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## Supporting healthy communities through sports and recreation programs

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### Summary

#### What we know

- There is some evidence, in the form of critical descriptions of programs and systematic reviews, on the benefits to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities from participation in sport and recreational programs. These include some improvements in school retention, attitudes towards learning, social and cognitive skills, physical and mental health and wellbeing; increased social inclusion and cohesion; increased validation of and connection to culture; and crime reduction.
- Although the effects of sports and recreation programs can be powerful and transformative, these effects tend to be indirect. For example, using these programs to reduce juvenile antisocial behaviour largely work through diversion, providing alternative safe opportunities to risk taking, maintenance of social status, as well as opportunities to build healthy relationships with Elders and links with culture.
- Although Indigenous Australians have lower rates of participation in sport than non-Indigenous people, surveys suggest that around one-third of Indigenous people participate in some sporting activity (ABS 2010). That makes sports a potentially powerful vehicle for encouraging Indigenous communities to look at challenging personal and community issues.
- Within Indigenous communities, a strong component of sport and recreation is the link with traditional culture. Cultural activities such as hunting are generally more accepted as a form of sport and recreation than traditional dance. Therefore sport and recreation are integral in understanding 'culture' within Indigenous communities, as well as highlighting the culture within which sport and recreation operate.



## What works

There are a range of benefits pertaining to participation in sports and recreation activities. In the absence of evaluation evidence, below is a list of principles of ‘what works’ and ‘what doesn’t work’ to assist with sport and recreation program implementation.

- Providing a quality program experience heightens engagement in the sports or recreational activity.
- Where no activity has been previously made available, offering some type of sport or recreation program to fill that void should be given priority over making selective decisions about which program to carry out.
- Linking sports and recreation programs with other services and opportunities (for example, health services or counselling; jobs or more relevant educational programs) improves the uptake of these allied services. This assists in developing links to other important programs for improving health and wellbeing outcomes, or behavioural change.
- For sporting programs, providing long-term sustained, regular contact between experienced sportspeople and participants allows time to consolidate new skills and benefits that flow from involvement in the program.
- Promoting a program rather than a desired outcome improves the uptake of activities—for example, a physical fitness program is more likely to be well used if promoted as games or sports rather than a get-fit campaign.
- Involving the community in the planning and implementation of programs promotes cultural appropriateness, engagement and sustainability.
- Keeping participants’ costs to a minimum ensures broad access to programs.
- Scheduling activities at appropriate times enhances engagement—for example, for young people, after school, weekends and during school holidays, when they are most likely to have large amounts of unsupervised free time.
- Facilitating successful and positive risk taking provides an alternative to inappropriate risks.
- Creating a safe place through sports or recreation activities, where trust has been built, allows for community members to work through challenges and potential community and personal change without fear of retribution or being stigmatised.
- Ensuring stable funding and staffing is crucial to developing sustainable programs.

## What doesn’t work

- Some sports activities can contribute to exclusion on the basis of race, class or gender, for example football tends to exclude females, so adjunct programs need to be run, or more inclusive activities selected.
- Expecting too much from a program (for example, having an expectation that a sports program will eliminate substance abuse or antisocial behaviour). Programs need to be linked to other services and programs to maximise positive outcomes.
- Expensive activities, or those that do not engender broad community interest, can increase social exclusion.
- Promoting the wrong focus—for example, badging a program as a health program rather than a games program—reduces its attractiveness to young people.
- Programs that are not developed in conjunction with the target community are less likely to have buy-in.



## What we don't know

- Many of the positive effects of participating in sports or recreational activities are indirect and long term, generally making it not feasible to categorically state causal links between programs and specific outcomes. Therefore, it is important that policymakers and researchers continue to refine indirect measures, as well as building a body of documented and evaluated programs that demonstrate effectiveness through these indirect measures. Solid program logic (that is, the logic or reasoning upon which the program is based) may assist with this.
- There is very limited literature on ways to address gender, financial and other barriers to participation in sports and recreation programs.
- Although the non-Indigenous literature on elite sports notes some problems with drug abuse among athletes, it is not clear in Indigenous-specific literature whether this is a problem, and if so, how it could be managed.
- The literature reviewed here does not discuss which types of programs are better suited to specific geographic locations (such as remote regions), ages or genders. Studies exploring these issues could make a valuable contribution to understanding where to target specific types of programs.
- Longitudinal studies of program outcomes would help to capture and assess the magnitude of those benefits of sports and recreation programs that appear to take longer to emerge than the average program funding cycle would allow.

## Introduction

Healthy communities are communities in which people have the physical and mental health and wellbeing needed to conduct their daily lives. The purpose of this paper is to review the available evidence of a range of sports and recreation programs in relation to their effects on supporting and building healthy communities.

This paper is based on the synthesis of findings from over 30 studies, covering all geographic areas from inner city to remote regions, and age groups ranging from primary school to young adult. The studies were identified through searches, using Google Scholar, as well as a range of academic databases such as Australian Public Affairs Information Service, ProQuest Social Science journals, and SocIndex. Studies were then selected for analysis and synthesis, based on quality and relevance to the topic.

The Australian studies used account for approximately two-thirds of the research, with some international studies included to add depth. More than half the studies looked at programs run in Indigenous communities in Australia and Indigenous communities in the United States, Canada and New Zealand, with additional evidence from other ethnic minority (that is, immigrant) and ethnic majority contexts. The research synthesised in this paper uses a range of research methods to develop this research evidence, predominantly descriptions and critical assessments of programs, as well as evaluations and systematic literature reviews.

These programs are often conceptualised as providing 'a site for self discipline and character building' (Hartmann 2003). This site or situation allows skills such as cooperation and conflict resolution; communication; problem solving; delayed gratification and self-discipline to develop. The development of these skills can, in turn, lead to a change in self-concept and self-esteem. In the case of crime prevention programs, these programs are thought to support the growth of protective factors that prevent engagement in antisocial behaviours (Nichols 2007).



# Background

## Definitions of sports and recreation programs

The terms 'sports' and 'recreation', for the purposes of this paper, will be used to mean the following types of activities:

- *Sports*: This includes a range of organised physical activities, such as football, netball, basketball, athletics and the like. These often have a competitive element. Types of sporting activities reviewed here include both team and individual sports (Cairnduff 2001; Morris et al. 2003b).
- *Recreation*: Recreation overlaps with sports, but also includes a range of other leisure activities that are not generally included in sporting categories. A range of non-Indigenous-specific activities are included in the evidence such as film nights, discos, family fun days and barbecues, and outdoor activities such as wilderness adventure programs. While art programs were not specifically addressed, many of the effects noted in the paper are also applicable to arts programs.

### **A note about cultural heritage:**

The maintenance and promotion of Indigenous cultural heritage is vitally important for building healthy individual and cultural identities. Although this current paper will not include programs specifically designed to pass on Indigenous cultural learning and heritage, where evidence of this forms part of the overall sport or recreation program outcome, this will be disseminated.

## Why are sports and recreation activities important in Indigenous communities?

### The overall importance of sport and recreation

This section explores the reasons why sports and recreation are important for supporting healthy communities, first looking at communities more broadly, before focusing specifically on why they are important activities in Indigenous communities. Sports and recreation are an integral part of any culture, society or local community. There is a large body of evidence, both in community sports and in sports therapies (that is, the use of sports as platforms for therapeutic treatment of physical or mental health issues), which demonstrates the links between these activities and improved physical and mental wellbeing (Cunningham & Beneforti, 2005; Nichols, 2007; Ruhanen & Whitford, 2011), as well as with improved social cohesion and inclusion.

Sports and recreation programs for young people often provide a vehicle for improving educational engagement, academic achievement, and job-readiness; reducing antisocial behaviour; and providing avenues for more positive types of risk taking (Nichols 2007). Some degree of risk taking is a normal part of adolescent and teenage behaviour. However, where risk-taking leads to harm of self or others, it is unlikely to be considered healthy or normal. Although a more limited effect, participation in these activities can generate positive economic outcomes by building skills in sporting pursuits and other recreational activities, and by generating tourism (Masterman, 2004, cited in Ruhanen & Whitford 2011:35). The enjoyment (or 'fun') that active or passive participation in these activities generated is both intrinsically beneficial and a powerful 'hook' for engaging communities in programs with other social or personal development objectives (Hartmann 2003).



## The role of sports and recreation activities in Indigenous communities

Although Indigenous participation in sports is somewhat lower than that of non-Indigenous Australians, approximately one-third of the Indigenous population participates in some form of sporting activity (ABS 2010). These participation rates demonstrate that sports and recreation activities are an important part of daily life for many Indigenous people.

There are further reasons why sports and recreation programs play an important role specifically in the lives of Indigenous peoples and are a cost-effective means for supporting healthy communities:

- In remote communities, there is often limited infrastructure and programming to provide leisure and other pursuits (SA CSI 2007; Cunningham & Beneforti 2005), at times leading to engagement in unhealthy or negative activities (SA CSI 2007). The evidence suggests that providing locally relevant sports and recreation programs can be useful in building a sense of purpose, hope and belonging in these communities (Ruhanen & Whitford 2011; Stojanovski 2010).
- In regional and urban areas where Indigenous individuals and communities are in the minority, these activities provide an opportunity for improved social inclusion in the broader community (Cunningham & Beneforti 2005; Ruhanen & Whitford, 2011).
- Participation in these activities is also seen as a protective factor against substance abuse, self-harm and other negative behaviours (ACER 2011; Cairnduff 2001; Cunningham & Beneforti 2005; Stojanovski 2010).

## Some caveats to the evidence base

There are a number of caveats in the literature to the effects of participating in sports and recreational activities, and these should be noted. First, not everyone is interested in the same types of sports or recreation, so having only one option may limit the involvement of those not interested or not skilled, thereby contributing to increased social exclusion. Therefore, ideally a range of activities is recommended to allow everyone to participate fully in ways that are most effective in engaging them (Cairnduff 2001; Nichols 2007).

Second, some sporting and other recreational activities tend to be too expensive for disadvantaged and low-income groups and therefore may also contribute to increasing social exclusion (Nichols 2007; Sabo et al. 2005; Tonts 2005). Other activities have been variously noted as producing an exclusionary impact upon some groups in the community on the basis of ability, class, gender or race (Cairnduff 2001; Sabo et al. 2005; Tonts 2005). For example, girls in many communities may not be interested in playing football. Care needs to be taken therefore in selecting activities that will maximise community members' opportunities to participate (Tonts 2005).

Third, a small number of studies identified the problem of substance abuse in highly competitive sports (for example, Nichols 2007). This issue should be monitored carefully in the development of any sporting or recreational program.

Finally, it is important to note that direct causal claims about benefits are problematic (Hartmann & Depro 2006) because such benefits are often diffuse, long term and therefore difficult to measure (Cairnduff 2001; Cunningham & Beneforti 2005). Measurements of outcomes and impacts therefore tend to be via indirect means or proxy measures, such as improved attendance and retention at school, or reduced ambulance and police call-outs.

While this means program acquittals based solely on quantitative data become largely meaningless, the lack of statistical measures or data do not equal a lack of benefits (Cunningham & Beneforti 2005). Thus, in implementing the programs described here, it should be noted that program benefits cannot be manipulated for short-term gain, so it is imperative that a longer-term view of benefits be adopted (Cameron & McDougall 2000; Cunningham & Beneforti 2005).



## What are the benefits of participating in sports and recreation programs?

There are many documented benefits of how participation in sports and recreation programs is valuable for Indigenous communities and individuals. In this section, a profile of these benefits is provided. Several broad areas of benefit emerge in the literature—improvements in learning and education outcomes; countering boredom and reducing crime and antisocial behaviour; improved health and wellbeing; increased civic engagement; increased social inclusion; and opportunities for employment and economic development.

### Improved learning and education outcomes

Where Indigenous students have disengaged from school, sports activities and recreation have often been used as one of a combination of strategies to successfully re-engage them—that is, to improve attendance, retention at school and academic achievement (AIFS 2011; Higgins & Burchill 2005; HoRSCATSIA 2011; Lonsdale et al. 2011; Rynne & Rossi 2012).

Participation in these programs has also been shown to improve a range of cognitive and social skills. These include:

- self-discipline (Light 2010; Lonsdale et al. 2011)
- self-confidence, cultural identity and pride (Lonsdale et al. 2011)
- goal setting and delayed gratification (AIFS 2011; Light 2010; Lonsdale et al. 2011)
- cooperation and conflict resolution (Higgins & Burchill 2005).

#### Box 1: The Sporting Chance Program

The Sporting Chance Program aims to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students (boys and girls) using sport and recreation as a vehicle to engage them in their schooling (Lonsdale et al. 2011). There are two distinct components of the program: School-based Sports Academies for secondary students, and Education Engagement Strategies, for both primary and secondary students.

The academies offer 'innovative and high-quality sports-focussed learning and development opportunities' (Lonsdale et al. 2011:13) to engage students in school. The academies are intensive, offering mentoring and support to students at least once per week and in some cases every day, before, during and after school. The Education Engagement Strategies are less intensive, vary considerably and involve visits at least twice per year to the school of high-profile athletes, who stay in a community for 1–5 days and provide mentoring and role-modelling activities for young people (p. 13).

ACER's (Lonsdale et al. 2011) evaluation of Sporting Chance demonstrated that there has been improved attendance and engagement in schools running both components of the program, improvement in learning achievement and retention to Year 12 at some sites (others were inconclusive) and increased parental and community involvement in schools (p.4–5). The sustainability of engagement in school is more evident in the School-based Sports Academies than the Education Engagement Strategies (p.4).

Additional benefits include parental pride in the achievements of their children, school staff observing positive changes in 'student confidence, self-esteem, behaviour, attendance and engagement in learning', and the students themselves being able to articulate a range of positive learnings from their participation (p.5).

The ACER evaluation suggests that 'there is insufficient evidence to show a clear link between Academy or Education Engagement Strategy participation and improved academic outcomes' (p. 4).

Source: Lonsdale et al. 2011.



## Reduction of antisocial behaviour and crime

Sports and recreation programs often aim to reduce crime and antisocial behaviour indirectly through the provision of alternative, healthy activities (Allard et al. 2007; HoRSCATSIA 2011). Although not an Indigenous study, Hartman's analysis of a midnight basketball program in the United States provided evidence of statistically significant reductions in property crimes in cities with such a program, as compared to cities with no program (Hartmann & Depro 2006).

Evidence that sports and recreation programs help to reduce antisocial behaviour and crime across Indigenous communities is varied. Although some Indigenous community members believe that sporting programs offer opportunities to reduce boredom, and keep young people from involvement in crime, others warn against seeing sporting programs as a 'cure-all' for social issues including criminal behaviour (Rynne & Rossi 2012). It is important to consider that, although it is unlikely that sports and recreation programs will have a direct impact on reduction of antisocial behaviour and crime, they form an important mechanism by which positive social and personal development may occur (Morris et al. 2003b).

The popular view that sporting programs for youth will keep them busy and out of trouble appears to be more evident for Indigenous individuals in programs where the motivation to stay away from criminal or harmful activities is high, and the level of involvement by coaches, mentors and police is of an intense nature (CBSR 2012:39; Rynne & Rossi 2012).

### Box 2: The Wadeye AFL Development Program

The Wadeye AFL Development Program in the Northern Territory provides a good example of this position. The initial introduction of a senior league in Wadeye did not appear to be having an impact on community safety and reduction in violent behaviour, both important aims for the program.

In response, the community initiated lobbying for a regional team that people can get behind and support, as this was seen as an opportunity for the community to unite. After the successful entry of Wadeye Magic into the Northern Territory Football League (NTFL) there was overall support for the view that the community was calmer and more cohesive. Players, families and community members voted 'helping players stay out of trouble' as the second most significant change that had occurred since the program inception (p. v–vi, 41).

However, it is the participation rules for the Wadeye Magic football program that appear to be specifically helping a small number of young Indigenous men stay out of trouble. The Community Police Liaison officer views the playing list each week (which consists of approximately 50 local men) and if any of the players are identified to have been causing trouble, they are excluded from playing that week. Opportunities to play for Wadeye Magic are extremely coveted; hence the incentive to stay out of trouble is high (p. 39).

*Source:* CBSR 2012.

### Box 3: Clean Slate Without Prejudice Program

Another sporting program that appears to be having an impact on crime reduction among Indigenous offenders is the 'Clean Slate Without Prejudice' Program in Redfern, New South Wales. Designed specifically to divert Indigenous young people from engaging in further criminal activities, the Redfern Local Area Command, in partnership with the Tribal Warrior Association (TWA), runs the program.

Men participating in the program undertake boxing and fitness training, volunteer with TWA, and attend various forums on topics such as health and exercise, substance abuse and family violence. Police also regularly meet with the participants to provide mentoring and train with them in the boxing and fitness program. In addition, Indigenous Elders from Redfern and inner Sydney operate the TWA and this provides training for the commercial maritime industry and certification in mentoring diverse cultures, with a view to helping program participants find employment and harness their own experiences to mentor other young Australians, particularly Indigenous youth.

The initial program, which started in 2009, saw only 1 of the 10 participants re-offend. Although causal links cannot be inferred from this report, Redfern Local Area Command reported that, in 2009, there was an 80% drop in charges of robbery against Indigenous men.

Source: Judicial Commission of New South Wales 2011.

## Health and holistic wellbeing

Participation in sports and active recreation activities has direct benefits in improving physical health and wellbeing, such as increased life expectancy and reduced heart disease (Higgins & Burchill 2005; Reimers et al. 2012; Ruhanen & Whitford 2011).

The benefits of these programs become even more apparent in improving mental health and wellbeing. Several authors reported improved mental health and even a reduction in self-harming behaviours following community sports and recreation programs (Frazier et al. 2007; HoRSCATSIA 2011; Ruhanen & Whitford 2011; Sabo et al. 2005:8). Some of the specific benefits include reductions in harmful behaviours (HoRSCATSIA 2011) and reduced suicide and depression in adolescents (Sabo et al. 2005).

Additional benefits include:

- increased self-esteem, dignity and confidence (Atherley 2006; HoRSCATSIA 2011; Nichols 2007; Phipps & Slater 2010; Ruhanen & Whitford 2011)
- empowerment and an increased sense of control or agency (Atherley 2006; Nichols 2007; Phipps & Slater 2010)
- pride in one's personal or community achievements, which is crucially important in marginalised communities (Atherley 2006; Lonsdale et al. 2011; Tonts 2005)
- increased resilience (Hunter 2012).

## Increased civic participation

Participation in Indigenous sports and recreation programs has been shown to open up opportunities for development of leadership skills as well as increasing access and involvement in activities that have valued outcomes for individuals and their communities. Opportunities to organise and run award nights; volunteer in a community shed building project (AIFS 2011); and developing coaching skills that allow participants to reinvest in programs (Rynne & Rossi 2012) are just a few examples.





## Increased social inclusion

Even with the caveats stated earlier, participation in sports or recreational programs is regularly demonstrated to increase social inclusion and decrease exclusion. Activities must be appropriate and implemented effectively (Cairnduff 2001; Tonts 2005). (Principles for appropriate selection and implementation are detailed in the 'Conclusion', below.) Indigenous festivals can act as 'fulcrums for social and traditional cohesion' (Cameron & McDougall 2000:4), and deep friendships can develop through shared, vigorous sports training sessions and competitions (Light 2010).

## Economic development—career pathways and tourism

Participation in sports and recreation programs can lead to economic development through direct training in specific job skills (for example, sports coaching) or indirectly by encouraging increased tourism (Higgins 2005). The latter is particularly salient in communities where sports events can attract increased tourism (Ruhanen & Whitford 2011).

An Indigenous surfing program that the Australian Sports Commission developed has demonstrated an example of community and individual capacity building as a result of sports programs. In collaboration with Surfing Australia and local communities, 5 locations across New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Queensland participated in surfing programs that were delivered in a variety of contexts, ranging from twice-yearly holiday camps to weekly sessions as part of the school sports curriculum (Rynne & Rossi 2012).

As a direct result of 1 program, 9 participants went on to gain qualifications as surfing coaches. This achievement allowed these participants to gain access to equipment, provide coaching to other young people, and develop themselves as future mentors and role models. In addition, local programs are now able to employ Indigenous coaches from the local area, instead of contracting non-Indigenous coaches from outside the community. The concept of being self-sufficient in running future surfing programs was an important outcome as one program coordinator relayed, 'Obviously what will happen eventually—my vision is—once we train all these coaches up, the communities will be able to run the programs' (Rynne & Rossi 2012:34).

## How do sports and recreation programs support healthy Indigenous communities?

The studies reviewed here suggest that there is a range of mechanisms through which sports and recreation programs support healthy communities and assist communities in tackling negative behaviours. As noted above, the benefits of these programs and activities are often realised indirectly and cannot be manipulated, so the development of a given program will not necessarily automatically result in a particular personal or social outcome. Several themes emerged in the literature around these mechanisms, as detailed below.

## Fun and enjoyment as an engagement tool

Participating in sports and recreation programs is enjoyable for most people, providing opportunities to build physical and social skills and develop friendships. This makes sporting and recreation activities useful for engaging people in programs that aim to build other skills or promote health goals such as increasing life expectancy, which of themselves are of less intrinsic interest (Cunningham & Beneforti 2005; Light 2010; Reimers et al. 2012). Pleasure and 'kicking up dust' (Slater 2010:147) are also important mechanisms by which both traditional and non-traditional forms of sport and recreation can help to improve mental wellbeing (Phipps & Slater 2010; Sabo et al. 2005; VicHealth 2010).



## Role models and mentoring

Positive role modelling and mentoring often occurs as a natural process when young people work alongside accomplished sportspeople and senior community members. According to the South Australian Commissioner for Social Inclusion, young people are actually *looking* for positive models to emulate (SA CSI 2007).

Indigenous Australian cultures tend to have observational learning styles, which are facilitated in sports and recreation programs in a highly effective manner (O'Brien et al. 2009). Young people are able to observe, and then emulate behaviours to which they aspire (O'Brien et al. 2009).

Similarly a coach who is genuinely caring yet disciplined can provide a role model to which young people can aspire (Hartmann 2003; Light 2010). Likewise, younger players often emulate the behaviour of talented Indigenous footballers, provided the senior players' on-field and every day off-field behaviours are consistent (O'Brien et al. 2009).

### Box 4: Coonamble sports mentoring program (Stride Foundation)

Coonamble is a disadvantaged community in the far northwest of New South Wales, with large numbers of single-parent families, and often a lack of positive male role models for young boys (AIFS 2011:1).

In conjunction with a local reference group comprised of Coonamble residents, the Stride Foundation established a sports mentoring project to promote healthy development, build greater links to the community, and teach a range of pro-social skills to young boys in the town.

Thirty young males aged 12–18 participated in this project over 2 years. These boys typically 'may not normally have engaged in school activities or health promotion programs' (p.2). Adult mentors were recruited from local sports clubs and provided with training in mentoring skills, and a community dinner was held to promote the program. Given the community's existing efforts to build cohesion between Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents, a 'mixed racial group of young people and mentors' was developed (p. 3).

Sporting participation was encouraged, and even rewarded through a Sports Award night. In addition to participating in regular sports and mentoring, the youth were encouraged to raise funds for a sports equipment storage shed at the local sports oval, and participate in a trip to Sydney to see a rugby match and meet famous professional rugby players.

Raising funds for the shed helped to build a greater sense of connection to the local community, and the Sydney trip helped to cement relationships between mentors and mentees. An AIFS review of this program demonstrated that young participants exhibited 'improved...attendance, behaviour and retention at school', 'increased social, emotional and relationship development' and empowerment with 'skills and motivation to achieve their goals' (p. 6).

Source: AIFS 2011.



## Diversion from inappropriate behaviour

Boredom and a sense of having no purpose are often precursors to engaging in antisocial, destructive or illegal activities. Participating in active pursuits is a prime mechanism for preventing these types of behaviours (Delfabbro & Day 2003; Stojanovski 2010). In the case of youth, being involved in active pursuits reduces the amount of unsupervised free time they have, which reduces their capacity to engage in negative or risky behaviours (Morris et al. 2003b:1), while promoting positive behaviours and even some social or employment opportunities (Frazier et al. 2007).

Nichols also noted that by providing a positive environment in which to take risks, sports can provide an alternative to criminal behaviour as a way of maintaining one's social standing (Nichols 2007). The South Australian Commissioner for Social Inclusion interviews with delinquent youth document that they actually repeatedly call for increased arts and sporting activities, so that they do not turn to crime for something to do (SA CSI 2007). Sport is repeatedly shown to be a 'powerful antidote to boredom' (Cunningham & Beneforti 2005:89; Ruhanen & Whitford 2011). Sporting activities can often require longer-term commitment to build technical skill and mastery, which Nichols suggests can be a hook, or long-term diversion from negative behaviours (Nichols 2007).

By building greater social interaction and greater understanding of other groups in the community (for example, age or ethnic groups), sports and recreational activities can help to reduce the fear of crime in the community, as well as building empathy which may help to prevent would-be criminals from engaging in wrongdoing (HoRSCATSIA 2011).

## Empowerment

Empowering people to live happy, fulfilling lives is an important mechanism for developing sustained, healthy communities. Sports and recreation programs can be pathways to empowerment, demonstrated in the following two examples.


- Taking control in civic spaces:  
O'Brien and colleagues found that...connection to role models was considered important for the development of a sense of empowerment in Indigenous community members over their lives (O'Brien et al. 2009:202).
- Employment and self-sufficiency:  
Instead of paying for skilled non-Aboriginal instructors to come into an Indigenous community program to provide surf coaching, the community is able to employ local young people who have completed their surf coach training, which will eventually enable the communities to run the programs themselves (Rynne & Rossi 2012).

## Building social, cognitive and emotional skills

Sports and some types of recreational programs not only teach physical skills, but can also be used to teach a range of other cognitive social skills that are important for personal and community functioning in everyday life. For example, group activities can be sites for learning to communicate more clearly, relate to different people, build networks (that is, social capital), contribute ideas, and learn pro-social values (Light 2010; Nichols 2007).

In addition, sports and recreation programs can support skills development in the following 4 ways:

1. **Context-based learning situated in a community of practice:** Participation in sports and recreation allows for learning new cognitive, social and other skills via context-based learning—that is, learning skills that are relevant to needs here and now (Fogarty & Schwab 2012).



Research in education has repeatedly shown that [an Indigenous] student's ability to 'scaffold' new information on top of an existing knowledge base is a precursor to improved educational attainment (Fogarty & Schwab 2012:14 citing McRae et al. 2000).

Furthermore, they take place in a community of practice—that is, a group of people conducting the same activities at varied skill levels, which supports the learning process (Light 2010).

### **Box 5: Clontarf Football Academies**

The Clontarf Foundation uses Australian Rules football as the hook to improve Indigenous boys' educational engagement. Its School-based Sports Academies are funded under the Sporting Chance Program and aim to improve the education, discipline, life skills, and self-esteem and employment prospects of young Indigenous men. The program offers a wide range of student activities including for example camps, excursions, leadership and team building. The focus is on these activities rather than sport as such. The program provides up to 50 hours per week with students (including during and after-school contact, lunchtimes, camps, workplace and community visits). While some activities are incentives for school attendance, academic effort, general good standing and positive behaviours, many activities are to engage some of the most at-risk and disengaged students who wouldn't otherwise attend school (ACER 2011: 55–60). Staff induct students into the academy, help students with their subject selection and participate in a range of support activities, either helping in a whole-class situation or withdrawing small groups or individual students to work on a one-on-one basis (ACER 2011:56).

An evaluation of the Clontarf Football Academies by Nichols (2007) demonstrated an average 80% retention rate across the 3 study sites (that is, 3 schools), generally exceeding average Indigenous completion rates across Western Australia by 17%. Further, approximately 80% of graduates gained employment compared to the national Indigenous labour force participation rates of 64%. These rates were current at the time of the study (Nichols 2007:112–3).

The collection of performance data for the Sporting Chance Program has changed over the life course of the program, which has limited the availability of current performance outcomes. However, the authors note that 'The professional judgement of school staff suggests that the Sporting Chance Program is having a moderate (positive) impact on students in relation to attendance, engagement, achievement, retention and parental/community involvement' (ACER 2011:94).

Key success factors for the program are the quality and commitment of the staff; autonomy, structure and routine in the project; and consistent sufficient project funding (ACER 2011:59).

*Source:* Nichols 2007; ACER 2011.

- 2. Fostering social interaction:** Social interaction is important for building a supportive environment to support changes in behaviour and attitudes, and helps reduce social isolation and build social inclusion (Cameron & MacDougall 2000:1; Ruhanen & Whitford 2011).
- 3. Fostering intercultural exchange can help to build greater social cohesion:** The evidence shows that sporting events can foster intercultural exchange. This can occur between different Indigenous groups (Phipps & Slater 2010; Ruhanen & Whitford 2011), and can also occur between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups (Higgins 2005).
- 4. Group activities can promote inclusiveness:** Where activities are low cost and inclusive of anyone with a shared interest, they can promote social inclusion and reduce social isolation (Light 2010; Tonts 2005).



## Self-expression

Many studies discussed the role of sports and recreation activities in building identity (Light 2010). For example, O'Brien and others' (2009) study of the Rumbalara Football Club in Victoria showed how the club helped to foster positive Indigenous identities through role modelling and mentoring.

## Principles for implementing effective programs in Indigenous communities

The evidence that has been presented thus far clearly reveals the beneficial impacts and outcomes from sports and recreation programs in Indigenous communities. There are a range of principles presented in the literature that should be considered and incorporated into the development and implementation of a locally relevant and effective sports or recreation program. These have been grouped under several themes which emerged during this study. A diagram summarising these principles is also provided at the end of this section.

### Program design

- **Where no activity has been previously made available, offering some type of sport or recreation program to fill that void should be given priority over making selective decisions about which program to implement.** The evidence suggests that there is no one sport or recreation activity that produces a given outcome. Rather, studies that attempt to compare the relative effectiveness have found that they are all roughly equal in effect. However, given that different activities appeal to people of different ages and genders, there is ultimately a need to provide a range of activities (Morris et al. 2003a; 2003b).
- **The quality of a sports or recreation experience is just as important as the end-product.** These types of programs produce benefits through engaging in the process, so it is more important to develop a positive process than a refined end-product (Cunningham & Beneforti 2005). To facilitate positive personal and social changes, it is also of crucial importance to *create a safe place to explore new ideas and experiment with change* (Morris et al. 2003b).
- **Appeal to target group's passions and interests.** This will most certainly improve the uptake of a program (Hartmann 2003).
- **Link sports and recreation programs to other services and opportunities.** A given sports or recreation program in itself may not be sufficient to achieve improved health and social outcomes. Therefore, links to other services (for example, health or employment services) or to other education or vocational development opportunities are important to capitalise on the outcomes of a program (Cameron & MacDougall 2000; Hartman 2003; Hartman & Depro 2006). Linkages between sports and recreation programs and multiple local community service agencies—where other needed services can be accessed—appear to have the most positive effects (Morris et al. 2003a).
- **Sustainable programs are crucial to maximise long-term outcomes.** Sustainability requires stable staffing and adequate resources, both in terms of finance and equipment (Cunningham & Beneforti 2005; Lonsdale 2011; Morris et al. 2003a). Long-term funding is crucial to set up programs and build momentum, as trust often needs to be built first (Cameron & MacDougall 2000; Hartmann 2003; Hartmann & Depro 2006). Finally, for a program to become truly sustainable in the long term, the community needs to run it (Cunningham & Beneforti 2005).



- **Promote programs as sport or games to maximise inclusion.** Promoting the wrong focus—for example, badging a program as a health program or education re-engagement program—reduces its attractiveness to young people. It is important not to place the emphasis on the intended outcome of the program when marketing to young people, rather market the activity that the program involves. For example, rather than promoting a program to improve fitness for young people, or one which aims to fix a given issue in the community, a more successful approach would be to promote a traditional games program (Cunningham & Beneforti 2005)—that is, the activity should be promoted rather than the desired outcome.
- **Have senior community members who are willing and able to transmit cultural knowledge to young people** (Higgins 2005). Senior Indigenous community members do want the absolute best for their young people and want opportunities to pass on cultural knowledge (Cairnduff 2001).
- **The quality of relationships in program design and implementation matters.** Where a program increases social exclusion or where service providers do not consult representatives from across the community, there is the potential for sports and recreation programs to drive a wedge in the community. It is important therefore to involve the community in planning and delivering a program (Cairnduff 2001). The sportsperson's or leader's charisma and commitment are vitally important in building a successful and engaging program, as is their relationship with the community (Hartmann 2003; Lonsdale et al. 2011). It is also vitally important that the sportsperson or leader running a program has consistent, regular contact with the community to maintain momentum (Cameron & MacDougall 2000; Lonsdale et al. 2011).
- **Keep costs to a minimum to ensure participation is feasible for those on low incomes** (Cunningham & Beneforti 2005; SA CSI 2007). Many Indigenous communities are among the most socioeconomically disadvantaged in Australia, increasing the possibility that expensive activities or those requiring a lot of specialist equipment are beyond their reach.
- **Evaluation is important and requires funding.** To meaningfully assess the effectiveness of these activities it is important that the processes, outputs and outcomes of programs are carefully evaluated (Lonsdale et al. 2011; Morris 2003b).

## Program implementation

A range of principles also emerged, which specifically relate to the implementation of a program:

- Before commencing a program, **it is important to get to know the community, to build trust, and to allow sufficient lead time to develop the most appropriate project for the local context** (Higgins 2005; Lonsdale et al. 2011). Involving the community in planning the project and incorporating their interests and expectations will maximise buy-in (Cairnduff 2001; Morris 2003b).
- **It is important to provide a range of activities**, to maximise the chances that any individual will find something that engages them (Cairnduff 2001).
- **Attention should be given in program design to ways to address gender issues.** In some Indigenous communities, avoidance relationships may dictate that separate programs are run for males and females. However, in others combined programs may be useful for breaking down negative and limiting gender stereotypes—particularly by providing broader opportunities for girls to participate (Higgins & Burchill 2005).
- **Voluntary participation is important to ensure those involved in a program are receptive to change and learning** (Morris 2003b).



- **Some types of projects require short-term, intense interaction to be effective, although others require steady and long-term interaction.** Short-term, intense interaction is particularly important in wilderness adventure programs, where activities that are less than 6 weeks duration typically showing the greatest impact in re-engaging disengaged youth (Cameron & MacDougall 2000; O'Brien et al. 2009). On the other hand, sport activities requiring significant skill development typically produce greater effects when run over 10–20 weeks (O'Brien et al. 2009). Where a program goal is to reduce delinquency, sustained interaction is a key to an effective program (Cameron & MacDougall 2000).
- **Schedule activities at appropriate times** (Cunningham & Beneforti 2005)—for example, programs aimed at tackling boredom in children and youth are most needed outside school hours, on weekends and during school holidays, when they are most likely to be bored and to engage in antisocial behaviour. On the other hand, a program focusing on older adults may be more appropriate during daytime hours.

## Involving the community

- Where practical **involve community members who are willing to impart culture and knowledge.** This allows Country and culture to shape a given project and to shape how a program proceeds (Higgins 2005).
- **Fostering collaboration and group ownership may help re-build social cohesion** by providing a space where more marginalised people can begin to build the networks of relationships, and a space where conflict can be explored and resolved (CBSR 2012).
- **Where possible, a whole-of-community holistic approach is important,** in keeping with the communal nature of Indigenous cultures (Cunningham & Beneforti 2005). Where a program aims to improve health and wellbeing, a holistic approach that allows for physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and cultural wellbeing is required to maintain cultural relevance and appropriateness (Morris 2003b; Phipps & Slater 2010).

## Working with young people

- **A mix of at-risk and not-at-risk youth** is important to provide pro-social, positive peer role modelling for those at risk of engaging in antisocial behaviour (Morris 2003b); however, careful management of such programs is required to prevent negative peer role modelling for those at highest risk (Bender, 2010; Fergusson et al. 2002; Hurd et al. 2011).
- Where working with youth engaged in risky or antisocial behaviours, it is important to **facilitate successful and healthy risk taking.** This can provide a safer alternative to dangerous or criminal risk taking, which is often used to maintain social standing and image within a group (Morris 2003b).
- **Youth programs should provide opportunities for young people to develop and exhibit leadership.** This maximises learning opportunities (Morris 2003b).
- Where a project is linked to a school, **strong relationships with the school are crucial for maximising the potential for re-engaging disengaged students.** Interested teachers involved in the program are crucial links between the program and the school (Lonsdale et al. 2011).



### Consult and involve Elders

#### Involve Community

- Indigenous languages
- Collaboration and group ownership
- Whole-of-community approach

#### Working with at-risk young people

- Mix of at-risk and not-at-risk youth
- Successful and healthy risk taking
- Opportunities to develop and exhibit leadership
- Strong relationships with schools

#### Designing the program

- An activity is better than having no activity
  - High quality
  - 'Branding' is important
- Appeal to the group's passions and interests
  - Link to other community services
- Sustainable funding and long-term programs
  - Build quality relationships
  - Keep running costs to a minimum
  - Evaluate

#### Implementing the program

- Get to know the community before starting
  - Provide a range of activities
- Address gendered access and participation
  - Voluntary participation
  - Appropriate project length
- Schedule activities at appropriate times

**Figure 1: Summary of principles for effective arts programs in Indigenous communities**

## Areas for further research

Further study in two specific areas would assist to improve our knowledge of how the benefits of sports and recreation programs help to support healthy Indigenous communities:

- Although evidence suggests that attempting to ultimately prove causality between these types of programs and positive community outcomes is largely a futile exercise, continuing to build a body of evaluation will provide additional evidence around the nature of these benefits and the mechanisms by which they are produced.
- Longitudinal studies of program outcomes will help to capture and assess the magnitude of those benefits that appear to take longer to form than the average program funding cycle would allow.

In June 2013, The Commonwealth House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (HoRSCATSIA 2013) tabled a report into the contribution of sport to Indigenous wellbeing and mentoring. The Committee found that, overall, the evidence supported the concept that sport has a positive impact on Indigenous wellbeing and mentoring. The Committee established that sport could contribute positively to achieving targets for closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in areas such as health, education and employment (HoRSCATSIA, 2013:v).





Recommendations from the Inquiry include (but are not limited to): the development of a framework of service delivery and evaluation for Commonwealth agencies which fund sport programs; base funding and coordination assistance to Indigenous regional and state sporting carnivals; longer-term funding to Indigenous sports programs (preferably over 3-year cycles); development of Indigenous participation in supporting roles around sports such as coaching, umpiring, health work and administration; prioritising funding and strategies to increase Indigenous female participation in physical activity; and support for initiatives that increase the array of Indigenous sporting role models at all levels (HoRSCATSIA, 2013:xiii–xv).

## Conclusion

A broad array of evidence clearly demonstrates the beneficial effects of participation in sports and recreation for supporting healthy Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. These activities provide a safe place for people to learn new skills, explore and confront both personal and community trauma and dysfunction, and build social networks. This paper has outlined a range of successful practices as well as some broad principles for effectively implementing sports or recreation programs. It should be noted that although adhering to these principles is likely to result in effective programs, causal links between sports or recreation programs and specific outcomes are almost impossible to demonstrate. Therefore, care should be taken to design specific programs in consultation with the community in which they will be carried out, to ensure relevance and the best possible uptake of the program.

## Appendix 1

The Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Assessed Collection includes summaries of research and evaluations that provide information on what works to overcome Indigenous disadvantage across the seven Council of Australian Governments building block topics.

Table A1 contains a list of selected research and evaluations that were the key pieces of evidence used in this Resource Sheet. The major components are summarised in the Assessed collection.

To view the Assessed collection, visit <<http://www.aihw.gov.au/closingthegap/collections/>>.

**Table A1: Assessed collection items for *Supporting healthy communities through sports and recreation programs***

Title	Year	Author/s
Indigenous sporting events: more than just a game	2011	Ruhanen L & Whiteford M
Children’s social and personal development through sport: a case study of an Australian swimming club	2010	Light RL
Rethinking sports-based community crime prevention: A preliminary analysis of the relationship between midnight basketball and urban crime rates	2006	Hartmann D & Depro B
Investigating indicators for measuring the health and social impact of sport and recreation programs in Australian Indigenous communities	2005	Cunningham J & Beneforti M
Theorizing sport as social intervention: a view from the grassroots	2003	Hartmann D
Sport and recreation for Indigenous youth in the Northern Territory: scoping research priorities for health and social outcomes	2001	Cairnduff S



Table A2 contains a list of Closing the Gap Clearinghouse issues papers and resource sheets related to this resource sheet.

To view the publications, visit <<http://www.aihw.gov.au/closingthegap/publications/>>.

**Table A2: Related Clearinghouse resource sheets and issues papers**

Title	Year	Author
Supporting healthy communities through arts programs	2013	Ware V-A
Mentoring programs for Indigenous youth at risk	2013	Ware V-A
Trauma-informed services and trauma-specific care for Indigenous Australian children	2013	Atkinson J
Strategies and practices for promoting the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people	2013	Closing the Gap Clearinghouse
Strategies to minimise the incidence of suicide and suicidal behaviour	2013	Closing the Gap Clearinghouse
Parenting in the early years: effectiveness of parenting support programs for Indigenous families	2012	Mildon R & Polimeni M
Early learning programs that promote children's developmental and educational outcomes	2012	Harrison LJ, Goldfeld S, Metcalfe E & Moore T
Healthy lifestyle programs for physical activity and nutrition	2011	Closing the Gap Clearinghouse
Effective practices for service delivery coordination in Indigenous communities	2011	Stewart J, Lohoar S & Higgins D

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## Terminology

**Indigenous:** ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’ and ‘Indigenous’ are used interchangeably to refer to Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Closing the Gap Clearinghouse uses the term ‘Indigenous Australians’ to refer to Australia’s first people.

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