

Get Fit for Life: Elementary School Group

Counseling with a Twist

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Abstract

A significant number of elementary school-aged children participate in some form of athletic activity. As they become pre-teens, the percentage of these children involved in sports lessens, especially as children begin to recognize differences in athletic abilities. Research assessing youth sports suggests that adults and peers can increase children's levels of motivation to participate in athletics by providing a climate that prioritizes social and emotional development. This article details a psychoeducation group designed by an elementary school counselor to encourage the integration of physical fitness and mental health initiatives that support a healthy lifestyle.

Keywords: school counseling, group counseling, fitness

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Children's involvement in organized sports can be beneficial to their current and future physical, psychological, and social health (Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013; Eveland-Sayers, Farley, Fuller, Morgan, & Caputo, 2009; Hinkle, 1992; Keegan, Harwood, Spray, & Lavallee, 2009). While there are mandated physical education requirements in public schools, some research suggests that 41% of students do not engage in a high enough level of cardiovascular exertion to fully benefit physically from these experiences (Hinkle, 1992). Although over 40 million youth participate in sports outside of the school per year, 35% of them drop out for various reasons (Gano-Overway, Newton, Magyar, Fry, Kim, and Guivernau, 2009). Consequently, many children lose out on the potential benefits of organized athletic activity. With children spending many of their waking hours within the school, it appears that the school environment is an opportune place to help advocate for increased athletic involvement.

According to the American School Counselor Association (2012), one of the roles of the school counselor includes advocacy for direct interventions that assist all students within the school setting. School counselors may advocate by collaborating within the community to create interventions that address systemic change. One way in which school counselors may impact a system is through program development that targets school culture. By creating initiatives that integrate the physical, psychological, social, and emotional aspects of a healthy lifestyle, school counselors can reinforce support for the "whole child" and encourage the development of shared language throughout a district. Partnering with school staff in these efforts can raise awareness of student needs and promote school counselor advocacy.

Previous literature has recommended that physical and mental health school professionals collaborate to support opportunities to promote the athletic, social, and emotional benefits of sports. Hinkle (1992) announced a call to the profession advocating for school counselors and physical educators to build programs that include aerobic activity, and more recently, Webb, Webb, and Fults-McMurtery (2011) have encouraged the expansion of this partnership to include collaboration that addresses students with special needs. Facilitated by a school counselor and a physical education teacher, *Get Fit for Life* is an example of an elementary school-based morning fitness group that addresses the athletic, social, and emotional benefits of organized athletic activity. The structure of the program is designed to recognize children's individual growth, social skill development, and characteristics of a motivational environment. Its implementation in the elementary school setting highlights the value of group work and the creativity that school counselors can use in developing and organizing prevention groups for all students. For the purposes of this article, the terms sports and athletic activity will be used interchangeably when referring to physical fitness.

Benefits of Fitness for Children

Physical fitness is important to one's overall quality of life (Eveland-Sayers et al., 2009). With obesity rates continuing to rise in children (Haapala, 2013; Hinkle, 1992; London & Castrechini, 2011, Pérusse, Kailimang, & Krell, 2009) and the ensuing consequences resulting in greater susceptibility to medical concerns later in life, it is important for schools to provide students with a variety of opportunities to increase their athletic activity. Ironically, according to some literature, trends in physical education reflect a decrease in the amount of time students engage in these activities in favor of a more academically rigorous curriculum (Ryan & Panettini,

2011). As student and educator accountability continue to be at the forefront of national education initiatives, schools' academic priorities tend to increase as do stress and anxiety among some students. If opportunities for students to participate in physical activities that may stave off further mental health concerns are reduced, then academic performance may also decline.

Noting society's commitment to academic achievement, many researchers have chosen to examine association between performance in school and athletic activity (Eveland-Sayers et al., 2009; Haapal, 2013; London & Castrechini, 2011; Ryan & Panettini, 2011). Haapal's research suggests that children with higher cardiorespiratory fitness and greater motor skill development may also have stronger working memory, greater attention to tasks, and higher cognitive functioning. Haapal also found that children who struggle with obesity are likely to have lower cardiorespiratory fitness levels, which may negatively affect motor functioning and brain development. Other promising research has found links between elementary school students' physical activity and mathematic achievement scores (Eveland-Sayers et al., 2009), and a potential achievement gap between fit and unfit children beginning as early as fourth grade (London & Castrechini, 2011). The need for greater awareness and intervention in elementary school is evident.

Examining empirical support for the psychological and social benefits of athletic activity, Eime et al. (2013) reviewed 30 quantitative and qualitative studies performed between 1990 and 2012. Their review of the literature revealed that psychologically, people benefit from involvement with sports in a variety of ways. Greater emotional regulation, decreases in anxiety, and symptoms of depression were found, followed by implications for the development of greater coping strategies and emotional self-efficacy. Increases in self-esteem, confidence, self-awareness,

and self-advocacy were also cited as benefits of athletic participation, which have important implications for social relationships as well. Several of these studies suggested that given a supportive environment, connectedness, character development, and social decision-making were among the interpersonal benefits of participation in sports, particularly specific to children's ability to empathize with others and control their own behaviors (Eime et al., 2013). These prosocial behaviors not only impacted their emotional regulation during the activity but also supported a greater sense of overall self-efficacy (Gano-Overway et al., 2009).

Given the links between team sports and school functioning (Eveland-Sayers et al., 2009; Haapala, 2013; London & Castrechini, 2011), a group focused on athletic activity that encompasses these priorities has the potential to attract a variety of students that might not otherwise be interested in participating in counselor-run groups outside of the classroom setting. The proposed program, Get Fit for Life, is an example of an athletically focused psychoeducational group that reinforces shared language used during classroom guidance lessons, creates in vivo opportunities for counselors to support healthy feedback exchanges, and provides opportunities for students to establish personal goals that correspond with academic achievement, social decision-making, and self-awareness.

Fostering a Motivational Climate

Ames (1992) suggested that the motivational climate reflects the surrounding social influences that help to create a particular culture. Vazou, Ntoumanis, & Duda (2006) specify this environment by suggesting that, "the term motivational climate refers to perceptions of situational cues and expectations that encourage the development of particular goal orientations, and at a given point in time, induce a certain goal involvement state" (p. 216). Ames identified two motivational climates

embedded in achievement goal theory: task-involving and ego-involving. Although each of these environments can encourage the continuation of athletics, task-involving (characterized by support for effort, individual mastery, and personal gains) appears to promote more positive physical, psychological, and social outcomes. Ego-involving, which focuses more on competition and children's skill sets in relation to their peers, may not yield the same desired benefits to self-esteem, social connectedness, and athletic continuation.

As cited in Keegan et al. (2009), Nicholls' research (1989) suggested that children under the age of 11 or 12 cannot differentiate between effort and ability. This assumes that children's motivation comes from experiencing a task-involving environment (Keegan et al., 2009); therefore, the framework for their early athletic development is shaped by the influences of peers and adults (e.g., coaches and parents). The environment created by these social agents has the potential to further support a strong motivational climate that reinforces effort and individual progress or to promote an ego-involving culture, which prioritizes ability over effort. Examining the behavior of coaches, parents, and peers is therefore important to understanding, creating, and maintaining a healthy athletic culture that supports young children of all abilities.

Remaining in sports can be dependent on the atmosphere created (Atkins, Johnson, Force, & Petrie, 2013; Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010; Keegan et al., 2009). "Significant figures in children's lives, such as parents, coaches and peers contribute to the creation of the motivational climate, which is defined through these figures' behaviors, values, attitudes and communications and affect how children come to understand and respond to achievement situations" (Atkins et al., 2013, p. 330). Developmentally, elementary-aged children tend to look at coaches and parents as

the authority, which suggests the importance of their role in motivating future athletic involvement. When parents and coaches contribute to an environment that fosters intra-team competition similar to the culture devised for elite athletes, many of the developmental needs of children are left out; henceforth, motivation to continue decreases for many children (Bailey, Cope, & Pearce, 2013).

This concern deepens when referring to students with disabilities. Depending on the setting, many students with disabilities are mainstreamed into classes and activities to ensure that they are educated in the least restrictive environment. As far as social and emotional development, there are many benefits for these students as well as their peers. Coaches can foster an environment conducive to acceptance and positivity. With growing numbers of children diagnosed with invisible disabilities such as ADHD and many of them encouraged to participate in activities that allow for greater opportunities to move, coaches need to be especially attuned to the environment which they create. Understanding the children's needs and strategies that encourage motivation and peer acceptance are important and necessary to encourage continued engagement among all children (Beyer, Flores, & Vargas-Tonsing, 2008; Lullo & Van Puymbroeck, 2006). It is therefore important that adults be particularly mindful of messages that their behaviors send to children as far as feedback, collaboration, attitude, and competition are concerned.

It is also important for coaches to be aware of the emotional and social implications of their actions. According to Deci and Ryan's research (2000) regarding self-determination theory (SDT), there are three psychological needs that impact a motivational environment: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. For children to remain motivated in sports, coaches and supporting adults need to ensure that children are feeling actively a part of decision-making, capable, and connected to

others (Bailey et al., 2013). The ability or inability to successfully support each of these three factors can foster an intrinsic, extrinsic, and/or an amotivational environment. Similarly, Reinboth and Duba's (2006) research suggested that athletes' well-being is enhanced when they feel valued, listened to, and supported, which suggests the need for coaches' interests should extend well beyond the numbers on a scoreboard. Utilizing a more democratic leadership style characteristic of a task-involving climate is one way that coaches can attend to these psychological needs. Incorporating collaborative decision-making and validating feelings in combination with the articulation of clear expectations for effort and behavior may ultimately help coaches create appropriate boundaries that promote more creative and appropriate risk-taking among children.

In addition to considering the behavior of coaches, the motivational environment is also impacted by parents as well. As far as physical and psychological health, parenting styles and behaviors have been known to influence children's perceptions of body image and motivation to engage in athletic activities (Atkins et al., 2013; Tata, Fox, & Cooper, 2001). Atkins et al. (2013) suggested that warmth and encouragement to participate in sports can positively impact children's desires to continue to play and support other psychological outcomes such as self-esteem, sport competence, and enjoyment. Atkins' research and the research of others (e.g., Keegan et al., 2010) found that overall, parents who prioritized elements of a task-involving climate as far as praising best effort and having fun encouraged greater motivation and a positive athletic climate. Additionally, open dialogue with coaches pertaining to the physical, social, and psychological needs of their players has also been found to support an accepting environment in which all abilities and team contributions are acknowledged (Beyer et al., 2008).

Considering the impact of coaches and active involvement of many parents, it appears that adults play an integral role in the psychological, behavioral, and social benefits that children experience from team sports. Those that model caring behaviors indicative of a task-involving climate help children to experience greater enjoyment, more commitment to the sport, and a deeper sense of belongingness to others on the team (Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010). Likewise, adults' abilities to develop positive interpersonal relationships with players can also promote children's emotional regulation skills (Gano-Overway et al., 2009). Thus, fostering the motivation in children to participate in sports and providing opportunities for the development of important life skills is a combined effort.

While the motivational climate has long been studied in relation to adults (Vazou et al., 2006), there is limited research regarding its influence on athletic continuation in children and adolescents. Developmentally, children and adolescents are highly influenced by peers. Consequently, the social component inherent in the participation in sports may be driven by the environment created and maintained by peers.

Vazou, Ntoumanis, & Duda's (2005) qualitative study researched peers' influence on the motivational environment. Eleven dimensions of the environment emerged, which included improvement, equal treatment, relatedness support, cooperation, effort, intra-team competition, intra-team conflict, normative ability, autonomy support, mistakes, and evaluation of competence. Each of these areas was seen as influencing the psychological environment.

Descriptive Methods

According to Keegan et al. (2009), adults can promote a task-oriented environment by incorporating collaborative play and decision making, multi-aged and

ability pairing, individual assessment, and ample time to recognize all children's successes. The following outline of the Get Fit for Life group specifically addresses these components and incorporates shared leadership between facilitators (coaches) and peer mentors. Partnering with other stakeholders such as a physical education teacher or coach in the school offers a balance of skillsets and conveys to students the importance of an integrated model of physical health, mental health, and wellness. Collaboration also affords employees the opportunity to learn from each other, which is likely to increase school counselor advocacy in the future.

Get Fit for Life: Outline and Design

The Get Fit for Life morning fitness group was developed in an elementary school and is currently marketed to all kindergarten through fourth grade students. With two facilitators, the 8-week group is limited to 20 students and it meets four mornings per week for 45 minutes before the school day begins. During the first day of each session, students are introduced to the structure of the group and are asked to pay close attention to their peers' choices and interactions for discussion later during circle time.

While the format of the group may vary, the first ten minutes of each session are devoted to an unstructured warm-up activity that promotes dialogue between peers. Facilitators prepare selected equipment and allow students the freedom to create games together, noting the way in which students interact with each other. Inclusive language, tone of voice, body language, and conflict resolution skills are observed and globally articulated such as, "I noticed that when John was initially not sure which group to play with when he came in, Tom immediately invited him to play basketball with his small group." These observations and reflections are often tended to during circle time at the end of the session as well. The overall goal of these ten

minutes is to allow for creativity and connection with members and facilitators in the group.

The next five to ten minutes include a structured team-building activity. Process comments are made by the facilitators throughout the activity and conflict resolution skills among peers are facilitated by the leaders when necessary to incorporate collective problem-solving. Opportunities to elicit feedback from bystanders, especially using older students as peer role models help the group members to remain engaged in the collaborative nature of the activity.

The next fifteen to twenty minutes focus on the activity of choice for that particular week. Specific skills related to basketball, Frisbee, bowling, ultimate football, scooters, and soccer to name a few of the sports are taught, and students are often paired up or working in small groups to support each other's individual growth. Activities are differentiated for all participants, and members of the group are encouraged through positive feedback to demonstrate examples of good sportsmanship.

Finally, the last ten minutes of each session are devoted to circle time. This allows for students to unwind and process their morning. At this time, students are reminded about the importance of using good presentation skills. Members help each other to speak at an audible volume, slowly, and directly to the person receiving the compliment. Each student is asked to share a specific example of complimentary feedback to one person of their choosing in the group for that day. Initially, the facilitators model compliments that reflect character and good decision-making. Students learn to provide feedback such as, "I'm proud of Ally because when she was tagged, she followed directions immediately and did not get upset." Or, "I am proud of fourth grade Sammy for encouraging her kindergarten partner

Alex to step with his opposite foot when they were practicing throwing the Frisbee.” Facilitators can also use these opportunities to ask recipients how it felt to receive this feedback. Emotional expression skills are fostered through these exchanges and peer mentorships are formed and reinforced.

The final moments of circle time include a summary of the feedback and at times, goals that students can focus on during that school day. Whether students are asked to use a new vocabulary word in their classes, intentionally make a point to initiate a verbal or non-verbal connection with a fellow morning fitness group member throughout the day, make a point to initiate a positive comment to a teacher or classroom peer, or another individually set or group articulated goal, students are aware that follow-up discussions during future groups will encourage accountability and further practice.

Get Fit for Life: A Task-Involving Motivational Climate

Vazou et al.’s (2005) study yielded eleven dimensions that supported a task-involving motivational climate. Each of these areas is incorporated into the Get Fit for Life group through a variety of intentional interactions and activities. Facilitators (coaches), peers, and parents are all involved in the creation and maintenance of this climate and are able to support children’s efforts and individual athletic, social, and emotional growth in many ways.

Following up on Vazou et al.’s (2005) qualitative findings, Vazou et al. (2006) conducted a predictive follow-up study that examined the influence of peers and coaches on the motivational environment. Their results suggested that the perception of a task-involving climate affected children’s degree of physical competence, enjoyment, and effort. Their results also suggested that a more ego-involved climate increased competitive trait-anxiety. Other studies such as Keegan et

al. (2009) examined young children's athletic motivation and found that one of the strongest themes connected to children's motivation to participate in athletics related to that of positivity, which is characterized as "positive feedback, positive affective responses, positive pre-competition talks, encouragement, collaboration/support, and fun" (p. 371). It seems likely that athletic confidence, effort, and attitude are supported by positivity and enjoyment.

Improvement. One of the first dimensions discussed by Vazou et al. (2005) focused on improvement. In an ego-involving environment, improvement would likely equate to students measuring their athletic development as it relates to that of their peers' progress. Throughout the program, facilitators and peers are encouraged to provide on-going positive feedback that specifically addresses students' individual progress. This progress may be articulated in relation to their athletic skill, interpersonal relationships, or contributions to the environment. During circle time, facilitators model positive feedback and here-and-now process comments to support students by providing this type of feedback to each other. As sessions progress, group members naturally follow suit by focusing less on athletic comparison (e.g., "I'm proud of Frank for scoring two goals") and more on recognizing students' improvement (e.g., "I'm proud of Sammy for holding the Frisbee parallel to the floor when participating in the relay."). Facilitators often follow this student's compliment, for example, with further encouragement by saying, "I love the way Jane observed that Sammy has been working on the way she is holding the Frisbee, even though she and her partner were standing across the room."

Equal treatment. This dimension focuses on fairness and understanding of each person's importance to the team. During the Get Fit for Life group, facilitators regularly communicate the importance of everyone getting what he/she needs to be

successful. Activities are differentiated for students with a variety of athletic and cognitive abilities. These messages are often internalized by students, as facilitators regularly hear students providing positive encouragement to peers with a variety of disabilities such as, “I’m proud of Susan for listening to the directions carefully and helping a teammate stand in the right place for the activity.” Susan represents a student who requires frequent redirection because of attentional difficulties, and in this case example, a peer has recognized that she was able to attend to the directions and support her teammate. While the complimenting peer is not specifically aware of Susan’s disability, her intuition and the environment has encouraged her to recognize her peer’s individual improvement and specific contributions to the team. In another example, a student who struggles with emotional expression and behavioral difficulties is allowed to choose the activities in which he would like to participate as long as he shows encouragement and good sportsmanship when he chooses to sit out. During one round of capture the flag, his peers invite him to play, and he accepts as long as his flag is barely visible to other students. While this potentially creates an unfair advantage because peers may struggle to retrieve his flag, the group welcomes him into the activity, allowing him to reach one of the final rounds without hesitation. Minutes later, he receives a compliment from a peer for taking a risk and helping to create a fun environment with his smile.

Cooperation. This dimension emphasizes the importance of working collaboratively and supporting each other. There are many different ways in which the program provides students with opportunities to work together. Facilitators are able to model and reinforce cooperative learning skills and can choose to use different activities to highlight and discuss the transferability of these skills to the

classroom, social situations, and career decision-making. One example of a cooperative activity used in this program is called the “Eco-System Sit.” This activity is a regularly used team-building initiative that incorporates a science discussion around the eco-system and the importance of everything needing to work together to ensure that the system functions appropriately. Simply, students must work together and trust each other in order to sit down on each other’s laps without falling and their hands free to wave in the air. This task can be particularly challenging given the diversity of ages in this program. Students are charged with the task of brainstorming appropriate positioning, how they will communicate when to both sit and stand together, and when they will be able to wave their hands. Facilitators provide guidance and attend to the physical safety of the group but also allow this be a student-led activity. Children feel accomplished after the completion of this activity and a follow-up discussion around what worked and did not work helps students and group members to set future goals.

Effort. Praising effort is one of the key elements of a task-involving motivational climate. Throughout the program, peers are regularly heard motivating each other to try their best by praising effort rather than the outcome only. During circle time, students often provide compliments such as, “I am proud of Dustin for not giving up when he had trouble dribbling the ball around the cones.” Or, “I noticed that Sandy tried different ways to help communicate the message to her teammate, especially after he became frustrated and misunderstood the directions.” Facilitators often provide process comments throughout the activities that support a strong work ethic and the ability to keep going after a disappointment. This also serves to support resiliency and self-efficacy.

Inter-team competition. In combination with emphasizing effort, the Get Fit for Life program supports inter-team competition by encouraging an environment where students push each other to work to their personal best. Older students can often be seen stepping up as leaders during these moments and helping to support younger, more shy or struggling students in identifying their strengths and contributions to the team. An example of this might look like a fourth grade boy huddling up his small group and devising a plan that includes recognizing each member's strengths. One student may be encouraged to be the runner because of her speed, while another student might be coached to hang back and let the team know if a member on the opposite side comes into the team's territory. Each student in the activity feels valued and supported as an active contributor to the team. Facilitators and students recognize these specific dynamics during circle time and a goal for future classes may include more in-group communication to ensure that all students are equally involved in the activity.

Intra-team conflict. This dimension reflects a main focus of this program. ASCA (2012) identifies the importance of teaching conflict resolution skills and helping students to make a distinction between tattling and telling. In the school where this program was developed, kindergarten developmental counseling lessons include helping students to differentiate between small "caterpillar" problems that can be worked out by students themselves and big "butterfly" problems that warrant adult intervention. This language is regularly used throughout the school day and particularly emphasized during Get Fit for Life. In an age where "everyone is a winner" and adults tend to intervene without allowing students to develop their own conflict resolution skills, the competitive nature of sports can bring about many in vivo learning opportunities to develop coping strategies that promote resiliency.

Helping students develop appropriate communication skills and the ability to distinguish between small and large problems encourages fair play and the development of healthier anger management strategies. An example of this might be during an activity where students try to avoid being tagged by the Octopus. During circle time, students are often praised by facilitators and each other for being honest when they inadvertently stepped outside of the boundaries or experienced a light tag that they might not have initially recognized. When the “guilty” or tagged student does not argue or complain and believes that everyone is playing by the rules, an environment of trust is created amongst members. In the event where an argument occurs, the activity is often stopped and students are encouraged to decide what kind of problem it is (caterpillar or butterfly) and then to talk about how they are feeling and strategies to resolve the issue. Other members are sometimes asked if they might have a suggestion for the two students in conflict, and a disagreement is often resolved using proper communication skills and community support. This environment will often result in one of the students offering to agree to disagree and keep playing. Even if a student makes a choice that initially sparks an argument, she is praised for her efforts to remain calm and ultimately work the problem out in a way that is productive.

Normative ability. This dimension refers to social comparison. As students advance through elementary school, they become more aware of themselves in relation to others. By second grade, typically developing students begin to realize their strengths in various areas and are rewarded with praise for their accomplishments. Solely emphasizing these accomplishments may reinforce an ego-involving climate only. Facilitators can simultaneously support a task-involving climate by engaging in discussion around the “goals” of Get Fit for Life. Students

come to recognize that the emphasis is not on winning but on preparing for a productive day at school through exercise, collaboration, and positive connections with others. With these collective group goals, students are supportive when facilitators establish rules in ultimate football, for instance, that everyone on the team touches the ball before a touchdown is scored.

Mistakes. The Get Fit for Life group attracts students with both type A and type B personalities. With stress sometimes acting as a catalyst for perfectionistic tendencies and/or mental health concerns, (Blodgett Salafia & Lemer, 2012) this program regularly reinforces positive coping strategies and messages that promote healthy risk-taking. This is not only important for students to understand an intrapersonal perspective, but an interpersonal perspective as well. Students are supported in embracing their own fallibility as well as that of other group members. Students are encouraged to both own their own mistakes by accepting responsibility for their actions and be accepting of the inevitability of mistakes in others. Facilitators take opportunities to discuss both verbal and non-verbal reactions and the social consequences that occur when teammates are not accepting of others' mistakes. Conversations often extend the school counselor's developmental guidance lessons that focus on different forms of communication and friendship. Facilitators may reinforce acceptance by praising a student who intentionally passes a ball to another student even after he had dropped the pass previously; consequently both students have the opportunity to feel accomplished and connected to the group.

Evaluation of competence. This dimension is honored by celebrating individual successes. Students are encouraged to praise the progress of each student. At times, facilitators will ask students to give a compliment to a peer whom they've never given one to in the past. This pushes students to observe each other in

different ways and often allows for the recognition of different strengths that others have not yet mentioned. Over the course of this program's five-year development, one of the highlights of this dimension in relation to student success occurred during ultimate football with a student who struggles with social and sensory deficits. During one game, Hailey regularly threw the ball in the opposite direction to no teammate in particular. Facilitators observed the non-verbal expressions of peers to ensure that she still had support and encouragement from the group. During the following session, this student was regularly thrown to by peers and despite encouragement would become very excited and again throw the ball in the opposite direction. Just as this session was concluding, she was awarded the ball and just as she was about to toss it in the wrong direction, she stopped, pivoted, which is an athletic skill worked on in the group and threw it directly to a teammate for a successful completion. At this time, encouraged by the older peers, both teams stopped, clapped, and chanted her name. The excitement on her face was the focus of many of the students' compliments during circle time. Hailey was given the opportunity to evaluate her competence based on the feedback from others specific to her individual growth.

Relatedness support. School counselors are trained in group dynamics, and according to Yalom's therapeutic factors, universality and cohesion are two factors that promote therapeutic growth (Yalom, 2005). Students regularly take opportunities to include each other during less structured activities and are encouraged to tell each other directly when something is bothering them or they've missed their smile the past few mornings in their absence. This promotes connectedness and encourages students to show accountability to the group.

One of the activities that facilitators use that directly promotes relatedness and support focuses on bystander intervention. Anti-bullying initiatives are regularly

utilized in school counseling programs and an opportunity to bring shared language and strategies into the Get Fit for Life group reinforces these important messages. During the popular “Bully Ball” game, students discuss the roles of the bully, the bullied, and the bystander (Olweus & Limber, 2007). As discussed in classroom developmental guidance lessons, students engage in a discussion about the responsibility of the bystander and are encouraged to utilize strategies that help them to become “upstanders.” Devised as a scooter game, the “bully” needs to tag people who then say loudly, “I need help!” Bystanders are charged with the responsibility of tagging them back into the game by saying, “upstander to the rescue.” Students are also taught about the power of bystanders who join forces to protect the bullied students. In this game, if one student links arms with at least two other group members, they can tag the bullied student back in by saying, “we’ll include you.” Facilitators have opportunities to observe students who take risks to help others and who orchestrate opportunities to support the students who need help. This activity is then processed during circle time and compliments reflect the support and altruism exhibited during this activity.

Autonomy. The last of the eleven identified dimensions focuses on students finding their voices and developing a belief about their abilities to be successful or, according to Bandura (1986), their sense of self-efficacy. Students are encouraged to share their input in respectful ways and even offer suggestions for new or amendments to existing activities. All students from kindergarten through fourth grade know that the facilitators’ motto is “fostering autonomy.” When capable students struggle to put on their shoes or tie their laces, facilitators communicate to them that they believe that they can complete this task autonomously. Students support each other in these efforts and recognize individual progress, even around

small accomplishments like tying a flag to their waist or unzipping their jackets by themselves in the morning. Facilitators use various opportunities to recognize teachable moments.

Discussion

School counselors are trained in group process and according to ASCA (2012), have a responsibility to deliver services that support school culture. Time and district priorities often represent hurdles that inhibit school counselors from reaching larger numbers of students with group counseling interventions. One way to circumvent these issues may be to offer less traditional opportunities outside of the seven-hour school day that specifically cater to the values of the community. The school district in which this program was first developed offers an academically rigorous curriculum with many students who engage in extensive after school sporting activities. Academic achievement and fitness are two important priorities embedded in the culture of the community. As such, opportunities to support positive achievement and health and wellness in the school are recognized and appreciated.

As the achievement gap continues to widen between fit and unfit students and is compounded by cultural factors such as socioeconomic status (London & Castrechini, 2011), the need to empirically study current groups and develop greater opportunities for children of all athletic abilities becomes especially important in the elementary school population. While to date, the Get Fit for Life group has not been studied empirically, its efficacy may be measured in various ways in the future. Given the intricacy of group dynamics and the value of group counseling in the schools, research that examines the impact of therapeutic factors on group goals, academic and social engagement, and achievement and/or emotional expression skills may guide further development of this program. Likewise, qualitative interviews with

parents, coaches and school personnel may evidence a need for more transparency between home and school.

Limitations

Limitations for school districts may exist around availability of staff before school hours and morning transportation for students. Additionally, the types of equipment and available gymnasium space to run this program might also be a challenge. While physical fitness is a priority in the community in which this group was developed, other communities might value morning programming focused on different topics. It is therefore important for school counselors to assess the needs of the community and consider altering the timing, design, and priorities of the group to remain consistent with community values.

Summary

As it currently stands, Get Fit for Life represents a marriage of school counseling initiatives with community values. The group continues to be utilized as a gateway for school counselors to provide counseling interventions to students who might not otherwise be likely to experience the benefits of group counseling outside of the classroom setting. Parental and administrative support has contributed to its growth and success over the years, and its contribution to the health and wellness of elementary school students represents an initiative that addresses the needs of the “whole child.”

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