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Study finds fathers are key to improving girls' health, fitness and wellbeing

With less than 10% of girls entering high school able to perform basic skills such as kicking, catching and throwing a ball, and less than 20% being sufficiently physically active, it is easy to see why teenage girls are far more likely to drop out of playing sports than boys. This not only has damaging impacts on girls' health and fitness, but also on body image and self-esteem. With current strategies to increase girls' involvement in sport having little impact, researchers from the University of Newcastle decided to take a novel approach, designing a fun and positive exercise program for fathers and daughters to undertake together.

Under the world-first DADEE program (Dads and Daughters Exercising and Empowered), 155 primary school age girls and their 115 fathers took part in a wide variety of traditional and non-traditional sporting pursuits including hockey, soccer, touch football, basketball, tennis, martial arts and boxing, as well as rough and tumble play, and games to improve aerobic and muscular fitness.

During the eight-week program, fathers also learnt evidence-based parenting strategies for optimising their daughters' physical and mental health. The importance of 'equalist' parenting was emphasised — where girls and boys are given equal encouragement to remain physically active throughout their lives — and fathers learnt about the positive impact of female role models and the negative of impact of 'pinkification'. In fact, the DADEE program deliberately reversed the usual stereotypes so that girls' t-shirts and drink bottles were blue and fathers' t-shirts and drink bottles were pink.

Not only did girls improve their sporting skills and physical activity levels, but the DADEE program impacted positively on their self-esteem and resilience. By moving the focus from 'pretty' to 'healthy', it was found that girls improved their positive self-concept and gained a newfound physical confidence. Lead researcher, Professor Phil Morgan, from the University of Newcastle's Priority Research Centre for Physical Activity and Nutrition, says that the girls' physical confidence "was partly attributed to a growing awareness of gender biases and a refusal to buy into traditional stereotypes".

For fathers, not only did they improve their own physical fitness and learn 'how to teach' their daughters sporting skills, but they also reported increased parenting skills and strong improvements in family bonding and understanding of the importance of the father-daughter relationship. In fact, when fathers were asked about the most beneficial part of the program, the two most common responses were that they could see an improvement in their daughter's social-emotional wellbeing and that their father-daughter bond had strengthened.

Professor Morgan describes the pilot study's results as "outstanding for both fathers and daughters":

The program greatly improved the girls' social-emotional wellbeing by empowering them to be resilient and critical thinkers, to take on new challenges, to be persistent and brave, and to take a leadership role in the family's physical activity habits with renewed physical confidence.

Research summary for principals

As a result of the study, not only have fathers reported that their daughters are practising their newly acquired ball skills in hitting, throwing and catching, but they are also participating in school and community sports in greater numbers. Girls who took part in the program have subsequently been inspired to take up wide variety of sports including soccer, softball and swimming, as well as trying activities like boxing and martial arts which are not traditionally regarded as 'female' sports.

The results of the DADEE study are in line with a large number of academic studies undertaken over the past thirty years which demonstrate the important role that fathers play in influencing their children's physical, social, emotional and mental health. The role of fathers has been found critical not only in encouraging girls to adopt 'masculine' attitudes of being more physical, taking risks and embracing unpredictability, but also in helping girls to improve their body image and self-esteem. Yet Professor Morgan writes that despite "the many benefits that result from a strong father-daughter relationship", up to 70% of fathers only see themselves as an 'extra set of hands' in helping mothers to raise daughters. In addition, he says:

fathers are often less involved with daughters than mothers, spend less time with daughters than sons, spend less time being active and practising sport skills together, and discount their role in fostering their daughters' physical activity behaviours and social-emotional wellbeing.

Professor Morgan believes that the DADEE program has been so successful because it has shown fathers how to become an equalist parent by "removing the gender straitjacket and acknowledging their daughters more for their physical confidence, passions, insights and beliefs, rather than their looks and passivity". In doing so, he says, fathers learn to "honour their daughters' unique experience in the world and to encourage them to define femininity in their own terms".

References

DADEE website: <http://www.dadee.net.au>

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