

Entry Title

STUDENTS AS LIFE-STYLE ACTIVISTS (SALSA) Program

Abstract

SALSA is a unique peer education program to provide high school students with the necessary knowledge and skills to achieve and maintain a balanced and healthy lifestyle.

The program aims to improve students' eating and exercise habits by increasing their understanding of healthy choices. Participation in the program has led to students increasing their knowledge and motivation to make well-informed choices regarding their health as well as enhance their ability to develop a greater sense of well-being.



Aim

To improve students' eating and exercise habits by increasing their understanding of healthy choices

Nature of the Problem

In the face of a global epidemic of childhood obesity there is an urgent need for effective interventions to help children and adolescents control their weight and to prevent obesity. Recent studies show that overweight and obese children and young people are now experiencing increased risks of diabetes, risk factors for heart disease and fatty liver disease.

General Practitioners from Mt Druitt identified a need for public education to address the problem of obesity in young people. They realised that addressing obesity in young people is often difficult to achieve in a day to day consultation in general practice

Extent of the problem

During the past three decades, the prevalence of overweight and obesity in children and adolescents has increased rapidly throughout the world. In Australia the rise in child and adolescent overweight and obesity began in the 1980s and continues unabated¹. In NSW, around 25% of children and young people are overweight or obese.

Adolescent obesity is a major predictor of a lifetime of obesity and ill health. Therefore

interventions to prevent excess weight gain are most important at this stage of life, especially in ethnically diverse and socio-economically less disadvantaged communities. Schools provide an appropriate setting for health promotion with adolescents. Although a number of school-based, obesity prevention interventions have been developed, few have shown to be effective to prevent excess weight gain in adolescents (Summerbell C et al., 2005).

Strategic importance

This was a collaborative project of SWAHS with the Mt Druitt General Practitioners, Rooty Hill High School and the George Institute for International Health.

The project relates to the goals and strategic directions of NSW Health, in building healthier communities by engaging the community, working in partnerships and embracing innovation. It links in well with the SWAHS Healthy Weight Strategy 2006-2011.

Planning and implementing solutions

A working team was formed with Mt Druitt General Practitioners, Dr Lim, Dr Bittar and Dr Sethia, staff from Rooty Hill High School and Dr Shah, Community Physician, SWAHS to develop a peer-led intervention to prevent adolescent obesity.

The theoretical framework of the program was based on Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) and utilised the experience of a similar model to improve asthma outcomes in adolescents in schools in Australia.

The program materials were developed after careful planning, contemplation and consultation with students, staff and parents.

Financial support from Pfizer Pharmaceuticals assisted with the program resources. The program was named Students As Life-Style Activists–SALSA by the students



The intervention was a two step process. In the first step, sixteen Year 10 students were trained as SALSA Peer Leaders in a six-hour workshop, held at a site outside the school.

The workshop covered the activities of the three lessons about food choices, activity and healthy lifestyles that peer leaders would be delivering to Year 8 students. These lessons, which incorporate audio visual aids, games, small group work and martial arts activity, were designed to be practical and fun, providing an alternative form of learning at school. During the morning the peer leaders participated in each of the program activities and in the afternoon they practiced leading the activities.

The Mt Druitt General Practitioners provided a nutritious and delicious lunch.

SALSA Peer Leaders delivering lessons to Year 8 students

The SALSA Peer Leaders were from a variety of backgrounds including Aboriginal, Anglo-Saxon, Philipino, Maori and Tongan.

In the second Step, the Peer Leaders, working in groups of four and using the SALSA Peer Leader's Manual, delivered three SALSA lessons to Year 8 classes over one school semester.



Outcomes and Evaluation

A post test evaluation design was used with all participating students and teachers being invited to complete evaluation questionnaires after completion of each of the lessons.

A range of process and outcome measures were used to assess the quality, fidelity and the delivery of the intervention by the SALSA Peer Leaders and the impact of the program on the participants. Drs Michael Dibley and Li Ming analyzed and reported on the data collected.



The results indicated that the program was well accepted and highly rated by all involved. It was easily integrated into the existing school health education curriculum and was delivered as planned. Teachers observed the SALSA Peer Leaders were prepared and communicated effectively and were rated highly by over 90% of the students. Students reported they learnt how to eat well (55%) and exercise (44%) with 25% reporting what they learned they would put into action. The results of the formative evaluation guided a revision of the Peer Leaders Manual and program resources including a video with the Sydney Swans footballers.

Useful secondary outcomes have included student-led changes in canteen food choices, with students and staff making healthier choices at the school canteen, along with a significant increase in sales of healthier alternatives. Specifically the Peer Leaders reported eating more vegetables and fruit and being more active.

Sustaining change

Processes to ensure that the improvements will be sustained include:

1. Addition of a cooking lesson with involvement of parents
2. A new SALSA video featuring the Sydney Swans footballers, students from Rooty Hill High School and Mt Druitt General Practitioners has been produced by the Multi Media Department, SWAHS.

3. SALSA Peer Leaders Manual and training have been revised.

4. Funding application to NHMRC has been submitted to study the program in a controlled trial in forty schools in SWAHS by the George Institute for International Health.

Sydney SWANS with SALSA Peer Leaders



Future Scope

A peer-led approach to influence behavior change to prevent obesity in high schools is feasible and of value to students and the wider community and will help to improve eating habits, increase activity and improve the health of young people in Australia. Prior to wider dissemination it should be tested in a controlled trial. All aspects of the program and training have been documented to make it easily transferable to other areas.



Dr Soo cooking with SALSA Peer Leaders

References

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