Evaluation of the Active After-school Communities program 2011: summary of findings

Background

The Active After-school Communities (AASC) program is a national initiative that provides primary school children with access to free sport and 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).

The 2011 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 2011 evaluation.

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- 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 2011
- The hundreds of AASC program community coaches, children and parents who participated in our research.
Methodology

In 2011, the methodology used for evaluating the AASC program included a:

- 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 2011 annual survey was used to assess the effectiveness of program delivery.

Key findings

Decreasing sedentary activities

The AASC program appears to be successful in decreasing sedentary activity in the hours immediately after school. 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 nearly two-thirds of 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. Just over one-quarter had no alternative structured physical activity available, and a further eight per cent of parents were not sure what was available. In total, nearly 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 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 objective 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. The majority of stakeholders believe children of all abilities feel welcome participating in the AASC program, and most OSHCS and community coaches have done something special to attract inactive children (although schools are less likely to have done so). However there is some question, particularly amongst program staff, about the effectiveness of these strategies.

The research in 2010 showed that first-time participating children were, on average, significantly less likely to be physically active than the Australian general population of children, suggesting these targeted initiatives were working. However, in 2011, there was no difference between the physical activity levels of first-time participating children and the Australian general population.

Impact on children

Parents of participating children and other stakeholders believed the program was having a positive impact on children in terms of physical activity levels, attitudes toward physical activity, and propensity to join a sports club. Over half the parents believed the AASC program stimulated their child’s interest in club membership, especially when the program was delivered in a school environment. Fifteen per cent of parents whose child is a current or past member of a sports club believed it was the AASC program that was the catalyst for their child to join the club. There was also evidence that participating parents had become more aware of organisations offering structured physical activity to primary school-aged children in their local community.

Since 2009 there has been an increase in the proportion of school and OSHCS contacts who strongly agree that children feel more positive towards sport as a result of the program.

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.

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Impact on communities

The majority of participating sites, especially OSHCS, 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.

Areas for improvement

Satisfaction with the performance of community coaches was mixed. In particular, 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.

The vast majority of OSHCS and the majority of schools said they always help the community coach supervise the children when the program is being delivered at their site, and community coaches’ and program staff assessment of supervision was also generally positive. However, community coaches and program staff rating of assistance from the site in terms of delivery and participation is considerably lower than what OSHC and schools report.

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. In addition, while many regional coordinators feel confident training and appraising community coaches in Playing for Life, there is evidence that further internal training on these principles is required to ensure regional coordinators are fully equipped to train coaches in this area.

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 or fact sheets, and relatively few of those who had used them considered them to be useful. Many of these printed resources will be transferred to online resources in 2012/13.
Across the board regional coordinators were highly valued by both community coaches and AASC program sites. Although satisfied 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, this was an area that could be improved upon. Given this is a key aspect of regional coordinators’ responsibilities, it is important that regional coordinators continue to be trained and resourced to perform this role effectively.

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). However, they felt they would benefit from further support and training to better assist them in their community development role (for example, developing pathways for children and families to join sporting clubs and for coaches to deliver outside of the AASC program).

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, continues to be 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.

**Future program evaluations**

On Ministerial directive, no research will be conducted in 2012 however a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation process will be re-introduced mid 2013.