In our experience, we have found that a limited amount of scholarly research has been conducted on the topic of curriculum development in recreational program planning for children and youth. For instance, detailed literature searches using discipline-related search engines, such as SPORTDiscus™, result in few relevant findings.

Overall, the amount of research or documentation regarding the use of guidelines or best practices to influence recreation programming is inadequate. However, we have still found that some useful information can be extracted from the current literature in the domain of physical education to help recreation program planners strategize and begin to develop purposeful programs.

Best Practices in Physical Education Programming

Evidence-based programs are typically based on substantial research that helps to choose activities designed to improve select health-related behaviours or outcomes (Lounsbery, McKenzie, Trost & Smith, 2011).

Given that curriculum-based physical education (PE) is a “cousin” of recreational programming, the trend towards evidence-based programming (at least in school settings) is positive. It also offers some practical guidance and insights to recreation programmers.

Although few evidence-based PE programs are available (McKenzie, Sallis, & Rosengard, 2009), there are at least two popular, evidence-based programs that are used in parts of Canada and the United States. They are:

- the Sports, Play and Active Recreation for Kids (SPARK™) program; and
- the Coordinated Approach to Child Health (CATCH®) program.

CATCH® is an evidence-based, coordinated school health program designed to promote physical activity, healthy food choices and the prevention of tobacco use in children (CATCH, 2012).

Although this article refers primarily to the SPARK™ program, both programs have proven to be popular, where implemented, largely because of their evidence-based development and successful alignment with provincial and state standards (Sharpe, Forrester, & Mandigo, 2011).
More About SPARK™

SPARK™ was developed in 1989 at San Diego State University and has been implemented in American schools since 1994 (Dowda, Kohl, McKenzie, Rosengard, & Sallis, 2005). SPARK™ is a well researched, peer-reviewed, evidence-based PE program developed by physical education researchers (Levin & Martin, 2002; McKenzie et al., 2009).

The SPARK™ program was specifically designed to address the issue of inactivity and decreasing fitness levels in children and youth (McKenzie et al., 2009). The main focus of the SPARK™ program is to develop cardiovascular endurance in students by increasing participation in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA). SPARK™ also includes components of abdominal and upper strength instruction, with a heavy emphasis on age-appropriate fundamental movement skill development.

Overall, the SPARK™ curriculum is designed to include progressive activities that are engaging and easily implemented in a school or recreation setting. The program includes a validated teacher training and assessment strategy to enhance the effectiveness and skills of the instructors delivering the program (Sallis et al., 1997).

Since the SPARK™ program was introduced in Canada five years ago, no Canadian-based PE or recreational program research that we are aware of has been published. However, in 2008, the Public Health Agency of Canada cited SPARK™ as a Best Practices Portal for children’s programming.

Cardel Place Research Project

Beginning in early 2014, the Cardel Place child and youth action research team will be examining the integration of a holistic and multi-disciplinary recreation program for six- and seven-year-old children. The 22-week intervention will use the SPARK™ physical activity lesson plans, aligned to Canadian Sport for Life principles.

The primary objective is to determine if this integration will improve children's motor proficiency. Specifically, measures of upper limb coordination, balance, speed, agility, strength, and bilateral coordination will be pre- and post-tested.

Physical activity (PA) behaviours of the children will be examined over five months by using accelerometers and direct observation, following the System of Observing Fitness Instruction Time.

The Cardel Place action research team seeks to establish that purposeful, holistic, evidence-based programming can improve motor proficiency competence and PA behaviours. Our hope is that this will help to create a generation of children and youth who are confident in their fundamental movement skills, and thus more physically active and engaged in recreation and leisure throughout their lifetime.

Conclusion

In our view, future researchers should be encouraged to document the sequence of reasoning and decision-making used to create a program, from its inception to the final evaluation of intended outcomes.

Based on our own experiences, there is a clear need for more research that assesses the effectiveness and practicality of using evidence-based programs in recreational and after-school program settings. In addition, there is a need for fresh Canadian research in these areas, so more of the Canadian experience can be added to the literature.

Key Terms

Evidence-based programs are typically based on substantial research that helps to choose activities designed to improve select health-related behaviours or outcomes (Lounsbery, McKenzie, Trost & Smith, 2011, p. 518).

SPARK™ (Sports, Play, and Active Recreation for Kids) is a research-based, public health organization dedicated to creating, implementing, and evaluating evidence-based physical activity programs that promote lifelong wellness (SPARK, 2012).

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References


