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FEATURE ARTICLE



The EmpowerHER Program: Developing a Curriculum to Foster Social-Emotional Learning and Physical Activity Among Adolescent Girls in a Summer Care Program

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ABSTRACT

Programs integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) and physical activity (PA) can contribute to positive behavior outcomes and development for adolescent girls. The purpose of this article is to report the development of the EmpowerHER Program curriculum. Specifically, this curriculum describes implementation strategies and activities tailored to adolescent girls while contributing to the literature surrounding health programs addressing PA and SEL components. Adolescent girls (10–14 years old) participated in an eight-session summer program that provided the opportunity to engage in fun-filled activities that encouraged PA and SEL. Strategies from the EmpowerHER program can be applied to curriculum development and program implementations in out-of-school settings to aid in promoting PA enjoyment and engagement for adolescents. This curriculum supports the importance of contextually tailoring a health program to support PA and SEL for adolescent girls.

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Background

Physical activity (PA) is associated with improved quality of life and health outcomes including improvements in bone health, weight status, mental health, and sleep (Piercy et al., 2018). Previous literature suggests that PA declines across the lifespan, particularly during adolescence (Aubert et al., 2022). This decline during adolescence is more significant among girls than boys (Dumith et al., 2011). A global study reported 84.7% of girls between the ages of 11–17 years did not meet PA recommendations (Guthold et al., 2020).

Facilitating positive social behaviors and connections may be critical to PA in adolescents, particularly in girls (Duffey et al., 2021). Positive social behaviors can include exposure to cooperative learning strategies (e.g., teamwork, collaboration, and communication), which help improve social-emotional learning (SEL) in adolescents (Olive et al., 2020). SEL refers to the process through which individuals acquire and apply knowledge, attitudes, and skills to manage their emotions, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Lawson et al., 2019). The promotion of SEL and PA among adolescents has received significant attention in recent years due to the potential to enhance academic performance, reduce

risky behaviors, and promote physical and mental health (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Singh et al., 2019). Recent literature has provided health educators with strategies to implement SEL within classrooms (Ciotto & Gagnon, 2018; Olive et al., 2021). However, understanding how to implement these programs in a variety of settings is important to explore.

Studies have identified a significant decrease in PA during out-of-school time (OST), specifically in summer (McCue et al., 2013; Volmut et al., 2020). During summer, adolescents have increased screen time, inconsistent sleep schedules, and decreased access to structured PA opportunities (Brazendale et al., 2017). Summer care programs (SCPs) can be used to enhance PA during summer (Beets et al., 2016). SCPs are often full day, adult-supervised programs that offer a set of semi-structured activities (McLaughlin & Pitcock, 2009). SCPs can also facilitate the development of positive interpersonal relationships and SEL (McDonough et al., 2018). Recent research has also indicated that SCP friendship networks play a role in adolescent PA during the summer (Prochnow et al., 2021; Prochnow, Patterson, Bridges Hamilton, et al., 2022; Prochnow, Patterson, Meyer, et al., 2022). These aspects make SCP ideal for implementing SEL and PA programs.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to describe the development process and resulting curriculum for the EmpowerHER Program, a SEL and PA program designed for adolescent girls aged 10–14 years old. Sharing this detailed curriculum development process and curriculum aims to increase transparency and provide a useful foundation of engaging PA and SEL content for health educators implementing programs in similar settings.

Curriculum development

Meetings with the SCP executive director and program coordinator were held to discuss priority content for the program. Based on these discussions, it was suggested that SEL components should emphasize mental health improvement. A literature search regarding adolescent PA and SEL programs was conducted to prepare a first draft of the curriculum. Previous SCP programs such as the SMART girls program, have focused on enhancing self-esteem and resiliency (Afterschool Alliance, 2014; Boys & Girls Clubs of America, n.d.), which assisted in aligning SEL components. External resources such as Leschitz et al. (2023), Tosh et al. (2022), and the Kid-Grit curriculum (Gabor & Jordan, 2023) were used as foundations for this development stage.

The EmpowerHER curriculum was grounded in key concepts from Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001), including observational learning, reinforcement, self-efficacy, and reciprocal determinism, as well as Social Network Theory foundations emphasizing peer selection, influence, and transmission effects (Krause et al., 2007). For example, the program incorporated peer

modeling of physical activities, provided positive reinforcement through staff encouragement and small prizes, aimed to build participants' confidence in their abilities, recognized the interaction between personal, behavioral, and environmental influences, and leveraged peer connections and dynamics to spread target attitudes and behaviors through the adolescent social network.

Semi-structured lesson plans were piloted two months prior to implementation to gain feedback. Five graduate students within a department of health behavior with experience in adolescent development attended each pilot session. An overview of the program was presented at the beginning of the session. Volunteers were instructed to act as if they were adolescent girls to enhance accuracy. Revisions were made to curriculum upon conclusion of each pilot session. A document of all activities, goals, and equipment is provided online (see https://www.tprochnow.com/files/empowerher_curriculum.pdf). Table 1 provides an overview of the eight sessions with themes and components.

Program overview

The program objective was to provide an opportunity for girls to engage in fun-filled activities that encouraged PA and SEL. Interactive activities aimed to promote social connections, empathy, and positive perceptions of PA were emphasized throughout this program. According to CASEL (2020), successful SEL interventions foster social and emotional concepts through explicit instruction and student-centered learning to allow students to fully engage in the learning process and activities should be sequenced, active, focused, and

Table 1. EmpowerHER program overview of educational sessions.

Session	Theme	Intro (emotion check-in)	PA (activity)	PA Benefits (concept)	SEL (activity)	Social Dynamics (concept)
1	Creating wellness goals	Building rapport	Creative games: lava field	Recommendations	Goal setting: Tap into dreams	Social Support
2	Embracing personality and character	Loving self	Aerobic fitness: Freeze dance	Academics/creative skills	Self-Awareness: Minute to win it	Impression management
3	Strong body strong mind	Healthy actions	Functional Fitness: Strategic exercises	Muscle strength	Social Awareness: Empathy charades game	Empathy
4	Valuing social relationships	Social support	Creative Games: Obstacle course	Social benefits	Relationship Skills: Who's in your circle?	Who's important
5	Establishing a wellness balance	Intrinsic motivation	Interval Training: Tabata workouts	Heart health	Self-Management: Marshmallow challenge	Self-persuasion/Self-management
6	Improving social actions	Social relationships	Traditional Games: rock paper scissors hop! + Hula hoop pass	Performance/functional skills	Responsible Decision Making: human knot	Social facilitation/Modeling
7	Building flexible foundations	Open mindedness	Flexibility: Yoga	Mental benefits	Resiliency: Mindful me	Mindfulness/observation skills
8	Reflecting on wellness goals	Life goals	Indoor Games: Fitness feud	How to share benefits	Goal check in: Vision board presentation	Self-reflection

explicit. Cooperative learning strategies were implemented in the EmpowerHER program to align with these expectations. All SEL activities promoted responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationships skills. Meanwhile, moments of discussion and reflections were centered on self-awareness and self-management. Program sessions (90-minutes each) were conducted twice per week for four weeks.

Educational sessions

Each session was divided into three sections: (1) emotional, (2) physical, and (3) social wellness content. Emotional components encouraged girls to actively express their emotions and stories through an introduction prompt for each session topic. Physical components provided structured physical activities that involved active body movement and team challenges. Social components involved activities in a classroom setting to foster empathy skills and social connections (e.g. expressing emotions, building relationships).

During session 1 girls learned more about their peers in the program, discovered ways to work as a team, and expressed their interests. This session introduced SMART goals and the eight dimensions of wellness to better understand how to create a wellness goal. Session 2 encouraged participation through creative dance to express, understand, and regulate emotions including freeze dance and teambuilding games. Session 3 involved a variety of functional fitness movements such as squats, lunges, and jumping jacks. This session integrated different fitness tasks for muscular strength and reviewed the benefits of PA. Discussions were centered around the benefits of engaging in activities that promote strong muscles, confidence, and mood. Session 4 involved an activity reflecting on peer and family relationships. All girls used concentric circles to illustrate these relationships and talk about how support can be given and/or received from people close to them. Session 5 guided the girls to brainstorm on their intrinsic motivators. The discussion from this session included the health benefits of heart health through a Tabata-style exercise. In session 6 girls participated in more team bonding activities to learn about functional skills and modeling positive behaviors around others encouraging them to be role models in their community. Session 7 created a space and time for girls to experience therapeutic methods like mindfulness and yoga that might help them better navigate difficult situations and control negative emotions. The goal of this activity was to bring their awareness to things around them, be present, and understand what we can control within our environment. Lastly, session 8

centered around reflecting on their growth. An activity called fitness feud was carried out to reinforce skills and concepts learned throughout the program. The girls ended the session by completing their vision boards that were started at the beginning of the program.

Discussion

The goal of this article was to describe curriculum development and activities tailored to adolescent girls in the EmpowerHER program. Although the SCP provides various resources to promote youth development, this curriculum created another opportunity for girls to experience a space that encourages self-expression and social connections, all while learning the benefits of PA and SEL through group activities. Additionally, the structured creation of the curriculum through stakeholder conversations, literature searches, pilot testing, and revisions is a valuable template for creating and improving health education curriculum. Lastly, as this curriculum focused on out-of-school time and specifically summer, the unique context and development during this time played a role in programming. The summer is seen as a critical time for growth, but also a preparation period for the upcoming school year (Duffett et al., 2004). Many discussions in the sessions were centered around positive social behaviors that can be demonstrated as they return to school settings which often come with changes in social networks as well as PA behaviors.

Translation to Health Education Practice

The EmpowerHER program curriculum and creation process could be used as a basis for further customization in PA and SEL focused programs for adolescent girls. Contextually tailoring these concepts to meet the needs of the girls in which the program will be delivered is critical. In order for this tailoring to occur, Health Educators and Certified Health Education Specialists (CHES) should first assess the needs and capacities of the community (CHES Responsibility Area 1) which would include sub-competencies 1.1.2 “Identify priority populations,” 1.2.3 “Conduct a literature review,” and 1.3.4 “Assess existing and available resources, policies, programs, practices, and interventions” (Eifert et al., 2021). Starting in this area and with these sub-competencies, the EmpowerHER program benefited from the recommendations of previous studies relating to adolescent development.

Likewise, grounded in the planning stage (CHES Responsibility Area 2), health education professionals performed sub competencies: 2.1.1 “Convene the

priority populations, partners, and stakeholders,” 2.3.6 “Conduct a pilot test of intervention,” and 2.3.7 “Revise intervention based on feedback.” Along with the pilot testing and feedback process, implementation (CHES Responsibility Area 3) was carried out through sub-competency 3.1.1 “securing implementation resources” and 3.3.3 “Modify intervention as needed to meet individual needs.” Lastly, this article highlights the evaluation and research (CHES Responsibility Area 4) by finalizing the exit ticket surveys following sub-competency 4.1.9 “Develop instruments for collecting data” (Eifert et al., 2021). Throughout the development, implementation, and process evaluation of the EmpowerHER program, health education professionals can see the importance of contextually tailoring a female adolescent health program to support PA and SEL.

Conclusions

In summary, this article provides some insights into the potential benefits of integrating PA and SEL during summertime, specifically SCPs. SEL and PA programs designed for adolescent girls may benefit from using cooperative activities that allow them to create, learn, and make social connections among their peers.

Disclosure statement

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