

Study: Summer sports camp shapes up positive attitudes, self-esteem

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Participation in a national summer day-camp program has a significant effect on the attitudes of children regarding education, self-perception and sportsmanship, according to a new study.

A national study of more than 3,500 children enrolled in the 2006 National Youth Sports Program found that children, ages 10 to 16, demonstrated positive changes in their attitudes and perceptions regarding education, self-perceptions and sportsmanship at the end of the program. The program, for students who qualify for either free or reduced lunch programs defined by federal guidelines, promotes physical activity and positive living by teaching new sports, healthy lifestyles, learning skills and community service.

Students were surveyed at the beginning of 39 programs around the country. They were asked about their attitudes regarding whether school is important, if they want to graduate from college, if they like the way they look and act, if playing fair is important, and if they are responsible for their own actions. Questions also addressed drug use, nutrition and physical activity. The children were asked the same questions again at the end of the program, and the researchers found a significant increase in their positive attitudes toward these topics.

"We find these results to be very reaffirming for our efforts to make a difference in the lives of children," said Gale Wiedow, national program director at the National Youth Sports Program. "This may be the first time we have been able to collect a substantial amount of data directly

from participants and to do so in a manner that permits statistical analysis. In the past, NYSP has relied on strong anecdotal success, but now we hope this new information will encourage more support for this great program."

Federal funding for the 200-plus National Youth Sports Programs was reduced this year, and only 56 programs were selected to continue, including the camp at Purdue. The National Youth Sports Program is a part of the National Youth Sports Corp. based in Indianapolis.

As part of the survey, children were asked to rate 24 items on a four-point scale. The surveys were then analyzed to determine if there were differences between pre- and post-test responses on four factors reflecting attitudes toward education, self-perceptions, physical activity and sportsmanship. Researchers found that three of the four primary attitudes examined were significantly more positive at the end of the program.

The national study was conducted by Sarah Ullrich-French, a Purdue doctoral student in the a Department of Health and Kinesiology, and was supported by a grant from USA Funds. During the summer camps, USA Funds supplemented the regular programming with an educational lesson called "Unlock the Future." This lesson plan focused on emphasizing the importance of education after high school and what children can do now to prepare for additional education.

"Even though the program is called National Youth Sports Program, it is about so much more, said William Harper, Purdue's program director and head of the Department of Health and Kinesiology. "Teaching children about sports is just one way to encourage their self-esteem and self-perception. This camp is about positive reinforcement and exposing children to college students who are strong role models for life skills, as well as in the classroom and on the track or field."

Additional analysis by Ullrich-French found statistically significant increases in perceptions about the connection between education and income and the benefits of hard work.

"The observed changes in a relatively short time period supports the usefulness of such programs with youth," said Ullrich-French, who is studying sport and exercise psychology. "Middle-school age children had the greatest amount of change for attitudes toward education, self-perceptions and sportsmanship. We didn't see as much change regarding the children's physical activity. However, the physical activity items were largely about behavior patterns, and it would be difficult to expect a large degree of behavior change in such a short period.

"But it is very encouraging to see increases in self-perceptions and healthy core values that can possibly lead to children adopting more healthy lifestyles."

An older study, conducted at Purdue's 2002 and 2003 programs, showed that campers' total aerobic fitness level increased. This fitness data was collected using a test developed by the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance.

About 400 children participated in Purdue's 2006 summer program. More than 1,000 local children have participated in Purdue's program since it started in 2002. The students, in teams of about 15, rotate through activity stations that include basketball, tennis, softball, swimming, soccer and volleyball, as well as sessions on computer skills training, nutritional information, dangers of substance abuse, community service-learning projects and career opportunities. The Purdue campers also have participated in lacrosse, judo and rowing. NFL quarterback Drew Brees has visited with the children every summer, and the campers also have received free athletic shoes and swimsuits during past camps.

Source: Purdue University

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