

Making exercise fun and cool for at-risk teens

March 9 2012, By Katherine Kahn



Motivating teens to exercise is often a tough sell, but a new study in the *American Journal of Health Promotion* finds that introducing culturally tailored activities, those that young people find fun and popular, can encourage some of the most at-risk teens to get active.

Researcher Suzanne Laberge, Ph.D., and colleagues from the University of Montreal and McGill University designed FunAction, a 16-week, lunch-time [physical activity program](#) for underserved, multiethnic teens. FunAction offered 12 popular activities that the teens said they would like, including a [video game](#) called DanceDance Revolution, kung fu, hip-hop, capoeira, African dance, and a multisport World Cup. Researchers promoted the program with a kick-off event, a rally, and several variety shows. Posters, banners with student photos, and educational leaflets

were also distributed.

Over 150 8th graders were eligible to participate in the program. “While over 60 percent of boys participated in the program, nearly 80 percent of girls participated,” Laberge said. “That is a high level of participation, since girls typically participate less in physical activity than boys.” The key to the program’s impressive levels of participation, Laberge said, was that it was culturally tailored to the students it targeted.

The study also evaluated whether participants’ self-esteem, social skills and ability to concentrate improved during the program. While there was no change seen in the girls, the boys’ attention and concentration skills showed significant improvement. “It is often an overlooked fact that physical activity requires attention and concentration. Developing these skills may help improve academic achievement,” Laberge said.

Part of FunAction’s success was due to social marketing and promotion, which uses many of the same principles and strategies as commercial marketing, except the goal is to encourage healthy behaviors instead of sell a product.

“Social marketing is the absolute perfect way to get [young people](#) to adopt healthy behaviors because it focuses on what young people want, what they need, and what they’re concerned about,” said Carol Bryant, Ph.D., an expert in social marketing from the University of South Florida.

An effective [physical activity](#) program offers participants “something that’s going to truly make their life better right now, not some promise that 20 years from now they won’t have a heart attack. That’s not going to motivate a young person,” Bryant says.

What about the cost of a program like this? It doesn’t need to be

expensive, Bryant added. Equipment costs are usually low and volunteers can help staff the activities. Also, funding may be available to schools and youth organizations from state health departments and other sources.

More information: Laberge S, Bush PL, and Chagnon M. (2012) Effects of a culturally tailored physical activity promotion program on selected self-regulation skills and attitudes in adolescents of an underserved, multiethnic milieu. *American Journal of Health Promotion*. 26:105-115.

Provided by Health Behavior News Service

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