what you wanted to do. They wouldn’t just say ‘okay, we’re doing this’; they’d be like ‘Who wants to do this? Who wants to do something else?’ They’ll ask for everyone’s opinion” (Y-3). This quote also reinforces that the leaders integrated a youth-driven approach. One youth also felt that when the girls had an opportunity to share, they felt what they had to say was valued by the leaders: “When we had serious discussions, they [the leaders] listened to us…it made me feel like someone actually wanted to listen to me and I actually had something important to say” (Y-4).

Ongoing Challenges

Year two of the GJWHF program implementation was not without its challenges. Such challenges included: competing extra-curricular activities, the use of electronic devices during program time, and sessions being too short.

**Competing extra-curricular activities.** Extra-curricular programs that conflicted with the GJWHF program were afterschool activities that took place both at school and within the Boys and Girls Club clubhouses. Competing extra-curricular activities became evident when the leaders tried to integrate the ‘Running and Reading’ program into the GJWHF program. While the youth participants expressed a keen interest to become community volunteers, it soon became apparent youth prioritized their extra-curricular activities over the ‘Running and Reading’ program. Two youth participants commented: “I really liked it [‘Running and Reading’], but after the first session that’s when soccer started, so I had lots of soccer practice” (Y-1) and “I had other priorities, I had to babysit some weeks...and during the week of the ‘Running and Reading’ I had Cabaret…it would be hard for me to make the commitment to come and do the ‘Running
and Reading” (Y-8). Some of the leaders acknowledged that it was challenging for the youth to attend the ‘Running and Reading’ due to their extra-curricular activities. One leader said:

It’s very difficult for them [youth] to commit because it really conflicts with after-school activities. The time we started ‘Running and Reading’ coincided with their Cabaret and it was tough for them to get there, for them to go to school, to the Boys and Girls Club, and then to the other school for ‘Running and Reading’, it was a lot of moving around. (L-5)

**Use of electronic devices during program time.** Most leaders discussed how they struggled with the girls using electronic devices (e.g., iPods, phones, etc.) on the bus and during the program. One leader stated: “Getting the girls engaged and fighting for their attention with technology…the girls come on the bus and they all have their iPods and phones and that’s who they’re socializing with” (L-5). This issue seemed to extend into the program as well, as one leader stated that even if the girls were not using their devices, they often still posed as a distraction: “When they [youth] get to the club, it’s still in their pocket, not in their backpack. It’s hard because if their phone goes off and you’re speaking to them, they automatically go to their phone” (L-5). While the leaders repeatedly reinforced to the youth that their behaviour was not acceptable, it was difficult to enforce. One leader suggested that for future years, a rule would need to be introduced and enforced from the outset of the program indicating that electronic devices were not permitted. She stated: “I think in future years we need to have a no cell phone rule, similar to at school and the rest of the Boys and Girls Club policy, just because even kids listening have one headphone in” (L-1).

**Length of program sessions was too short.** Each session of the GJWHF program was 75 minutes long; however, this was seen by both the participants and the leaders as not being sufficient as many times the different segments of the program session (relational time,
awareness talk, physical activity time, and debrief) often felt rushed. One leader stated: “We had the life skills and then the physical activity component and I felt we were kind of having to rush through it as we had so little time to fit in everything that we wanted” (L-2). A youth participant went on to explain how she felt the program sessions were also too short: “The time was very short. It bugs me. It feels like I’m there for five minutes and then I have to leave” (Y-2). Not only does the above quote illustrate the challenge of insufficient program length, but it also demonstrates how the constraints of having a schedule for transportation to and from the program can be a challenge. One leader explained: “We are constrained by time, especially because of the bus; we have to be very regimented with our timing, if we could do an hour and a half or two hours instead I think it would be more beneficial” (L-1). Lastly, another leader discussed how she felt she did not establish as strong of a rapport with the girls as she was hoping to because of the limited amount of interaction time: “One thing I thought for myself is that I didn’t spend enough time with them [youth]. It’s hard to be that much of a leader when you only see them so quickly and only once per week” (L-2).

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to evaluate the second year of the GJWHF program implementation by examining how well program stakeholders were able to use findings from the first year evaluation to inform second year programming. It appears that the lessons learned from the evaluation within the first year of programming were useful in making effective adjustments that improved access to, and youth experience, of the GJWHF program.

As outlined in the introduction, Durlak and DuPre (2008) distinguished between core components and non-core components of programs and suggested that to improve program effectiveness there needs to be a balance of fidelity to the core components while making
adaptations to the non-core components. The theme ‘Continually Implementing Successful Strategies’ suggests that over the course of the two years of implementation, the leaders were able to be consistent in implementing the key principles (core components) of the TPSR model which were to provide youth voice, to empower youth, to establish supportive relationships with the youth, and to provide intentional opportunities to be leaders. Moreover, being consistent in the implementation of these core components were perceived by both the youth and leaders as having a positive impact on the development of the youth.

The adaptations made to GJWHF were to non-core components. More specifically, the findings suggest that locating more space for the program appeared to help provide more physical space to conduct the program activities with less distractions compared to the first year and also helped the youth feel more psychologically safe which past research has shown is an important component for youth programs (Petitpas et al., 2005; Scales, Benson, Roehlkepartain, Sesma & van Dulmen, 2006; Scales & Leffert, 2004). Ensuring reliable transportation also helped provide greater access to the program. Transportation has been demonstrated to be a barrier both in low and high income countries (Ensor & Cooper, 2004) and research in a Canadian urban centre has demonstrated that individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds have better access to services than those with lower socioeconomic status (Steele, Glazier, & Lin, 2006). Since attendance was an on-going issue in the first year of programming, the program leaders were able to organize the Boys and Girls Club bus to pick up participants. As a result, there was an improvement in participation numbers, as well as regular attendance. Also, dividing youth into smaller groups for activities such as relational time was perceived as helping to develop even stronger relationships in year two.
Although the results have shown the positive impact adaptations to implementation can have on a program, the results also indicate that there are always ongoing challenges. Competing extra-curricular activities, the use of electronic devices during program time, and sessions being too short were those identified by the participants. Researchers and Boys and Girls Club staff continue to address these challenges and together it was decided to make two major changes to future years of GJWHF programming: 1) the length of program sessions will be extended from 75 minutes to 120 minutes, and 2) GJWHF will become an electronic-free zone.

Overall, it appears that a combination of the adaptations for the second year of GJWHF implementation had a positive effect. This outcome is in line with past studies that have demonstrated a positive effect for adaptation on program outcomes (Blakely et al., 1987; McGraw et al., 1996). As mentioned earlier, Epps and Jackson (2000) argued that program evaluations are only effective for program improvement if the findings are used in a meaningful way. In this work, the researchers used a utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 1984; 2002) and identified and involved individuals (e.g., program leaders, program director of the local Boys and Girls Club) who would use the findings for decision-making about the program and presented the findings to decision-makers (e.g., Boys and Girls Club program committee) to reinforce commitment to the evaluation of the GJWHF program. More specifically, the researchers, program leaders, clubhouse managers, and the Boys and Girls Club program director have been working together throughout the implementation and evaluation of GJWHF which has helped all stakeholders better understand the successes as well as the challenges faced in implementing GJWHF and to make appropriate adaptations to the program. Previous research supports such shared decision-making, particularly among researchers and community members, as this practice has resulted in stronger program implementation (Durlak & DuPre, 2008).
There are several strengths associated with this study. First, while most physical activity program evaluations are based on one year (e.g., Papacharisis et al., 2005; Ward & Parker, 2012), the results from the current study take two years of program evaluation data into consideration. Second, the qualitative nature of this study allowed for an in-depth understanding of the program operations as well as the context and participants involved. Finally, this study provides an account of how the GJWHF program evolved and demonstrated how program adaptation can positively affect program implementation. While this study was successful in understanding the evolution of the GJWHF program over two years, there were some limitations within the study. First, when participants are aware that a program is being evaluated there is always potential for self-monitoring. Second, having program leaders conduct youth interviews had the potential to influence social desirability; however, this is not something that the authors believed was an issue within this study. Lastly, the sample size of 13 participants within this research hinders the generalizability of these findings to other programs but is consistent with previous research documenting attendance rates in afterschool programming (Dynarski et al., 2004; James-Burdumy et al., 2005; Maxfield, Schirm, & Rodriguez-Planas, 2003). It is recommended that researchers conduct interviews during program time with youth participants who do not attend regularly instead of only conducting interviews after the program ends.

**Practical Implications and Conclusion**

Based on the results from this study, it appears that researchers and practitioners must consistently evaluate physical activity-based programs and use the findings to adapt the program to better meet the changing needs of community-based partners. The constant monitoring and evaluation of the GJWHF program appears to be helping ensure that the program is being implemented effectively and meeting the needs of youth participants. Based on the positive
results from these ongoing evaluation efforts, administrators at the Boys and Girls Club have
decided to integrate the GJWHF program into their regular programming and staff members
from both the clubhouses and the university are working together in this partnership to make
GJWHF a part of regular programming at multiple Boys and Girls Club locations.

In sum, to promote positive developmental outcomes for female youth, physical activity-
based programs should make efforts to afford youth with unique experiences, offer formal and
informal leadership responsibilities, and expose youth to positive adult role models. In addition,
future research should consider program adaptation as a natural process in program development
and implementation and further explore how adaptation can influence sustainability.

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References


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Main Findings from Year 1 and Subsequent Actions for Year 2

Success # 1 – Using activities to facilitate relational time was effective
- Action - Continued to use the ‘Rose and Thorn’ activity during relational time

Success # 2 – Providing intentional opportunities for leadership was important
- Action – Continued using the TPSR model that focuses on developing life skills such as leadership by provided intentional opportunities to practice being a leader throughout the program

Success # 3 – Having communicative leaders that supported one another
- Action – Ensured that the leaders continued to have open lines of communication by sending updates regarding the programs activities via email prior to each program session, program, having brief check-ins and debriefs before and after each session

Success # 4 – Having a variety of physical activities for the youth to engage
- Action – Continued to provide a variety of physical activities throughout the program that were chosen by the youth themselves

Challenge # 1 – Issues with the facility having too many other competing programs on the same night which distracted the youth
- Action – Moved the program to a night when there were no other competing activities which provided more space for the program and decreased the number of distractions

Challenge # 2 – Difficulties with using taxi’s for transportation to get the youth to the program which were unreliable and led to difficulties implementing full sessions
- Action – Utilized the Boys and Girls Club bus that allowed for consistent on time transportation to and from the program

Challenge # 3 – Some of the life skills activities were too much like schoolwork (e.g., activities used worksheets to help youth learn about the skill, but the youth did not like these worksheets as they made it seem more like school)
- Action – Replaced worksheet activities with activity-oriented activities

Challenge # 4 – Behavioral issues such as social distractions and cliques
- Action – Divided the larger group of youth into smaller groups for the relational time and debrief which enabled them to get to know each other on a more personal level and to decrease the development of social cliques
Highlights

- Using lessons learned from year one to enhance program can have a positive impact.
- Youth and leader perspectives helped form a comprehensive understanding of program.
- Partnerships between researchers and organizations can lead to sustainable programs.