Team sport as a catalyst for Yolngu girls’ participation in healthy behaviours

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Aim
To assist girls to develop aspirations and to make good decisions that lead to better health and wellbeing.

Approach
Sport was used to attract Yolngu teenage girls to actively participate in lead up activities and earn a place in a 6 day sporting and cultural visit to Sydney. Most young Yolngu are athletic and would love to play sport in a high level team. However, existing team sports in Arnhem Land are male oriented with very limited options for girls. So a team sport needed to be provided which would provide the right hook to attract girls to participate in the healthy lifestyle program.

It’s not easy for young girls in remote Aboriginal communities to have aspirations and realise them. Without goals or ambition, there’s not much motivation to develop healthy lifestyle practices such as self care and self discipline. Many of the girls would love to be playing sport at an elite level and many of them have the talent. Some of the girls aspire to work as local rangers, looking after their land.

However the girls’ aspirations are limited as most of them haven’t had much exposure to anything outside their own or a neighbouring community, except perhaps a visit to Darwin. Many of the young people in communities are sniffing petrol and other substances. We wanted to excite the girls with real possibilities. A structure and pathway was needed for the girls to learn and practice personal skills. This process had to be slow and incremental, factoring in the inevitable distractions of cultural and family obligations, and peer pressure to sniff petrol.

In March 2012, a group of at-risk girls aged between 12 and 16 from three remote Aboriginal communities in East Arnhem started in the program. Initially the activities were social and recreational, such as beading, listening to music and watching DVDs. But the girls wanted to play sport, so netball coaching commenced and then 2 teams were entered in the mainstream Gove competition. This gave the girls a focus; a reason to attend training and be healthy – it gave them something to aim for.

Wins
A trip to Sydney was discussed with the girls, with entry criteria that must be met for selection. The girls were required to attain a minimum of 80% school attendance in the six months leading up to the trip. The overall school attendance rate had dropped to below 50%. Six months later, 15 of the girls had met the criteria with consistent attendance at the drop-in centre, healthy lifestyle clinic, fundraising activities, netball games and training sessions. They earned their place and travelled to Sydney for six days in September 2012.

The trip was packed with activities that broadened the girls’ horizons. They had a tour of Sydney sporting facilities on the fields and in the dressing rooms of NRL, ARL and cricket teams. They spent a morning at Bangarra Dance Theatre learning about all the different roles required to stage a dance show. They were pampered at a hairdressing school, and hosted and entertained by an inner-city high school. They had netball and AFL workshops and played in a round robin netball competition against a Sydney team that included some local indigenous players. Everywhere they went they shared their own experiences, stories and dance.

It was a busy and engaging trip with visible signs that the girls had gained confidence and were starting to take pride and look after themselves. They asked us to treat and dress their sores, which was a real milestone. Part of the personal hygiene preparation before the trip had been to learn that skin sores are not normal and can be treated.
What did we learn?

We learnt that individual behaviour change isn’t sustainable without supportive environments. While the focus was on lifting the lid of what’s possible for the girls and building their aspirations, we overlooked the impact of their return to the same difficult environment. Many of their parents still had chronic and disruptive alcohol problems. Their peers were still petrol-sniffing. Some still had no food or clean clothes in their house, which made it hard to get to school, and some still shared their 3 bedroom house with up to 15 others. We had raised the sights of the girls, but hadn’t addressed the ongoing issues that made it all very hard. We needed to raise the sights of the families at the same time, and to harness their support to continue the development process that makes it possible for the girls to achieve their goals.

It is possible that there were too many activities during the trip and not enough time to consolidate and talk about what the girls were seeing and experiencing. On return to their communities, a number of the girls reverted to poor school attendance and disruptive behaviour. We met with the girls individually and as a group, visited their homes and families and increased daily contact with the few that were struggling. But a strong post-return strategy hadn’t been developed for ongoing maintenance of their personal development. There were positive signs with the girls indicating that they’d like to try again for the 2013 trip and with recruitment of other girls as well. Over the 2012/13 long school holiday break, the girls did not revert to petrol sniffing, which they’d practised the previous year. It would have made much more impact to help the girls explore, while still in Sydney, what their experiences could mean on return to their communities.

Conclusion

There are many complexities in embedding healthy lifestyle practices in remote Aboriginal communities. Simply providing sporting activities without addressing the many barriers to healthy participation will not be effective or sustained. Creating supportive environments and developing personal skills are necessary for improved health and wellbeing.

To turn the tide, these young people need to know that dreams and aspirations can be realised. Young Yolngu girls need to see more of their own being successful and achieving their goals so they too can believe in themselves and strive for something special.

Healthy lifestyle initiatives are funded by the Chronic Disease Branch of the Department of Health and Ageing.