Evaluation of the Active After-school Communities program 2009–2010: summary of findings

Background

The Active After-school Communities (AASC) program is a national initiative that provides primary school-aged children with access to free sport and other structured physical activity programs in the hours directly after school. The program is delivered either at a primary school or an out of school hours care service (OSHCS) environment.

The AASC program objectives are to:

1. Enhance the physical activity levels of primary school-aged children through a nationally coordinated program
2. Provide increased opportunities for inclusive participation in quality, safe and fun sport and other structured physical activity through the AASC program
3. Stimulate local community involvement in sport and other structured physical activity.

Newspoll was commissioned by the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) to conduct an independent evaluation of the program in 2009, 2010 and 2011, following on from previous evaluation work from 2005 to 2008. This is a summary of findings from the 2009 and 2010 evaluations.

Acknowledgments

The ASC and Newspoll would like to acknowledge the support of the following organisations in the conduct of this evaluation:

- State/territory departments of education in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia
- Catholic Education Offices throughout Australia
- Centacare Childcare Services in Brisbane
- The schools and OSHCS staff who facilitated parent/child research or who participated in our school/OSHCS research
- The AASC program regional coordinators and managers who assisted in and supported the evaluation process in 2009–10
- The hundreds of AASC program community coaches, children and parents who participated in our research.
Methodology

In both 2009 and 2010, the methodology used for evaluating the AASC program included:

- representative national survey of parents of participating children
- survey of participating children aged 8 to 12 years at selected AASC program sites
- representative national survey of schools and OSHCS participating in the program
- representative national survey of coaches delivering the AASC program
- national survey of all AASC program staff (employees of the ASC).

The 2009 and 2010 annual surveys were used to assess the effectiveness of program delivery and explore ways in which the AASC program can be improved. This is generally referred to as program monitoring research.

In addition to this, an attempt was made to assess the impact of the program on participating children. A baseline survey of almost 850 parents of children participating in the AASC program for the first time was conducted from July to August 2009. Parents of these children were contacted again at six and 12 months to assess change on key outcome measures (such as physical activity levels and sport club membership). Results from this research were compared to those from a control group of non-participating children. This is generally referred to as impact assessment research.

Key findings

Decreasing sedentary activities

The AASC program appears to be successful in decreasing sedentary activity in the hours immediately after school. Almost all participating children were attending at least once per week. According to their parents, approximately half of participating children at school sites would have been doing something sedentary if they were not taking part in the AASC program, and the majority of those who would have been doing something active would have been engaged in unstructured physical activity.

Although more than half the children participating in the program at a school had alternative structured physical activity available to them in their community, the majority would not have participated in those activities. Approximately one-third had no alternative structured physical activity available, and a further 13 per cent of parents were not sure what was available. In total, nine in ten children participating in the AASC program were engaging in after-school structured physical activity they would not otherwise have been doing.
Satisfaction with the AASC program

All stakeholders were highly satisfied with the AASC program, and the vast majority considered the program to be fun and interesting for children.

Among school and OSHCS contacts, coaches delivering the AASC program (known as community coaches) and AASC program staff, there was general and high satisfaction with most aspects of program implementation, including the community coach registration process, the Community Coach Training Program (CCTP), the amount of grant funding, and funding processes such as grant application and funds acquittal.

The role of the regional coordinator (an ASC staff member assisting with program implementation at a school or OSHCS site) was highly valued.

Recruiting inactive children

One important goal of the AASC program is the recruitment of inactive children into the program. Research in 2009 found little difference in average physical activity levels between participating children and the general population of Australian children aged 5 to 12 years\(^1\), suggesting the program may not have been effectively targeting inactive children. A series of initiatives aimed at increasing recruitment of inactive children was put in place in late 2009 and 2010. Research in 2010 found that school sites were more likely than in 2009 to say they were getting help to develop inactive children strategies. Further, first-time participating children were, on average, significantly less likely to be physically active and members of sport clubs than the Australian general population of children in 2010, suggesting these targeted initiatives were working.

Impact on children

Parents of participating children and other stakeholders believed the program was having an impact on children in terms of physical activity levels, attitudes toward physical activity, and propensity to join a sports club.

Children who were still participating in the AASC program almost one year after first participating had increased their time spent in structured physical activity more than non-participating children and children who had stopped participating. Approximately three-quarters of children still participating one year later were meeting health guidelines for physical activity, compared to just over half of program drop-outs.

Longitudinal impact assessment research also found that participating children classified as inactive at the baseline had experienced a positive change in their unstructured physical activity levels six months after first participating, regardless of whether they were

still participating in the program. This increase was retained one year after participating and this was above and beyond any change in unstructured physical activity levels naturally occurring as non-participating children aged.

While most parents, both participating and non-participating, reported no change over time in their child’s enjoyment of physical activity, more participating parents than non-participating parents recorded a positive change. Furthermore, more non-participating parents than participating parents reported a negative change.

Although longitudinal impact assessment research found little evidence that sport club membership had increased directly as a result of program participation, there was evidence that participating parents had become more aware of organisations offering structured physical activity to primary school-aged children in their local community.

Impact on communities

The majority of participating sites, especially schools, believed that their involvement in the AASC program was improving their capacity to deliver sport and other structured physical activity to children. Two-fifths of schools said that new school teams were being formed as a result of the program. Most stakeholders were also generally satisfied that the program was stimulating community involvement in sport and structured physical activity, and had had an impact on the local community’s ability to support the participation of children in sport. Just over half of community coaches representing an organisation said the program was having at least a ‘moderate’ impact on their organisation, and this was mainly in terms of junior membership.

Areas for improvement

Satisfaction with the performance of community coaches was mixed. In particular, most stakeholders felt that community coach skills in terms of child behaviour management and communication needed development. Although generally well rated, the Community Coach Training Program (CCTP) was least well assessed in terms of helping coaches acquire child management and communication skills. From the community coach perspective, however, there was concern about their ability to manage large and diverse groups of children without more direct assistance from the site. Moreover, many community coaches felt this was not their role. In order to address this feedback, the AASC program is re-evaluating the content of the CCTP to better educate and equip coaches in this area.

The vast majority of OSHCS and the majority of schools said they always provide direct assistance to community coaches when the program is being delivered at their site, and the majority of community coaches were satisfied with site supervision and support from schools and OSHCS. However, both ASC program staff and community coaches suggested that the level of supervision and community coach support provided at OSHCS in particular could be enhanced.
Playing for Life is the coaching philosophy underpinning the AASC program and is fundamental to the program’s successful delivery, especially to traditionally inactive children. There is evidence that adherence to and understanding of this philosophy among community coaches is mixed. Between 2009 and 2010, however, the proportion of regional coordinators who felt confident training and appraising community coaches in Playing for Life had increased and the majority were confident doing this. As a key focus of the program, strategies are being put in place to ensure that regional coordinators are as best equipped as possible to train coaches effectively in the Playing for Life philosophy.

Newsletters and other printed resources developed by the AASC program for its various stakeholders had a mixed reception. Community coach training materials such as Playing for Life companion books and games resources were seen as very useful by those who had received them, but relatively few stakeholders had used the program newsletter, brochure, fact sheets or AASC Online, and relatively few of those who had used them considered them to be useful. In order to address this feedback, a review of program collateral is underway with an aim to increase the usefulness and effectiveness of these resources for sites, parents and coaches.

Although regional coordinators were highly valued by both community coaches and AASC program sites, there were relatively low levels of satisfaction with the performance of regional coordinators in establishing links between schools/OSHCS on the one hand and community coaches, local sporting clubs and other community organisations on the other. Given this is a key aspect of regional coordinators’ responsibilities, it is important that they are adequately trained and resourced to perform this role. A national project team has been developed that will work to enhance engagement strategies for national and state sporting organisations and clubs. These strategies will be implemented by regional coordinators at the local level aiming to improve these levels of satisfaction amongst stakeholders. It is also important to note that there have been many instances whereby regional coordinators have established strong links with community sporting clubs resulting in significant increases in club membership. This is an encouraging sign for the program and it hopes to build in this area over the coming 18 months.

Regional coordinators were strongly confident in the more procedural aspects of their role (for example, assisting with the grant application process, educating community coaches in Playing for Life, reviewing and appraising community coach performance), and the interpersonal aspects of their role (for example, communicating and providing ongoing support to schools, OSHCS and coaches). However, they felt they were relatively less well-equipped for the community development role (for example, establishing links between schools/OSHCS and community organisations, and especially for developing pathways for children and families to join sporting clubs and for coaches to deliver outside of the AASC program). As previously mentioned, engagement strategies for national and state sporting organisations and clubs are currently being developed to better educate and equip regional coordinators in this area.
In general, and consistently for all stakeholders, satisfaction with the AASC program and the degree to which the program is perceived to be having an impact, was greater for those involved in the program in a school rather than OSHCS environment. There is a strong suggestion that the school delivery model is more successful than the OSHCS delivery model. OSHCS factors such as mandatory participation policies, different attitudes towards site supervision, use of private providers as community coaches rather than sporting clubs or internal volunteers, and lack of parental involvement are all potential explanations for this difference.

**Program evaluation in 2011–2012**

In early 2011, 12 case studies of AASC program sites were conducted to better understand the factors associated with successful implementation of the AASC program and the key barriers to successful implementation.

Annual program monitoring research, as described above, is being repeated in 2011, with a renewed emphasis on understanding the factors that impact on the transition of participating children to sporting clubs. Research conducted in 2011 will be reported in 2012.