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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.

31 **Keywords:** evaluation; female youth; qualitative; physical activity; community programming

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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

55 compared to male youth (Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC], 2004), including lower rates
56 of self-esteem and higher rates of depression (Diseth, Meland & Breidablik, 2014; Hyde, 2014).
57 For example, beginning in grade six, levels of self-confidence markedly decline so that by grade
58 10 only 14% of females report that they believe in themselves (PHAC, 2004). In addition, a
59 number of studies have indicated that females from low income families have a greater risk of
60 dropping out of school, mental health problems, difficulties with the law, and risk-taking
61 behaviour (Bowlby, 2005; PHAC, 2004).

62 The PYD framework is a strength-based approach to youth development and puts forth
63 the notion that it is possible to optimize the relationship between individuals and their ecologies
64 (Ford & Lerner, 1992; Lerner, 2012). A particular focus of a number of PYD programs,
65 predominantly those that are based on physical activity or sport, has been the development of life
66 skills (Danish, 1997; Gould & Carson, 2008; Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005).
67 Life skills have been defined as “those skills that enable individuals to succeed in the different
68 environments in which they live such as school, home and in their neighborhoods” (Danish,
69 Forneris, Hodge, & Heke, 2004, pp. 40). These authors stated that life skills can be behavioral
70 (communicating effectively), cognitive (making effective decisions), interpersonal (being
71 assertive) or intrapersonal (setting goals). Within both the PYD literature and the applied field,
72 helping youth develop life skills has become a promising practice (e.g., Fredricks & Simpkins,
73 2012; Kingsnorth, Healy, & Macarthur, 2007; Mueller et al., 2011). Therefore, programs that
74 combine both physical activity and a PYD approach such as life skills (e.g., goal setting,
75 emotional regulation, leadership, confidence) may serve to be important opportunities for closing
76 the gender gap on both physical and emotional well-being.

77 In addition to providing increased PYD and physical activity opportunities for female
78 youth, researchers have recognized that there is a need for more empirical evaluations of life
79 skills programs (Brown & Fry, 2013; Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Hodge, Danish, &
80 Martin, 2013). Researchers recognize that in early years of implementation a focus on
81 understanding successes and challenges, as well as using the information collected to improve
82 the program may be more pertinent than examining overall impact of the program (Chen, 2005;
83 Patton, 2008). Epps and Jackson (2000) also suggested that evaluations are only effective if the
84 findings are used in a meaningful way for program improvement. To achieve meaningfulness,
85 Patton (2008) emphasized the importance of creating research questions, methods, and
86 communications that are tailored to program needs and requirements. For example, for programs
87 that are in the early stages, it is important for evaluations to capture lessons learned to be able to
88 make adaptations so that the program can be tailored to the context and improved in future
89 iterations.

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

99 **Program Description**

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

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

115 The TPSR model was used as the primary framework because the key principles of this
116 model support the elements of a youth-driven program which include: providing the youth with
117 voice, using a strong instructor-participant relationship that allows for the gradual empowerment
118 of youth, and providing intentional opportunities for leadership (Hellison, 2011). To provide
119 youth voice in the program they were involved in the planning of the program. Two months prior
120 to the start of the program a day long retreat was held for female youth from the Boys and Girls
121 Club that would be interested in attending the GJWHF program. At this retreat the youth
122 engaged in a number of activities designed to gain an understanding of what they wanted in a

123 program (e.g., collages of words that describe the life skills they would like to develop; a
124 brainstorming activity of ideas for the different types of physical activity to incorporate). From
125 this retreat, the leaders developed a master list of life skills and physical activities that could be
126 incorporated into the program and subsequently prepared a leader manual based on the TPSR
127 model and SUPER life skills activities. Once the program started, the leaders continued to
128 provide youth voice by having them choose the physical activities they wanted to engage in and
129 the leaders then integrated life skills activities that were outlined by the youth in the day long
130 retreat that could be taught and then reinforced with the physical activity (e.g., when the youth
131 had decided they wanted to play basketball the leaders chose the life skill of teamwork as it was
132 believed basketball is a good sport to foster this type of skill).

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

144 Each GJWHF session followed the TPSR model where each program session began with
145 5-10 minutes of relational time; a time where leaders check in with the youth to see how things

146 are going in their lives. Within the GJWHF program, the ‘Rose and Thorn’ activity was used
147 during the relational time which involved breaking into small groups and then each youth sharing
148 one rose (something positive that happened that week) and one thorn (a challenge that happened
149 that week). The relational time was then followed by an awareness talk. The awareness talk (20-
150 25 minutes) focused developing a variety of life skills including goal setting, confidence and
151 courage, respecting others, and seeking help from others. It was for the awareness talks that
152 program material from SUPER was integrated as there is a lack of specific details or activities
153 for this portion of a TPSR program within the current literature. As a result, workshop activities
154 from SUPER were integrated to provide leaders with resources for teaching and enable the youth
155 to practice the life skills. The awareness talk was followed by the physical activity plan (20-25
156 minutes) which was time that the youth engaged in a sport or form of physical activity. As
157 mentioned, the youth were very involved in the decisions regarding the types of physical
158 activities incorporated into the program. At the beginning, the leaders asked the youth for a
159 general list of physical activities that they wanted included in the program. Once the leaders had
160 this list, the participants were asked every two weeks what activity they wanted to engage in
161 next. Finally, a group debrief (5-10 minutes) occurred at the conclusion of each session where
162 the leaders and youth discussed progress that had been made in the program session that day, as
163 well as challenges or difficulties faced. During this time, the leaders also emphasized to the
164 youth how the skills developed in the program could transfer to other domains. For a more
165 detailed description of the program, see Bean, Forneris, and Halsall (2014).

166 In terms of Durlak and DuPre’s (2008) program components classification that was
167 previously described, the core components of GJWHF are: a) youth are provided with voice
168 within the program, b) there is an emphasis on relationship building between leaders and

169 participants, c) there are opportunities for youth to take on leadership roles, d) youth have
170 opportunities to be physically active, and e) youth are able to learn and practice life skills.

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

177 **INSERT TABLE 1**

178 **Methods**

179 **Participants**

180 **Youth participants.** Female youth between the ages of 11 and 16 ($M = 13.13$, $SD = 1.45$)
181 from three Boys and Girls Club locations attended the GJWHF program. The girls were from
182 low income families in a city in Eastern Ontario. Free transportation to the program was
183 provided to the participants for the duration of the program. On any given night, there were
184 between seven and 16 youth present for the program, with the mean attendance rate being 9.48
185 ($SD = 4.29$). There were eight consistent participants who attended the program on a regular basis
186 (attended more than 75% of the sessions), while six other participants attended the program on a
187 less consistent basis (attended less than 50% of the session). A goal of this study was to
188 interview both individuals who participated on a regular basis, as well as individuals who
189 participated inconsistently or dropped out to evaluate all participants' experiences regardless of
190 their program dosage (Philliber, Kaye, & Herrling, 2001; Weisman, Soulé, & Womer, 2001).
191 However, the individuals who did not participate on a regular basis were from a clubhouse that

192 shut down during the summer months and, as such, the researchers did not have access to these
193 individuals once the clubhouse closed. Therefore, only the eight participants who attended the
194 program on a regular basis were interviewed. Five of the participants were participating in the
195 program for a second year, while three youth were participating in the program for the first time.
196 The overall length of involvement in the Boys and Girls Club ranged from one month to nine
197 years.

198 **Program leaders.** The GJWHF staff consisted of five individuals: four students from a
199 local university (two graduate students and two undergraduate students all in the field of Human
200 Kinetics) and one senior youth worker at the Boys and Girls Club (who had worked with the
201 organization for more than three years). All of the leaders ranged in age from 21 to 24 years old
202 ($M=22.2$, $SD=1.2$). Two of the five leaders participated in year one of the program, while three
203 leaders were new to the program. The leaders completed volunteer training with the Boys and
204 Girls Club as well as attended two training sessions on implementing the program prior to
205 commencement of the GJWHF. In these two training sessions the leaders were provided with a
206 leader manual that outlined how the TPSR structure would be implemented into the program
207 (e.g., the first 5-10 minutes would involve the leaders placing the youth in small groups to
208 discuss how things were going using an activity called 'Rose and Thorn' where the youth would
209 each share something positive as well as something challenging they had experienced in the past
210 week). The leader manual also included a large repertoire of life skill activities with specific
211 instructions of how to implement the activities (some of these activities were taken from
212 SUPER). The training also involved discussions on how to introduce the life skills and engage
213 the youth in the activities. Once the program started the leaders continued to meet, with the
214 professor who conducted the training, every two weeks to debrief and to specifically plan the

215 next two upcoming sessions based on what the youth participants had decided regarding the
216 physical activity. Further, the leaders met 15 minutes before the start of each program session to
217 set up and finalize the plan for the session, as well as for 10 minutes at the end of each session to
218 review what went well and what could be improved for future sessions. All five leaders
219 participated in this study.

220 **Procedure**

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

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

236 Prior to conducting interviews, participants were reminded of their rights to confidentiality
237 and anonymity. Parental consent forms were distributed by the Boys and Girls Club staff prior to

238 the start of the program and assent forms were distributed to all youth participants at the
239 beginning of the first program session. Leaders provided written consent prior to their
240 interviews. All procedures were approved by the Research Ethics Board at the authors'
241 university.

242 **Interview Guide**

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

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

259 In both the youth and leader interviews probes such as "can you tell me more about..." or
260 "do you have an example to share about..." were used to follow-up and explore participants'

261 experiences further. All of the interviews were digitally recorded. The youth interviews ranged
262 from 26 to 45 minutes (M=31:33) while the leader interviews ranged from 28 to 50 minutes
263 (M=36:39).

264 **Data Analysis**

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

284 (Y = youth participant; L = leader). Numbers were assigned to each participant in the order in
285 which they were interviewed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality (e.g., Y-3 represents a
286 youth participant that was interviewed third).

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

301 **Results**

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

305 **INSERT TABLE 2.**

306 **Applying Lessons Learned Can Make a Significant Difference**

307 From the program's first year evaluation, several lessons learned were identified. The
308 programmers used these strategies to adapt and improve GJWHF for its second year. Feedback
309 from youth participants revealed several successes in year two of program implementation that
310 built on lessons learned after the program's first year of implementation.

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

325 As mentioned, having reliable transportation represented a challenge during the first year
326 of GJWHF. To address this concern in year two, the Boys and Girls Club bus was hired to pick
327 the youth up from their home clubhouse, bring them to the GJWHF program site and drop the
328 youth back off at their home clubhouse once the program was over. This was noted as improving
329 accessibility to the program and adding value, which is evident by this leader's statement:

330 Some of the difficulties that we had were with transportation last year. This year we were
331 lucky enough to get the bus from the Boys and Girls Club and that helped out because the
332 bus was reliable and came on time, so the girls could attend every session. (L-1)

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

346 **Breaking the larger group into smaller groups for different activities led to better**
347 **opportunities to participate.** From the year one evaluation, it was determined that often the
348 group size was too large (e.g., one large group of 12-15 youth) to facilitate appropriate activity
349 management and foster strong leader-participant relationships, one of the core principles of the
350 TPSR model and GJWHF program. For the second year of implementation, the set-up of the
351 program was modified slightly to better utilize the five program staff. Instead of having one large
352 group with five leaders, the girls were divided into two or three smaller groups (depending on

353 participation rates during the session) and were paired with one or two leaders for the relational
354 time, awareness talk, and debrief. The youth were brought together into either one or two larger
355 groups for the physical activities. Not only did the small groups provide a greater opportunity for
356 youth and leaders to develop closer relationships, as discussed by this leader: “The small group is
357 awesome and when you have a small group you can really get to develop strong relationships
358 with each of them [youth]” (L-5), but also allowed for more introverted participants to have the
359 opportunity to share and contribute in a smaller group. This was highlighted by one leader:

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

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

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

368 **Continually Implementing Successful Strategies**

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

376 youth engage in leadership roles through formal and informal activities, and ensuring positive
377 adult relationships.

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

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

395 To foster participation numbers and keep the girls engaged, I think that the day trips and
396 things that we did outside the gym really helped...these things are opportunities that the
397 girls didn't necessarily always have. It was cool for them to do something different...You

398 got to come to the program and you would have all these new opportunities afforded to
399 you, so that encouraged engagement in these activities. (L-5)

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

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

405 Lastly, unique opportunities provided to the youth through the GJWHF program also
406 entailed more community involvement for the participants. As mentioned in the program
407 description, in year two, the youth had the opportunity to be mentors in a local weekly
408 afterschool program called the 'Running and Reading' program. One leader revealed how she
409 believed that this community involvement impacted the youth. She said: "I think it had an effect
410 in that they learned how to get involved a little more, whether it's just in their everyday life or in
411 their communities" (L-2). One leader discussed how she believed the youth participants enjoyed
412 the opportunity to mentor younger youth. She said, "The girls that did go really enjoyed it
413 ['Running and Reading'] and came back the next week and talked about it and enjoyed working
414 with the younger girls and boys from the program" (L-1). Likewise, a youth participant shared
415 her experiences of 'Running and Reading': "I really enjoyed it...a lot of kids would run up to
416 you 'I wanna read with you, I wanna read with you' and then you'd be like 'okay I'll read with
417 you'" (Y-8). Finally, one participant discussed the benefits of becoming involved with one's
418 community: "Helping your community adds up, so then if you help your community a lot and
419 everything... then you end up knowing a lot of people so they can be like 'oh yeah this person
420 did this, this, and this'" (Y-4).

421 **Having youth take on leadership roles through formal and informal activities has a**
422 **positive impact.** As mentioned above in the program description, providing leadership
423 opportunities for the female youth is one of the core principles of the program. The data analysis
424 revealed that the leaders and youth perceived that the program participants had both formal and
425 informal opportunities to be leaders throughout the GJWHF program.

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

442 It was fun, but we now know that it’s not as easy as we think it is to lead an activity
443 because some people really don’t listen and when it goes to a point when they just start

444 yelling and screaming then you have to excuse them out of the room, it's actually a pretty
445 hard situation. I learned that being a leader is not really easy. (Y-1)

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

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

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

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

465 Further, one leader went on to discuss how the youth participants understood the importance of
466 the program and helped to not only recruit, but also mentor some of the new participants:

467 There's a group of girls who were returning from last year and they understood what the
468 program was so we would bring in other girls to the program or they would actually
469 recruit girls from their own clubs to come in. They saw the value in the program and
470 wanted more girls to get involved. (L-3)

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

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

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

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

487 **Positive adult relationships.** Another successful strategy that was noted in year one and
488 reinforced in year two of GJWHF was the importance of establishing positive adult relationships

489 with the youth participants. Two leaders discussed how youth participants felt comfortable
490 confiding in the leaders:

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

496 Another leader went on to say:

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

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

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

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

506 It actually looked like you guys enjoyed being there and everything so that's what I
507 liked... they like, they encouraged people to talk about what's happening, but like they
508 didn't force you too...they weren't the annoying adult figure, they were actually
509 fun...they didn't act like they were better than us like a lot of people do...they did their
510 leader thing and then participated like everyone else. (Y-2)

511 Moreover, one youth discussed how she felt the leaders supported her sense of autonomy: “they
512 would let you vote on what you wanted to do. They wouldn’t just say ‘okay, we’re doing this’;
513 they’d be like ‘*Who* wants to do this? *Who* wants to do something else?’ They’ll ask for
514 everyone’s opinion” (Y-3). This quote also reinforces that the leaders integrated a youth-driven
515 approach. One youth also felt that when the girls had an opportunity to share, they felt what they
516 had to say was valued by the leaders: “When we had serious discussions, they [the leaders]
517 listened to us...it made me feel like someone actually wanted to listen to me and I actually had
518 something important to say” (Y-4).

519 **Ongoing Challenges**

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

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

533 and Reading” (Y-8). Some of the leaders acknowledged that it was challenging for the youth to
534 attend the ‘Running and Reading’ due to their extra-curricular activities. One leader said:

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

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

553 **Length of program sessions was too short.** Each session of the GJWHF program was
554 75 minutes long; however, this was seen by both the participants and the leaders as not being
555 sufficient as many times the different segments of the program session (relational time,

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

570 **Discussion**

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

576 As outlined in the introduction, Durlak and DuPre (2008) distinguished between core
577 components and non-core components of programs and suggested that to improve program
578 effectiveness there needs to be a balance of fidelity to the core components while making

579 adaptations to the non-core components. The theme ‘Continually Implementing Successful
580 Strategies’ suggests that over the course of the two years of implementation, the leaders were
581 able to be consistent in implementing the key principles (core components) of the TPSR model
582 which were to provide youth voice, to empower youth, to establish supportive relationships with
583 the youth, and to provide intentional opportunities to be leaders. Moreover, being consistent in
584 the implementation of these core components were perceived by both the youth and leaders as
585 having a positive impact on the development of the youth.

586 The adaptations made to GJWHF were to non-core components. More specifically, the
587 findings suggest that locating more space for the program appeared to help provide more
588 physical space to conduct the program activities with less distractions compared to the first year
589 and also helped the youth feel more psychologically safe which past research has shown is an
590 important component for youth programs (Petitpas et al., 2005; Scales, Benson, Roehlkepartain,
591 Sesma & van Dulmen, 2006; Scales & Leffert, 2004). Ensuring reliable transportation also
592 helped provide greater access to the program. Transportation has been demonstrated to be a
593 barrier both in low and high income countries (Ensor & Cooper, 2004) and research in a
594 Canadian urban centre has demonstrated that individuals from higher socioeconomic
595 backgrounds have better access to services than those with lower socioeconomic status (Steele,
596 Glazier, & Lin, 2006). Since attendance was an on-going issue in the first year of programming,
597 the program leaders were able to organize the Boys and Girls Club bus to pick up participants.
598 As a result, there was an improvement in participation numbers, as well as regular attendance.
599 Also, dividing youth into smaller groups for activities such as relational time was perceived as
600 helping to develop even stronger relationships in year two.

601 Although the results have shown the positive impact adaptations to implementation can
602 have on a program, the results also indicate that there are always ongoing challenges. Competing
603 extra-curricular activities, the use of electronic devices during program time, and sessions being
604 too short were those identified by the participants. Researchers and Boys and Girls Club staff
605 continue to address these challenges and together it was decided to make two major changes to
606 future years of GJWHF programming: 1) the length of program sessions will be extended from
607 75 minutes to 120 minutes, and 2) GJWHF will become an electronic-free zone.

608 Overall, it appears that a combination of the adaptations for the second year of GJWHF
609 implementation had a positive effect. This outcome is in line with past studies that have
610 demonstrated a positive effect for adaptation on program outcomes (Blakely et al., 1987;
611 McGraw et al., 1996). As mentioned earlier, Epps and Jackson (2000) argued that program
612 evaluations are only effective for program improvement if the findings are used in a meaningful
613 way. In this work, the researchers used a utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 1984; 2002) and
614 identified and involved individuals (e.g., program leaders, program director of the local Boys and
615 Girls Club) who would use the findings for decision-making about the program and presented the
616 findings to decision-makers (e.g., Boys and Girls Club program committee) to reinforce
617 commitment to the evaluation of the GJWHF program. More specifically, the researchers,
618 program leaders, clubhouse managers, and the Boys and Girls Club program director have been
619 working together throughout the implementation and evaluation of GJWHF which has helped all
620 stakeholders better understand the successes as well as the challenges faced in implementing
621 GJWHF and to make appropriate adaptations to the program. Previous research supports such
622 shared decision-making, particularly among researchers and community members, as this
623 practice has resulted in stronger program implementation (Durlak & DuPre, 2008).

647 results from these ongoing evaluation efforts, administrators at the Boys and Girls Club have
648 decided to integrate the GJWHF program into their regular programming and staff members
649 from both the clubhouses and the university are working together in this partnership to make
650 GJWHF a part of regular programming at multiple Boys and Girls Club locations.

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

656

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- 789
790
791

792 Table 1

793

794 Main Findings from Year 1 and Subsequent Actions for Year 2

795

796 Success # 1 – Using activities to facilitate relational time was effective

- 797
- Action - Continued to use the ‘Rose and Thorn’ activity during relational time

798 Success # 2 – Providing intentional opportunities for leadership was important

- 799
- 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

802 Success # 3 – Having communicative leaders that supported one another

- 803
- 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

806 Success # 4 – Having a variety of physical activities for the youth to engage

- 807
- Action – Continued to provide a variety of physical activities throughout the program that were chosen by the youth themselves

809

810 Challenge # 1 – Issues with the facility having too many other competing programs on the same night which distracted the youth

- 812
- 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

814 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

- 816
- Action – Utilized the Boys and Girls Club bus that allowed for consistent on time transportation to and from the program

818 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)

- 821
- Action – Replaced worksheet activities with activity-oriented activities

822 Challenge # 4 – Behavioral issues such as social distractions and cliques

- 823
- 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

826

827 **Highlights**

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