

ISSUE BRIEF

BEST PRACTICE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PROGRAMS

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center for
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Keeping Current
on Research
and Practice
in Physical Activity
for Older Adults



THE NATIONAL
COUNCIL ON
THE AGING

“There is no substitute for knowledge.”

—*W. Edwards Deming*

Introduction

This issue brief is the fourth in a series promoting best practice physical activity programming for older adults. The intent of this issue brief is to offer physical activity program directors a variety of tools and resources to help them connect with the latest research and best practices in the field of active aging. These recommendations can be adapted to various settings and functions. Earlier issue briefs may be downloaded from www.healthyaagingprograms.org.

How Can New Research Help You?

Today's work environment is demanding and competitive. Physical activity program directors must continually hone their skills and expand their knowledge base to stay at the top of their profession. It is especially important to understand the changing dynamics brought on by the rise of the older adult population as a significant factor in the fitness industry. The 2005 "Superstudy[®] of Sports Participation," revealed that older adults are participating in all forms of exercise—formal and informal, facility-based and independent, group or solo, at skyrocketing rates. More specifically, this study noted that "frequent" participation in fitness activities has increased 33% among people 55 and older since 1998, compared to a growth rate of only 13% among Baby Boomers aged 35 to 54, and zero growth among the "traditional" fitness participants aged 18 to 34.

The rapid increase among older participants more than other groups is reshaping the industry. Health club membership in the last several years among all people is up 127%, but for people age 55 and older, the increase is an astonishing 343%. Other trends noted include the tremendous growth of Pilates classes over the past 5 years (up 506%), followed by yoga and/or Tai Chi (up 118%).¹ All activities that are attractive to older people—from fitness walking to recumbent cycling, aquatics to using small weights—have enjoyed great increases in popularity as older people look for comfortable and sustainable ways to exercise.

Experts cite several reasons for the growth of older adult participation:

- Many current participants were part of the fitness revolution of the 1970s—they became active decades ago and have maintained the fitness lifestyle.
- It is now socially "normal" for older people to participate in fitness activities.

- More medical professionals are now prescribing physical activity for preventing or managing chronic diseases such as osteoporosis, heart disease, diabetes, and a host of others.

This kind of research, highlighting trends in the physical activity habits of older adults, provides valuable insight that physical activity directors can apply in practice every day. As another example, in a study by AARP, older adults responded much more positively to the words "physical activity" than "exercise." "Exercise" evoked negative memories of pain, muscle strain, sweat, and boring group regimens, whereas "physical activity" sounded enjoyable and easier to accomplish.² Incorporating these kinds of nuances in the use of language, and other aspects of program design, can help program directors attract new participants and deliver high-quality programs.

Creating a Learning Plan

Just as physical activity program directors help participants develop a personalized plan to achieve a fitness goal, they can keep themselves current in the field by creating a plan for themselves, following or adapting steps recommended by the International Council on Active Aging:

1. Identify Your Learning Style

Analyze the way you learn most effectively. There are four recognized styles of learning; knowing which of these styles works best for you can help to create the best learning situation.

The Visual Learner

- Learns from watching
- Intense focus on teacher
- Common among beginners, for whom proper demonstration is essential

The Auditory Learner

- Learns from listening
- Verbal communication is the key component; "word pictures" and detailed explanations are helpful
- Often able to do other things while speaking or listening

The Kinesthetic or Physical Learner

- Learns by doing
- Wants to experience or "feel" it

The Analytical Learner

- Learns from the facts
- Wants to know why; often learns by asking questions

2. Create a Plan of Action

- Identify emerging topics, or the challenges you have faced recently, or query colleagues or your mentor for suggestions on topics to pursue.
- Identify the information available, and what tools are best suited to your learning goals and objectives.
- Create a written plan of action including specific tasks, realistic timelines, and resources needed.

3. Work Your Plan

- Use your plan as a dynamic blueprint, revising it frequently.
- Research your topics using the Internet, issue briefs, newsletters, professional organizations, and your colleagues as presented below.
- Review your objectives and progress frequently.

4. Share the Information and Invite Discussion

Take the time to share what you are learning with your colleagues and generate discussion. Consider presenting at meetings of other professionals, inside or outside your organization. Interaction with colleagues is one of the surest ways to improve upon ideas, enhance lifelong learning, and promote collaboration.

In our best practice study, we found that many of the sites hold regular meetings with staff and volunteers to discuss recent news and research. One site reported collaborating with area senior centers to share new information more broadly.

One excellent source of new information is continuing education classes. The CEU requirements for certifications help ensure that instructors are up-to-date on the latest research.

Some of the best practice sites reported that as instructors completed their CEUs, they would share what they had learned with other instructors or staff.

Tools to Help You Stay Current on Research and Practice

Today's society produces an overwhelming amount of information, resources, and tools, so it's critical to find and use only the most reliable and accurate material. The following list of sources will be helpful for finding valuable and credible information.

1. Internet

The volume of information available on the Internet can be staggering. The Internet can bring you face-to-face with the latest science and best practices; on the other hand, it is also the source of much incorrect information. What you receive is only as good as the Web site, the author, the source of the material, and the publishing organization, so it is important to know the source and motivation of the organization providing the information. The following Web sites provide access to well-documented, trustworthy information:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
www.cdc.gov/node.do/id/0900f3ec80059b1a
- Health Compass
www.healthcompass.org
- Health Finder
www.healthfinder.gov
- The Healthy Aging Research Network
depts.washington.edu/harn
- MedlinePlus
www.medlineplus.gov
- National Institute on Aging
www.nia.nih.gov
- The National Blueprint: Increasing Physical Activity Among Adults Age 50 and Older
www.agingblueprint.org
- National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine
nccam.nih.gov

2. Professional Support

Being a member of an appropriate professional association allows you to take advantage of the resources and services it offers. They often deliver information in a manner that is easy to translate for older adults. Organizations that offer detailed, authoritative information on physical activity and aging include:

- American Association for Active Lifestyles and Fitness
www.aahperd.org/aaalf

- American Society on Aging
www.asaging.org
- American Senior Fitness Association
www.seniorfitness.net
- The Cooper Institute
www.cooperinst.org
- The International Council on Active Aging
www.icaa.cc
- International Society for Aging and Physical Activity
www.isapa.org
- NCOA's Center for Healthy Aging
www.healthyagingprograms.org

The following organizations offer research reports, books, training manuals, and exercise equipment that are highly regarded by professionals in the field:

- Hygenic Corporation (Thera-Band Products)
www.Thera-BandAcademy.com
- Human Kinetics
www.humankinetics.com

3. E-mail Lists

E-mail listservs are an efficient way to exchange ideas and discuss issues with colleagues in diverse locales; receive announcements of professional meetings, conferences, and awards; and keep abreast of timely research updates. The following organizations provide useful listservs:

- American College of Sports Medicine (special interest group on aging)
www.acsm.org
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
www.cdc.gov/aging
- International Council on Active Aging
www.icaa.cc
- National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity
www.ncppa.org/email_news_signup.asp
- University of South Carolina/Prevention Research Center
prevention.sph.sc.edu/newsletter/2005/2005_index.htm

4. Favorite Sites

With many conflicting priorities and distractions appearing daily on our computer screens, one way to ensure immediate, yet streamlined access to valuable information relevant to your work, is to use the "Favorites" function on your Web browser.

5. Google Alerts

One way to stay up-to-the-minute on global occurrences is to subscribe to Google Alerts. This free service requires you to enter the search terms of your choice, then brings you the information you request—daily, weekly, or as it happens. To register for Google Alerts, go to *www.google.com/alerts*.

6. Newsletters, Online and Printed

Online and/or printed newsletters offer brief, easy-to-read access to recent research findings and other general information. Online newsletters often provide the bonus of linking directly to the source of current research and best practices in the industry. The following organizations offer newsletters:

- Active for Life
www.activeforlife.info/newsroom/e_newsletter.html
- American Society on Aging
www.asaging.org
- International Council on Active Aging
www.icaa.cc
- American Council on Exercise
www.acefitness.org/fitfacts/fitbits_list.aspx
- The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports
www.fitness.gov/newsletter.htm
- University of South Carolina/Prevention Research Center
prevention.sph.sc.edu/newsletter/2005/2005_index.htm

7. Interactive Health Tutorials

MedlinePlus, a service of the National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health, offers online tutorials on a broad array of health topics at *www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/tutorial.html*.

8. Scientific Journals Online

Most top scientific journals offer an online subscription service with peer-reviewed articles on the most recent research, valuable editorial coverage on timely topics, and quick tidbits of information. Consider the following publications:

- Age and Ageing
ageing.oupjournals.org
- Journal of Aging and Physical Activity
www.humankinetics.com/JAPA/journalAbout.cfm
- Journals of Gerontology Series A: Biological Sciences and Medical Sciences
biomed.gerontologyjournals.org

- Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences
psychsoc.gerontologyjournals.org
- Journal of the American Geriatrics Society
www.blackwell-synergy.com/rd.asp?code=JGS&goto=journal

Publications that are less scientific and geared more for practical application include:

- Aging Today
agingtoday.org/at/at-256/toc.cfm
- Functional U™
www.icaa.cc/FunctionalU/FunctionalUhome.htm
- The Journal on Active Aging
www.icaa.cc/JOAA.htm

9. Networking

Staying up-to-date is easier when you build an effective network of peers who have professional interests similar to yours, whether locally or around the world.

One best practice site learns about new clinical studies on physical activity through established relationships with clinicians at a local hospital. Physicians and physical therapists with an interest in physical activity have access to different resources than health educators or physical activity instructors.

How do people who have “great connections” create and use their strong networks? It starts by taking advantage of every encounter, whether at a reception, at a meeting or conference, on an online listserv, in an elevator, through an introduction from a colleague, or just during the course of day-to-day business. Stretch beyond your comfort zone—be visible and fearless about whom you talk to. Introduce yourself and *ask questions* about professional interests, work settings, career paths, education, and personal interests. Learn what is of value and interest to other people.

10. Local, Regional and National Educational Events

Select and attend local or national conferences, meetings or seminars. In some cases, this requires making tough choices about time and money, so be sure to talk with others who have attended in the past before you make the investment. Other times, however, there are educational programs held at little or no cost at local hospitals or health centers.

At several of the best practice sites, supervisors made a special effort to help instructors regularly attend educational events. Sometimes this meant providing modest financial support.

If you are unable to attend an event in person, join by Webcast when available. Webcasts are effective learning tools used by organizations as diverse as the US Department of Health and Human Services’ Steps to a HealthierUS Conference, the American Society on Aging, and product manufacturers.

You might also choose to hold your own educational or staff training events.

One best practice site bases its staff training activities on guidelines from the American College of Sports Medicine and the American Heart Association, and then incorporates reviews of current research. Another offers training for area physical activity instructors and staff, further enlarging their pool of potential resources.

Summary

We are constantly bombarded by information in many forms, from a dizzying array of sources. Learning to sort out what information is useful, sound, and important is the key to increasing our knowledge—to professional growth itself. And learning to apply our expanding knowledge base to our everyday interactions with program participants is a critical factor in serving the aging community well.

We now have indisputable evidence that physical activity improves the quality of life for all adults as they age. As the field of physical activity for older adults continues to make advances to meet growing demand, it is essential to stay current on the evidence.

References

- ¹ *Superstudy® of Sports Participation*. For more information, visit the Web site of American Sports Data, Inc. at *www.americansportsdata.com*
- ² *Synthesis of AARP Research in Physical Activity 1999-2003*, AARP, January 2004

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