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## Lessons Learned from a Nontraditional Sports Program: CrossFit Kids for Youth at Risk

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# Lessons Learned from a Nontraditional Sports Program: CrossFit Kids for Youth at Risk

## Abstract

Offering youth, especially youth at risk, access to something different has the opportunity to allow participants to discover new passions and interests. A nontraditional sports program was offered to middle school students who were members of the local Boys and Girls Club during the 2015–2016 academic year. Identifying a program focusing on CrossFit was valuable because CrossFit Kids programming is geared to develop the whole child addressing health and lifestyle choices and social responsibility. The purpose of this paper is to describe the program, examine what worked and did not work, and note what changes were made based on the outcomes. Overall, the program proved to be valuable for the participants. Success was found when the participants' voices were used to inform adjustments to the program based on their needs instead of following pre-defined, fixed outcomes.

## Keywords

nontraditional sports program, CrossFit Kids, youth at risk, program review

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## Cover Page Footnote

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## Lessons Learned from a Nontraditional Sports Program: CrossFit Kids for Youth at Risk

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Offering youth, especially youth at risk, access to something different has the opportunity to allow participants to discover new passions and interests. A nontraditional sports program was offered to middle school students who were members of the local Boys and Girls Club during the 2015–2016 academic year. The Boys and Girls Club was interested in developing more links with the local university, exposing the membership to the local community and university, and providing alternative activities compared to traditional sports. Considering the high dropout rates in traditional sports (Sabo & Veliz, 2014), a university research team surmised that a nontraditional program focused on sport and fitness, CrossFit Kids, would be appropriate for the club membership. The Boys and Girls Club noted that 94% of their membership was from minority and/or low income families in the rural southeast with many from single-parent homes; in addition, most members had limited options of places to go other than home, school, and the Boys and Girls Club. Many of these participants also depended on Federal Food Assistance Programs and meals provided from the Boys and Girls Club throughout the academic year.

The nontraditional program and structure of CrossFit Kids programming is geared to develop the whole child through health and lifestyle choices as well as teaching social responsibility—respect for others, being responsible citizens, and avoiding violent and destructive behaviors (Black, Costello, Craft, & Katene, 2015; Ford, Wentzel, Wood, Stevens, & Siesfeld, 1990). The CrossFit Kids program was designed to align with the Boys and Girls Club’s vision of

offering life enhancing programs and character development experiences to enable participants to reach their full potential as productive, caring, and responsible citizens. The purpose of this paper is to describe the implementation of the program at the Boys and Girls Club, examine what worked and did not work, and note what changes were made based on the outcomes.

### BACKGROUND

Research indicates that the middle school years are challenging for reasons like increased focus on self-reflection, autonomy, and identity exploration; changes in adolescent bodies, minds, and emotions; and comprehensive shifts in life-structures—starting new schools, changes in friendships, changes in family structures, etc. (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2014; Witt & Caldwell, 2010). It is not uncommon for middle school youth to have negative experiences, which increase their vulnerability to disconnect from social institutions—school, family, and communities. Increased negative experiences are prevalent with youth who come from circumstances of limited parental and financial support, lack of consistency, and dependence on school and after-school programs for meals. Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, and Nols (2013) used the concept of social vulnerability to examine changes in social relationships among youth considered at risk. They highlighted the impacts of disconnection from social institutions leading to negative stigmatization, discrimination, sanctioning, and low self-perceptions. Crabbé (2007) noted that the more a group becomes disconnected, the harder its members are to reach while Roberts (2011) asserted that some seem to drop

out of society and may fall into the NEET (not in education, employment or training) label. Therefore, the further the disconnection, the fewer opportunities offered through education and sport (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Skille, 2014). Society then perpetuates the feelings of incompetence, failure, rejection, and lower self-image common in these youth (Andrews & Andrews, 2003).

One approach to reduce deteriorating relationships between youth placed at risk and social institutions is through the development of various types of programs that offer young people opportunities to discover new passions, work on skills, or re-engage with social institutions. Types of programs include summer camps (Allen, Akinyanju, Milliken, Lorek, & Walker, 2011; Allen, Cox, & Cooper, 2006; Merryman, Mezei, Bush, & Weinstein, 2012), pregnancy and STD prevention (Bryan, Schmiede, & Broaddus, 2009; Jemmott, Jemmott, Fong, & Morales, 2010), education-focused (Forsman & Vinnerljung, 2012; Grogan, Henrich, & Malikina, 2014), and sports-based (Black et al., 2015; Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Coalter, 2012). Haudenhuyse et al. (2012) suggested finding a way to reach socially vulnerable individuals is the first step for working towards broader development and social outcomes.

The development of interventions for youth at risk must have the clear foundation that recognizes the participants' complex lives. There is growing literature reviewing sport-based interventions because sport has proven to be powerful and can pique the interests of young people (Haudenhuyse et al., 2013). Outcomes from sport-based programs include the development of interpersonal skills, quality relationships, self-control, problem-solving, cognitive competences, self-efficacy, commitment to schooling, and academic achievement (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). Yet, Haudenhuyse et al. (2013) argued that prosocial behaviors should not be the starting point for an intervention

as vulnerable young people face concrete challenges. These scholars cautioned those involved with sport intervention programs as these programs tend to fail when they are ill-defined with hard-to-follow outcomes.

According to Haudenhuyse et al. (2013), a program for youth at risk should address the following: inputs (social, physical, cultural, political, and economic resources), throughputs (what is being done with used resources and how it is done), outputs (what is being accomplished with used resources), and outcomes (to what concrete consequences have such accomplishments led for those involved). Programs need to be flexible enough for the ever-changing complex circumstances of the participants. Yet programs are less effective when assumptions are made about youth based on the deficiency approach, and, therefore, caution should be practiced with the development of interventions as they can reinforce processes of social vulnerability (Haudenhuyse et al., 2013). Instead of focusing on outcomes to reduce deficit, Peterson (2004) argued that interventions should result in feelings of safety and happiness, be healthy and moral, and promote being fully engaged in life and contributing to society. Developing an evaluation process prior to implementing an intervention is also essential (Parent & Harvey, 2009).

Although there has been significant research that highlights the benefits of traditional sports, Haudenhuyse et al. (2012) discussed how some youth reject organized, competitive sport. Instead activities that are less formal, more flexible, and less competitive have proven to be beneficial for socially vulnerable youth (Andrews & Andrews, 2003; Haudenhuyse et al., 2012; Martinek & Hellison, 2009). Offering CrossFit to youth who have various experiences with sport and physical activity encourages participants to only compare their current efforts and abilities to themselves, which the research team referred to as BOOYA (best of only your abilities). The

BOOYA mentality is aligned with the CrossFit philosophy of increasing physical intensity, work level, and ability to become a better athlete, which may alleviate feelings of stress and anxiety experienced from competition. In other words, the participants have the opportunity to work at their desired intensity levels and choose how they will challenge themselves within a workout. BOOYA can also be viewed through the mastery motivational climate where participants use their own skills and abilities as the starting point (Kavussanu & Boardley, 2009; Theeboom, De Knop, & Weiss, 1995). If the principle of BOOYA is applied properly, participants may have increased enjoyment, perceived success, self-competence, moral functioning, prosocial attitudes, and intrinsic motivations (Haudenhuyse et al., 2014). Further, CrossFit workouts can be challenging as the participants often have to display resilience. The program fosters an environment where youth will have the opportunity to develop resilience assets: persistence, positive values, and identity and social skills that can be used to flourish in dangerous, stressful, or vulnerable environments (Damon, 2004). CrossFit was the chosen activity for the participants because of the individual aspect in a community setting, the challenge, and opportunities provided for success.

### THE PROGRAM

The Boys and Girls Club worked closely with the research team to develop a suitable program for their members. Coalter (2010) stated “Sport participation must occur in settings where young people are physically safe, personally valued, morally and economically supported, personally and politically empowered, and hopeful about the future” (p. 310). A local CrossFit facility with a large diverse membership was contacted to host the program, and the Boys and Girls Club received a federal grant that allowed them to transport the participants to and from this facility. The CrossFit facility provided a

supportive, accepting community, in an area identified as safe (e.g., meaning limited criminal activity had been reported). Yet, the research team was aware that CrossFit could be viewed as what Haudenhuyse et al. (2013) referred to “an open secret” (p. 475). This means that the youth participants might consider CrossFit as a fixed and external structure that excludes some people due to cost (as a membership is often three times the amount of a normal gym membership), has limited race diversity, and has limited promotion to underserved populations. Therefore, CrossFit is unknown to the Boys and Girls Club members because it is not a mainstream sport in their social worlds like football and basketball. However, with the growth of programs like Steve’s Club and televised events like the CrossFit Games on ESPN, more individuals are becoming aware of CrossFit.

Working closely with the executive director and program coordinator, the intervention was scheduled for three times a week for 12 weeks. During the fall of 2015, the participants attended the program for one hour on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. All parents signed waivers and informed consent documents, and the participants signed minor assent forms. Additionally, all participants received a sports physical to determine fitness for participation. Initially, 17 participants signed up through the Boys and Girls Club’s process of enrolling in programs, which did not ask for a commitment. Due to other extracurricular activities and lack of interest, only 10 participants completed the 12-week program.

The research team received an internal university award, the National Youth-At-Risk Research Award; this provided funds for three shirts for each participant, a qualified coach/trainer, food, water, journals, and youth-friendly equipment. Local businesses were also solicited for sponsorships to assist with costs of food and equipment. These actions support studies that highlight the need for partnerships as programs

for youth at risk are often underfunded (Gipson, Campbell, & Malcom, 2018; Kidd, 2008). Additionally, a coach/trainer was hired that had the following credentials: Bachelor of Science in Family and Consumer Sciences (B.S.F.C.S.) in Child and Family Development, Master of Education (M.Ed.) in Counselor Education/School Counseling and Guidance Services, Master of Science (M.S.) in Physical Education, experience running CrossFit Kids classes at the local CrossFit Gym, Positive Coaching Alliance Certification, CrossFit Level 1 certificate and CrossFit Kids certificate, and previous work experience at the local Boys and Girls Club. The coach/trainer's credentials aligned with the program because this individual (a) had academic degrees that were based on working with youth, (b) had work experience with the population, and (c) illustrated in-depth knowledge of CrossFit at various levels. Other individuals that worked with the intervention were two researchers who were also avid CrossFit athletes and two students majoring in Exercise Science and Coaching at the local university. All assistants were volunteers who were interested in working with this age group and received no financial compensation.

The program was similar to the CrossFit Kids program offered at the local CrossFit facility. The classes took place in the back corner of the gym or outside behind the gym. The classes were an hour long and the structure often followed this format: start with a game, review a strength or skill, complete a small workout, work on a new skill, and complete the session with a game. The program aimed to provide consistency in structure and coaching as this was something identified as missing in the participants' lives. Along with the emphasis on routine, the CrossFit Kid's certificate program emphasizes the importance of getting the participants to move often, play games, and have fun.

## **COLLECTING DATA**

### **Quantitative Approaches and Results**

The research team was interested in exploring the intellectual, physical, social, and personal impact from CrossFit participation. Therefore, numerous instruments were administered at the beginning and end of the first 12-week session: the Physical Activity Enjoyment State Scale (Kendzierski & DeCarlo, 1991), Goal Setting Skills Scale (Hansen, 1997), the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997), the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), Self-Talk Questionnaire (Zervas, Stavrou, & Psychountaki, 2007), and Motives for Physical Activities Measures-Revised: MPAM-R (Ryan, Frederick, Lepes, Rubio, & Sheldon, 1997).

Sixteen participants completed all instruments at the beginning of the program; unfortunately, due to attrition, only six completed all instruments before and after the program. Due to the low sample size, the originally planned inferential statistical analyses were not performed. Findings from the quantitative measures can be found below.

When examining how well they enjoyed the physical activity, the responses remained consistent across the six participants throughout the study. All of the students who enjoyed doing CrossFit found it interesting and fun. For the most part, they were very satisfied with their life, as 100% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "In most ways my life is close to my ideal." Examination of scores for the MPAM-R identified the most reported motives to exercise were to be physically fit, keep current skill level, have more energy, maintain physical strength to live a healthy lifestyle, do something they enjoy, maintain their physical health and well-being, and improve body shape. These motives remained constant across the program.



During data collection, there were several methodological issues that arose. First, the participants circled all the same numbers on the scales that ranged from 3 to 7 points. Second, participants left slightly less than half of the questions unanswered. Third, after further discussion with participants, it was found that some participants were confused by the prompts. Lastly, the researchers concluded there were too many items (95) across the six instruments being used on a small group of participants over a short period of time. During the second term of the program (Spring 2016), only the Self-Talk Questionnaire and Goal Setting Skills Scale were administered.

The Self-Talk Questionnaire results were inconsistent. It does appear that club members participated in less frequent negative self-talk at the conclusion of the program compared to the beginning; however, they also appeared to participate in less self-talk as the program continued. Overall, participants appeared to engage in self-talk regularly for motivation and to increase effort, which encouraged researchers to continue work with self-talk.

The Goal Setting Skills Scale results were positive; 80% of the participants stated that they often use goal setting and only 20% said they only sometimes use goal setting. This finding was consistent across the program among participants. Following the program, 80% of the participants agreed with the statement: "Once I set a goal, I don't give up until I achieve it." Researchers found that most of the participants did set goals, and, in follow-up discussions, the students appeared to tie goals to specific CrossFit movements. These results were positive and provide support that CrossFit may be beneficial and that program and data collection should be repeated with larger sample sizes.

### Qualitative Approaches and Results

Richer data came from focus group interviews that were implemented three times during the fall and the spring sessions. Qualitative

approaches are a form of social inquiry striving to bring context to and deeper understanding of how people live their lives through work, school, and home (Malagon-Maldonado, 2014). Focus groups with 3–4 participants were used to gather qualitative data by asking 10 semi-structured questions derived from the Sport Development Impact Assessment Tool (Burnett, 2001) with primary focus on the micro-level impact dimension. The questions addressed the participants' personal experiences and development within the program. The aim of the focus groups was to discuss participants' expectations of the program, strengths and weaknesses from the sessions, suggestions for changes to the current and future program, and family and peer support.

During analysis, confidentiality was maintained by giving each participant a pseudonym. Each focus group was transcribed verbatim, and transcripts ranged from 5–7 pages. Three researchers analyzed each interview independently using an open coding system. Commonalities across interviews were then identified and defined, and the following major themes emerged: CrossFit expectations, CrossFit Lessons, parental support, and number of sessions. The focus group narratives were beneficial as they were used to learn, reframe, and adjust the program. Haudenhuyse et al. (2014) looked at the work from Foster and Spencer (2011) and noted that there is value when focusing on youth narratives and interpretations. Elaboration is provided below for each of the major themes derived from the focus group interviews and any adjustments made to program as a result of these qualitative data analyses.

**CrossFit expectations.** The participants were not fully aware of CrossFit at the end of the first session. Following the first 12-week session, statements about expectations were linked to traditional sports and physical activities like basketball, football, and running. One participant, Kelly, stated that she initially thought

it was “some kind of rehab.” The research team thought their plan for introducing participants to CrossFit—bringing the participants to the CrossFit facility during the summer before the program began for initial exposure, explaining CrossFit to them in the fall during a recruitment session, and hosting the program at a CrossFit facility—would be sufficient to help participants understand the sport. However, following the first 12-week session, it became clear that the participants still could not explain CrossFit. Therefore, more intentional effort was made by the head coach/trainer, research team, and assistants to the program during the recruitment phase to talk about CrossFit as a sport. Additionally, the head coach/trainer showed the participants videos on her phone of CrossFit athletes that looked like them (e.g., teen CrossFit Games athletes and Steve’s Club participants). Lastly, the participants were tasked to look up CrossFit athletes on their own time. Due to these minor changes, when participants were asked about the program, two returning participants, Nicole, stated it was “doing more activities, being more active, achieving goals” and Monique stated “it’s fun, it’s the best workout and it’s tiring. You’ll be tired when you leave.” Now, instead of comparing CrossFit to sports they were previously exposed to, it became apparent that they were now able to discuss how they felt and share thoughts they have about the program. Participants that started during the second phase of the program focused more on the movements, like rowing, rope climbing, and deadlifts, instead of discussing the activity of CrossFit as a whole. Intentional efforts were made to discuss CrossFit during this second phase of the program.

**CrossFit lessons.** The participants discussed learning things about themselves in their lives throughout the program. Larry stated that CrossFit helped him “focus more because you have to remember to bring your shorts and shoes, it makes me remember stuff.” Teddy described experiences of hanging out with

friends in the neighborhood. He was now able to be more active and knows how hard to push to not get too tired while running around with friends. The responses to lessons learned were consistent in the second phase. Garry added that CrossFit helped him focus in school, and he was not as tired during the day.

**Parental support.** During the first 12-week session, the only interaction the research team had with parents was to sign waivers and consent forms. A question was asked in the focus groups about how parents felt about the program. More than half of the parents were not talking to their kids about CrossFit. Larry noted the only conversation he had with his mom was about how she thought he was too skinny. Larry’s response to her was, “I like to exercise.” James and Tommy, brothers in the program, admitted that their mom did not say much, so they did not know how their mom felt about their participation in the program. Teddy, on the other hand, said he told his mom about the movements he does during CrossFit. The females in the program seemed to discuss the outcomes from CrossFit more than the males. Kelly stated that her mom noticed it was “making me stronger.” Monique’s mom showed interest in her daughter losing weight. Due to the limited parental support during the first phase, efforts were made to get parents more involved and interested in the program. Therefore, a parent and child workout was scheduled during the second 12-week session, and all participants’ parents, with one exception, attended this workout. Interestingly, following this parent and child workout, the responses were much different about their parents. For instance, Nicole stated “My mom wants to come back. She asks me all the time what we did.” Teddy stated she “thinks it is good for him and liked working out with him.” Jon, who started during the second session, stated that his dad “thinks it is a good workout, but he [the dad] doesn’t understand what we do.” It became evident that the participants were opening up



to their parents about their progress within the program. It was important to all the participants that their parents were aware of this activity.

**Number of sessions.** Focus groups allowed the participants' voices to be heard. Other than asking for the head coach/trainer, researchers, and assistants to the program to work out with them, the participants focused on not wanting to come three times a week. Instead, as a group, they wanted to come Monday and Wednesday during the spring semester. Due to school schedules, the program was reduced from 12-weeks to 10-weeks. At the end of the second session, the returning participants stated that they liked coming two times a week and having Fridays off. This was an empowering moment for the participants because they recognized that their suggestions (voices) were heard.

## CONCLUSION

The intervention may have fallen into what Coalter (2007) referred to as the black or magical box as there were too many expected outcomes. Following the first 12-week session, it was apparent that changes needed to be made because of hard-to-follow outcomes that often plague sport interventions (Coalter, 2007). One of the major challenges that the CrossFit intervention encountered was highlighted by Haudenhuyse et al. (2013) as they stated, "on one hand, we need clear and well-defined interventions with easier-to-follow outcomes, and, on the other hand, there is the recognition that any set of outcomes is hard to make tangible" (p. 474). Initially, the program used six instruments; however, given large number of survey items and methodological issues, the researchers were unable to capitalize on any real outcomes. The researchers continue to rely on literature by Crabbé (2007) and Haudenhuyse et al. (2013) as these authors stated that there should not be fixed outcomes due to the different types of programs and the different needs of young people. Additionally, the outcome-based program negatively impacted the way in

which participants were exposed to the actual activity of CrossFit. Through the focus group data, it was clear that the participants were not sure of the purpose of program. This was a proven limitation as commitment levels reduced throughout the first 12-weeks. However, with more intention in explaining the program and getting parents involved, the second phase of the program saw greater commitment levels and understanding of the activity. This result could be linked to the development of commitment forms for each participant and his or her parent. Further, fewer participants were admitted into the program during the second phase which allowed the head coach/trainer, researchers, and assistants to the program to provide more focused attention to each athlete.

## ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES

During the first phase of the program, work level and dedication became a problem as participants lacked access to nutrition, clothing, and family support. It became apparent that assumptions were made about the participants prior to meeting them suggesting the program was established through prosocial behaviors (Mahoney, Stattin, & Lord, 2004). This meant it appeared that the research team thought they knew what was needed to make the participants' lives better without knowing them. The research team thought these young people would not be happy with their lives or be motivated for physical activity (which can be seen by the chosen surveys), and the program was initially written for these factors. However, what was not accounted for was the lack of energy for some participants during workouts because they were malnourished. The coach/trainer had to find ways to motivate the participants to be the best versions of themselves when they had limited fuel. Additionally, some of the participants did not have enough pairs of shorts to participate multiple times a week. Such shortfalls were not considered at the onset of the program. In order to attempt to assure equal

access through the sport program (Haudenhuyse et al., 2013), it became apparent that we needed extra shirts, shoes, shorts, and undergarments. Otherwise, without knowing it, social exclusion could be reinforced (Haudenhuyse et al., 2013). Spaaij (2009) found that many programs fail to interrupt the system and reproduce settings of inequalities.

Through a deeper analysis about access to resources, parental support, and focus on outcomes, a larger theme of structural resources and needs arose. In other words, “what structural means need to be in place to have positive participation in a program for youth at risk?” There were obvious changes when parents were able to participate with their child in the program. The parents’ interest sparked an even deeper interest and enthusiasm for the participants. Additionally, when the participants realized that they had access to clothing and shoes without any questions being asked, they missed fewer days, and in fact, looked for items they liked to wear. Therefore, more consideration needs to be given to the structural resources needed for programs to facilitate the ability of youth at risk to participate in programs. For instance, transportation issues, lack of nutrition, limited clothing, and scheduling can all limit programs that may have positive intentions for youth.

Consequently, when it comes to discussing the development of a program, it is beneficial to include the participants’ voices about their needs as their lives are complex (Haudenhuyse et al., 2012). Participants shared stories about being locked out of their homes throughout the day to give their single parent a break during a holiday, being responsible for making decisions whether to attend school, and having parents not showing interest in their child’s extracurricular activity of CrossFit. Beyond these situations that make the participants’ lives more complex than the average middle school student, the focus group and survey data highlighted positive impacts the program had on

the participants. For instance, the participants highlighted transferrable skills such as increased focus, being responsible to remember items needed to participate, and knowing more about one’s own energy levels. These skills can be used when preparing for school each morning. Having a better understanding of one’s self and the effect of self-talk can provide coping skills that can be used in home settings or even in school when family life becomes hectic.

Participants presented situations that were much different than the experiences of the head coach/trainer, researchers, and assistants to the program. In fact, moving from the first phase to the second phase, the coach/trainer had a hard time relating to the participants because she was not able to empathize. Recommendations from Coalter and Taylor (2009) about using an open-ended street/youth worker approach were implemented as adaptations were made for the second session of the program by allowing more intensive and extensive social relationships between the program personnel and the youth. The coach/trainer lacked the ability to develop relationships with the participants, had limited social interaction as there was little conversation about the participants’ lives outside of CrossFit, and struggled to know the participants’ names. Flett, Gould, Griffes, and Lauer (2013) identified actions by coaches that were negatively received such as the use of sarcasm, limited detailed descriptions and specific strategies for how lessons in sport could be transferred into non-sport settings, or lack of relationship development. During the first session, it was identified that the coach/trainer lacked the social interaction development needed to develop open and reflexive relationships (Kunz, 2009). Yet, this is not uncommon as the head boxing coach in Haudenhuyse et al. (2012) study stated that only two of the 13 coaches had the required socio-pedagogical approach needed to work with youth at risk based on the ability to communicate and interact (verbally and physically). Haudenhuyse et al. found

that the other 11 coaches did not understand the philosophy of the program and working with the at-risk demographic. Although socio-pedagogical coaching practices can be taught, it is hard to place motivation and genuineness of wanting to work with youth at risk into a curriculum or training program. Therefore, the program followed the suggestion that there may be greater impact and acceptance of a program if youth workers learn sport skills rather than hiring sports coaches to learn skills of a youth worker because youth workers frequently deal with youths' problems (Haudenhuyse et al., 2012; Theeboom et al., 1995). A boxing coach in the study conducted by Haudenhuyse et al. (2012) highlighted that programs need to be developed where the participants feel emotionally and physically safe as well as respected, and Peterson (2004) noted that group leaders are the essential ingredient for success.

The initial coach/trainer was not invited back for the second session because of her inability to develop relationships with the participants. Both of the researchers, avid CrossFit athletes, instead obtained their CrossFit Level 1 certificate and their CrossFit Kids certificate when they realized the lack of connection between the participants and the coach/trainer. This was beneficial because the researchers turned coaches understood the purpose of the program.

Further, the clear vision of the program enabled the new trainers/researchers to create a positive environment where participants (socially vulnerable youth) could experience feelings of success (Haudenhuyse et al., 2012). During the program, trainers/researchers and assistants to the program referred to these experiences of success as small victories (e.g., a participant getting his or her first pull-up, doing their first double under, or kicking up into a handstand). As new staff, trainers, and assistants come into the CrossFit environment, studies have shown that strategies and goals need to be communicated (Beets et al., 2016). Through the STEPs LET US intervention, Beets

et al. (2016) concluded that boys' and girls' moderate-to-vigorous physical activity level was maintained or improved as more emphasis was placed on training the staff to develop more individualized relationships with the participants. Through the CrossFit program, the participants had the opportunity to come to a supportive environment and work hard on exercises that may be new or old, and practice their own BOOYA for the day.

### **FUTURE RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS**

McDonough, Ullrich-French, Anderson-Butcher, Amorose, and Riley (2013) found that both autonomy and emotionally supportive relationships predict changes in social responsibility over and above belonging. Future research may include addressing the sense of belonging of participants and include factors like interaction and leader (e.g., coach/trainer) support as McDonough et al. found that leaders have a unique contribution to predicting social responsibility.

Haudenhuyse et al. (2014) used the social vulnerability model to analyze rules, tasks, and coaches within youth sport programs. Future research within the CrossFit setting should analyze the program to look deeper into the actions and interactions when working with socially vulnerable youth. Specifically, more attention can be given to the complex relationships the participants have with authority. Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias, and McLoughlin (2006) stated that the role of the leader is to create and maintain a balance of support and domination. However, Haudenhuyse et al. (2014) highlighted that, due to limited opportunities for personal and social development, youth may have negative self-perceptions and stressful relationships with authoritative adults. Considering the situations of vulnerable youth and their need for equitable power sharing, further understanding of how to work through these complex relationships is needed. Haudenhuyse et al. (2014) argued

that the appropriate authority relational approach needs to offer “optimal development opportunities for all, focusing on the participant instead of the rules, incite authentic decision and responsibility sharing with tangible outcomes for the participants, and provide tailored support” (p. 144).

Lastly, the idea of integrating the participants into traditional classes with age diversity also is an interesting concept. According to Benson, Scales, Hamilton, and Sesma (2006), this integration approach is valuable as mixing these two groups of people can contribute to positive outcomes. During the CrossFit Kid’s Certificate Training program, integrating children with adults is highly discouraged. However, when examining some of the home lives of the participants, we learned that many of the participants were in positions of being the oldest sibling, assisting in raising their younger siblings, spending hours alone at home over the weekend, finding ways to feed siblings at times, and/or deciding whether to attend school as their parents would not make the effort to take them to school if they missed the bus. Although the traditional thought that a child between the ages of 11–14 needs to be kept separate from adults for mental reasons, it would be interesting to see interactions between participants and adults when the young people are already making grown-up decisions.

Overall, the program proved to be valuable for the participants. Success was found when the participants’ voices were used to inform adjustments to the program based on their needs instead of following pre-defined, fixed outcomes. Although this provides complexity when starting an intervention, considering participant needs as part of program design increases the likelihood of future success.

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