

Girls Active Programme

2003-2005 Report

Summary



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Introduction

Girls Active is a physical activity programme targeting teenage girls in schools in the northwest (County Donegal, Sligo and Leitrim) region of Ireland. It is a joint initiative between the Health Service Executive West (HSE), Sligo Sport and Recreation Partnership (SSRP), Donegal Sports Partnership (DSP) and Youth Sport West (YSW). The programme is designed to increase the number of teenage girls involved in long-term regular physical activity through developing more supportive environments in schools.

This document is a summary of the evaluation of the first two years of the programme. During the first two phases of the programme, 2003/4 and 2004/5, a total of 19 schools participated with 239 girls taking part in the initial year and 330 in the following year. The purpose of the evaluation report is to provide feedback to the support organisations on the extent to which Girls Active has achieved its aims and objectives. In addition, the report provides information which may be useful to those who are interested in developing physical activities for teenage girls. It will also assist future policy development for physical activity in schools.

Methodology

A variety of methods has been employed to gather data for the present review, including a questionnaire survey of participating girls and case studies of three participating schools. A total of 198 girls who participated on Girls Active during the school year of 2004-5 returned completed questionnaires. These came from 18 out of the 19 schools that took part in that year and represented approximately 60% of the total number of girls involved. Together with other data (documentation, steering group and co-ordinating teachers' in-service day), these sources contribute to building a three-dimensional picture of the programme as it has evolved over the years and collectively point to a path towards its future development.

Key Findings

- The vast majority of girls are aware of at least some of the benefits of physical activity. More than two-thirds (68%) reported that physical activity was discussed during the SPHE class in schools where it was timetabled. When asked to identify the MAIN reason why they participated in Girls Active, the majority of girls (81%) selected either 'to get fitter', 'to be more active' or 'to have fun'.
- The girls had a high degree of input into deciding what type of activities were undertaken in Phase Two as more than 8 out of 10 indicated that they had a say in this regard (86%).
- The vast majority of girls (88%) stated that they took part in Girls Active activities either most or all of the time.
- Girls were asked to estimate their activity levels before and after participating in Girls Active. This was achieved by asking respondents to indicate the frequency at which they played sport, cycled or walked briskly for at least 30 minutes both before they started Girls Active and afterwards (not including PE class and activity in Girls Active itself). The results suggest that physical activity levels are higher after than they were before Girls Active.
- The majority considered that getting exercise and having fun were the two most important factors associated with Girls Active.
- Most (more than two-thirds) indicated that they were either very satisfied or satisfied with the type, number and length of sessions, with costs and with instructors.
- The vast majority of respondents expressed a high level of satisfaction with the co-ordinating teacher (81% of girls registering 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied'). Girls were generally also satisfied with



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the support from other Girls Active participants, other students in the school, and from their families.

- Most girls agreed or strongly agreed that they feel better (68%), are more active (64%), have learned new sports (61%) and are more aware of general health (64%) as a result of their involvement in the programme
- More than half the girls rated their satisfaction with Girls Active as 'excellent' and another third rated it as 'good', making a total of 90% who gave a positive overall rating to the programme.
- At the end of the questionnaire respondents were asked to list three words to describe what Girls Active meant to them. In response, many very positive words were included, such as 'worthwhile', 'cool', 'brilliant' and 'excellent', while there were few negative comments.

Characteristics of the programme

From all the findings it appears that the characteristics of the programme that appealed most to the participants were -

- the fun and exercise elements
- 'novelty' of the activities
- presence of friends
- girl-only was another plus for the programme
- absence of competition
- time to change clothes
- meeting new people.

School staff also responded positively to the programme. Both principals and co-ordinators commented on the general enthusiasm of the participants for Girls Active and on how it seemed to have influenced them in a positive manner, both in relation to their overall demeanour and in relation to their interest in pursuing opportunities for increased physical activity.

Overall, the programme has been successful in terms of its implementation in schools. It is clear that most girls maintained their level of participation throughout the year and were satisfied with the sessions, the instructors and the support provided within the schools. A positive general satisfaction rating of 90% from participating girls via the questionnaire speaks for itself in this regard. Clearly, the fact that girls had an input into deciding what type of activities were undertaken in the programme paid dividends.

Similarly, co-ordinating teachers and principals generally expressed satisfaction with the support provided by the steering group whether through funding, instructors' database, ready accessibility by phone and teachers' in-service training. In addition, the Activity Fest was mentioned as a valuable opportunity for girls to broaden their experiences of the programme.

Strengths

Staff in the case study schools identified the strengths of the programme as follows:

- Design of the initiative that incorporates external instructors and a flexibility of approach in response to the needs of the girls
- Financial assistance provided
- Quality of staff involved – commitment of co-ordinators, expertise of instructors, support from the steering group.

One of the clear strengths of the programme is that it has been developed and rolled out in consultation with girls. As a result, it is directly responsive to their needs and values their role as advisors as well as participants.

Without initial financial support the schools were less likely to have undertaken the programme in the first instance but now that the benefits are more visible, all three case study schools were prepared to consider maintaining the programme independently at some level.



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As with the girls, the responses from staff in relation to the personnel involved in the programme were positive – school staff felt the steering group provided accessible and relevant support through the in-service day, instructors' database, visits to schools and availability by phone. Principals appreciated the (voluntary) work of co-ordinators and co-ordinators felt that principals were supportive of the programme.

Challenges

The challenges for the programme were highlighted by girls and by school personnel as follows -

- Timing of sessions,
- Arrangements for instructors,
- Involvement of girls in timing/organising activities,
- Limitations on numbers involved.

Some Girls Active sessions occur at lunchtime and some after school and it appears that both schedules have associated problems. Lunch is no more than an hour long and commonly utilised for extra-curricular activities. For Girls Active, it can be difficult to acquire instructors at lunchtime and sessions may be necessarily curtailed. On the other hand, some girls find it more difficult to attend evening sessions especially if they live a distance from the school and rely on buses to get home.

While the Girls Active programme is intended to be additional to the formal curriculum, within the context of a 'whole school' environment all extra-curricular activity is viewed as an important part of a student's development and indeed as 'co-curricular' to the main programme of teaching undertaken by schools. In the 'whole school', therefore, lunchbreak becomes an equally important part of the student's day and adequate provision will be seen as important for all such activities. Programmes such as Girls Active are, therefore, more likely to prosper in the 'whole school' context.

Conclusion

Most of the girls participating in Girls Active had previously not been active in sports either inside or outside school. They put forward many reasons for this in the present study and most of those relate to a feeling of being excluded from such activities rather than negative feelings towards physical activity itself. They felt excluded because they were girls, because they were not 'good' at sport, because they did not like the limited range of sporting activity available to them, or because they did not like certain aspects of traditional competitive sport such as the pressure to win. When given an opportunity through Girls Active to choose other kinds of physical activities, however, it is notable that these 'non-sporty' girls responded very positively through their attendance and their enthusiasm for the programme. The girls felt motivated by a desire to get fitter, to be more active and to have fun – common reasons why anyone might get involved in sport. It appears that what was missing for these girls previously was a supportive environment and accessible appropriate activities.



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Recommendations

Girls Active Management (HSE West, DSP, SSRP)

1. Continue to support schools in implementing the Girls Active programme. In the process, maintain its core principles especially those that are important to girls.

2. Encourage participating schools to mainstream the programme by incorporating it into the school's general sports policies and programmes.

3. The programme can be further enhanced by the following:

- Continue to develop and enhance the partnership between the support agencies in order to sustain Girls Active so that it will become an integral part of every school's physical activity programme.
- Strengthen the link between SPHE and Girls Active – provide materials on the link in co-ordinator training and school visits; provide support and materials to SPHE teachers; emphasise the commitment of schools in relation to the terms and conditions of the programme.
- Facilitate and support the Girls Active programme to include sports clubs and other local facility providers.
- Acknowledge the work of Girls Active co-ordinators and continue to support them through training, school visits and the development of materials.
- Continue to promote and publicise the programme within each county so that participation by schools is recognised and valued.
- Pilot the development of a physical activity policy with a small number of schools. Such a policy would clearly differentiate between physical education, sport and recreational physical activity. The policy would emphasise the importance of developing opportunities for all students in a range

of programmes and events. It would be particularly sensitive to the needs of girls but would also examine the issue of provision of activities for boys. The development of such a policy would ideally involve the SPHE team in the school, the PE teacher and the Girls Active steering group.

Girls Active Schools

- Develop a culture that values participation by girls in a wide range of physical activities. This includes the development of a written school policy that, by recognising physical activities that are parallel to sporting achievements, is inclusive of participation for all.
- Continue to implement Girls Active as part of the school physical activity programme.
- Provide a supportive environment for teachers in their roles as Girls Active co-ordinators.
- Link with the local community to provide access to a wide range of sporting and recreational activities and facilities. Develop a database of existing facilities, clubs and activities available in the local community.
- Continue to involve girls in the selection, organisation and promotion of extra-curricular activities and activities in PE classes. Focus on individual as well as team activities.
- Promote Girls Active at all levels and every opportunity within the home, school and community environments.

Other Recommendations

- That the Department of Education and Science strengthen physical activity in schools through supporting extra-curricular school activities as important elements of the 'whole school' approach.
- That all agencies involved in Girls Active continue to fund Girls Active and all other programmes that promote the participation of girls in physical activities.

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