Recruiting and Retaining Families in a Physical Activity Program

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Purpose
Nationally, 12% of preschool children are obese (Sharma et al., 2009). The rates of obesity are even higher among low income, minority children (Anderson & Whitaker, 2009). Despite the high prevalence of obesity among preschool children few prevention efforts have focused on this age group. Involving parents in childhood obesity prevention efforts is critical. Most family involvement activities that have been described in literature incorporate programs that are based in schools or community-settings (Blom-Hoffman, Wilcox, Dunn, Leff, & Power, 2009). Frequently, these programs involve many resources to implement and family attendance rates are modest at best.

Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures (HKHF) is an innovative, multilevel, early childhood initiative to engage culturally diverse families, preschool staff, and the community to promote healthy eating and increased physical activity (PA). To promote PA for parents and their young children, HKHF developed and implemented a weekly Saturday Open Gym (SOG) program at an urban community center. SOG provides opportunities for young children to be physically active with their families in a safe, accessible and age-appropriate setting. To accomplish this important goal, HKHF implemented a weekly, 90-minute program for families that targeted children aged 3 to 8 at a local community center. The recruitment and retention strategies that were used to facilitate family participation in HKHF’s 5 SOG cycles will be discussed.

Method

Participants
309 Children primarily aged 3 to 8 (mean child age = 5 years, 1 month; SD = 2 years, 8 months) and 202 caregivers participated in SOG sessions (511 total individuals).
48 Undergraduate and graduate students who received training in physical activity, family engagement, and child development served as SOG activity leaders (activity leaders typically volunteered for one cycle).
2 Graduate Research Assistants served as Family Engagement Coordinators. The Family Engagement Coordinators were responsible for registering families to SOG, collecting all attendance data, and contacting families with weekly program updates.
An Undergraduate Work Study student served as the Family Outreach Coordinator. The Family Outreach Coordinator was responsible for planning and leading all family recruitment activities (e.g., attending local events to disseminate information about SOG).

Measures

Open Gym Cycle Attendance
Defined as the total number of unique families, caregivers, and children who attended one or more SOG sessions within a given cycle. Each SOG cycle lasted for an academic semester (e.g., September to December).

Figure 1.

Open Gym Family Retention

Figure 2.

Results
The 5 SOG cycles have averaged 54.2 families (range = 39-64); 186 different families have attended one or more SOG sessions throughout the 5 cycles.
The 5 SOG cycles have averaged 59.2 caregivers and 83.2 children per cycle.
33% of families have attended at least half of the SOG sessions within a given cycle.
37% of families who attended one or more SOG sessions in cycles 2, 3, 4, or 5 attended a previous cycle.

Conclusions
Overall, the first 19 months of attendance data demonstrate that the 5 HKHF SOG sessions were well attended and families returned in large numbers.
Importantly, the SOG program used multiple procedures to recruit and retain families including advertising in multiple venues, weekly personal phone contacts, and providing incentives for participation. Many of these strategies can be applied to other types of programs that aim to have families attend and participate in a school or community venue.

References