

1 **Abstract**

2 **Purpose:** The objective of this study was to evaluate the impact of a school-based
3 intervention (*Program X*) incorporating pedometers and email support on physical
4 activity, sedentary behavior and healthy eating in adolescents.

5 **Methods:** A randomized control trial (RCT) was used to evaluate the impact of the
6 *Program X* intervention. Six schools (N = 124 participants, mean age = 14.1 ± .8) were
7 randomized to intervention or control conditions for the six month study period.
8 Objectively recorded physical activity (mean steps/day), self-reported sedentary behavior
9 and dietary habits were measured at baseline and at six month follow-up and intervention
10 effects were assessed using repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) and chi
11 square tests (χ^2).

12 **Results:** Participants in the intervention group increased their step counts by 956 ± 4107
13 steps/day (boys) and 999 ± 1999 (girls). Repeated measures ANOVA revealed significant
14 group-by-time interactions for boys ($F = 7.4, p = .01, d = .80$) and girls ($F = 29.6, p$
15 $<.001, d = 1.27$) for mean steps/day. The intervention significantly decreased the number
16 of energy dense/low nutrient snacks consumed by boys ($\chi^2 = 4.0, p = .043$) and increased
17 the number of fruit serves among girls ($\chi^2 = 4.8, p = .028$). The intervention did not have a
18 statistically significant effect on sedentary behavior.

19 **Conclusions:** A school-based intervention incorporating physical activity monitoring
20 using pedometers and email support was successful in promoting physical activity and
21 selected healthy eating behaviors in adolescent boys and girls.

22

1 **Introduction**

2 Physical activity declines steeply during adolescence [1] and dietary behaviors
3 deteriorate as adolescents consume more food away from the influence of the family [2].
4 Data from recent studies suggest that many Australian adolescents are not adequately
5 active, consume too much soft drink and junk food and not enough fruit and vegetables
6 [3, 4]. While the relative contribution of physical activity and nutrition to obesity is
7 controversial [5], it is irrefutable that the pandemic of excess weight is a product of
8 widespread energy imbalance [6]. The prevalence of overweight and obesity among
9 Australian youth has accelerated since the early 1970s [7] and recent studies suggest that
10 approximately a quarter of Australian youth are overweight or obese [4, 8]. These rates
11 are consistent with pediatric obesity prevalence in the United States [9] and Europe [10].

12 The school has been identified as an ideal setting for the promotion of physical
13 activity and healthy eating [11] and school-based interventions that combine a variety of
14 strategies appear to hold considerable promise for sustainable behavior change in
15 adolescents [12, 13]. Due to a crowded school curriculum, interventions that encourage
16 adolescents to increase their activity levels outside of the school setting are warranted.
17 Physical activity self-monitoring with pedometers has emerged as an effective strategy
18 for increasing activity with adults [14]. More recently, the *Girls Stepping Out Program*
19 (GSOP) and the *Learning to Enjoy Activity with Friends* (LEAF) interventions have
20 demonstrated that pedometers can be used to increase physical activity among low-active
21 adolescents [15, 16]. While there has been a shift in health promotion focus from
22 targeting fitness, to the promotion of moderate intensity lifestyle activity [17], few
23 interventions targeting youth reflect this change.

24 Over the past ten years, computer-tailored feedback has emerged as a health
25 education strategy to improve diet and physical activity behaviors [18]. Frenn and

colleagues [19] evaluated an innovative intervention based on the Transtheoretical Model of behavior change in adolescents. The intervention was delivered using the Internet and computer-generated tailored feedback based on stage of change and was provided to individuals for both physical activity and dietary fat. Participants in the intervention group increased their physical activity (self report) and decreased their percentage of dietary fat intake from baseline to posttest. In contrast, the Internet intervention evaluated by Patrick and colleagues [20] did not have a significant impact on physical activity (self-report and objective measure).

The aim of this study was to evaluate the impact of *Program X*, a multi-component, extra-curricular school sport intervention that included pedometers for self-monitoring and social support from parents and emails. The intervention was developed in reference Bandura's SCT Social Cognitive Theory [SCT: 21] and specifically targeted social support and self-efficacy for physical activity. To the authors' knowledge, no previous intervention has combined these strategies into one multi-component intervention for adolescents.

Methods

Study design

Schools were randomized to one of two treatments. One treatment (control) consisted of a 10-week school sport program. The second treatment (*Program X* intervention) consisted of the same school sport program with information sessions and included pedometers for self-monitoring and social support from parents and emails. The study design, intervention components and participant flow are outlined in Figure 1.

Participants

Following a power calculation, it was determined that a sample of 120 students (60 in each treatment arm) was necessary to detect an increase in 0.5 standard deviations (1500 steps/day) with 80% power assuming 5% significance. The intervention was offered as an extra-curricular school sport program aimed at, but not restricted to low-active adolescents. Eight secondary schools were invited to participate in the study. Two schools (one government school and one independent school) declined to participate and six schools were randomized. A randomization envelope was prepared by a member of the research team and schools were assigned to one of two treatment conditions. Schools included in this study were from urban areas with low to moderate socioeconomic status. The mean age of participants was 14.1 (\pm .8) years and the majority of participants were born in Australia (94.4%) and spoke English at home (89.5%). There were 124 participants in the study, of these, 58 participants (boys = 30, girls = 28) were in the intervention group and 66 (boys = 23, girls = 43) in the control group. One hundred and six participants were assessed at follow-up. Participants were blinded to treatment allocation at baseline. Baseline data were collected in May/June 2007 and follow-up data were collected in November/December 2007. Ethics approval for the study was obtained from the University of Newcastle, New South Wales (NSW), Australia and the NSW Department of Education and Training ethics committees.

Treatments

Bandura's SCT provided the theoretical framework for the development of the *Program X* intervention. The SCT purports that behavior change is influenced by environmental factors, personal factors, and attributes of the behavior itself. This interaction is referred to as 'reciprocal determinism', as each factor may affect or be

1 affected by the others [21]. The primary personal components of the SCT addressed in
2 *Program X* were skills (students were provided with exercise-skill development including
3 weight training techniques and cardio-respiratory fitness exercises), self-efficacy
4 (students were instructed on goal setting techniques and self-management strategies), and
5 outcome expectancy (the program involved the identification of physical activity benefits
6 and strategies to make exercise more enjoyable). Social support was identified as a key
7 environmental component and the intervention included strategies to elicit social support
8 for physical activity from family and friends through newsletters and email-based support
9 for healthy eating and physical activity.

10 The *Program X* intervention was based on the LEAF pilot study [15] and included
11 five major components: i) enhanced school sport program focusing on lifetime physical
12 activities, ii) information sessions and summary interactive lecture focusing on physical
13 activity and healthy eating, iii) pedometers for physical activity monitoring, iv) physical
14 activity and nutrition handbooks and monthly information newsletters for parents, and v)
15 social support for healthy behaviors using email.

16 The enhanced school sport component was delivered once a week for ten weeks
17 and focused on lifetime activities (e.g. aerobics, weight training) that can be carried into
18 adulthood [26]. At the start of each school sport session, teachers introduced one of ten
19 physical activity and nutrition messages and delivered an activity reinforcing the
20 message. The ten physical activity and nutrition messages were selected because they
21 represent the behaviors that are commonly associated with lower levels of disease risk
22 and with being in the healthy weight range and included: i) Keep track of your physical
23 activity (using goals/diary), ii) Every step counts, iii) Reduce your time spent watching
24 television, using the computer & playing electronic games immediately after school, iv)
25 Be active with friends and family, v) Identify excuses for not being active, vi) Keep track

1 of fruit and vegetable intake (using goals/diary), vii) Aim for 2 pieces of fruit and 5
2 servings of vegetables each day, viii) Drink more water and swap sugary drinks for diet
3 drinks, ix) Reduce your portion sizes and eat at the dinner table, and x) Reduce your junk
4 food snacks.

5 To encourage physical activity self-management strategies, participants were
6 provided with pedometers to monitor their physical activity over the 6-month study
7 period. Pedometers were not sealed during this period and participants were able to
8 receive feedback regarding their step counts. Parents were provided with monthly
9 newsletters and participants were given physical activity and nutrition handbooks to be
10 signed by parents each week (for the 10-week face-to-face component). Both handbooks
11 and newsletters were designed to educate parents on strategies to support the health
12 behaviors taught to their children in *Program X*. Emails were used to provide additional
13 social support for physical activity and dietary behavior change. Following the
14 completion of the 10-week school sport component of the study, a member of the
15 research team delivered an interactive lecture summarizing the ten messages.

16 To assist in the recruitment of schools and students and to prevent resentful
17 demoralisation, the control group received a very minimal intervention. Students in the
18 control schools participated in school sport sessions and were provided with exercise
19 handbooks to improve the quality of their school sport experience. However, they were
20 not given any of the 'Program X messages' or additional materials or strategies to support
21 behavior change. They were not given any information regarding nutrition behaviors and
22 the only information students in the control group received about physical activity were
23 the exercise instructions in the school sport sessions.

24
25 *Measurements*

Physical activity was assessed using pedometers, demographics, sedentary and dietary behaviors were assessed using a questionnaire.

Physical activity. Yamax SW700 pedometers (Yamax Corporation, Kumamoto City, Japan) were used to measure physical activity [22-24]. Participants were asked to wear sealed pedometers for five days (including four consecutive school days and one weekend day). On the morning of the first day of monitoring, students were instructed by a research assistant on how to attach the pedometers (at the waist on the right hand side) and asked to remove the pedometers only when sleeping or when the pedometer might get wet. During the first session pedometers were sealed with stickers and students were asked not to tamper with the devices. At school each morning research assistants removed the stickers, recorded the scores, reset the devices and returned the pedometers to the students.

Sedentary behavior. The sedentary behavior measure focused on three components: hours per day spent watching television, using the computer (for non-school purposes) and playing electronic games. These items were adapted from the Adolescent Sedentary Activity Questionnaire used in the NSW Schools Physical Activity and Nutrition Study (SPANS) [25].

Dietary behaviors. Dietary behaviors were assessed using items from SPANS [25]. Items were used to assess students' consumption of fruit and vegetables, daily soft drink and water consumption and energy dense and/or low nutrient snack consumption. The final nutrition question asked students to report how often they ate energy dense and/or low nutrient snacks between meals.

Process evaluation. A process evaluation including a posttest questionnaire was completed to determine: (i) how many intervention school sport sessions were attended by students, (ii) participant use of pedometers for self-monitoring at follow-up, (iii)

participant perceptions of the email support (rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 5), and (iv) participant perception of the intervention's impact on specific physical activity behaviors.

Statistical analyses

Data were analyzed using the SPSS statistics package version 14.0 (SPSS Inc, Chicago, Ill.). Alpha levels were set at $p < .05$ for all analyses. Students who had completed at least three days of pedometer monitoring (with one weekend day) were included in the analysis. Intraclass correlation coefficient (ICCs) was calculated for 3 days (1,2,3) to determine the variability of the physical activity data. Independent samples t-tests were used to compare the groups at baseline for physical activity and sedentary behavior outcomes. Changes in physical activity and sedentary behavior from baseline to follow-up were assessed using a repeated measure analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine differences between groups. Intervention effect sizes were calculated using mean change scores with Cohen's d ($d = M_1 - M_2 / \sigma_{\text{pooled}}$). While there is some debate as to what the daily step targets for children and adolescents should be [27, 28], the recommendations from Tudor-Locke et al [29] were used to classify the students as low-active (boys $< 15,000$ steps/day and girls $< 12,000$) or active (boys $\geq 15,000$ and girls $\geq 13,000$). Independent samples t-tests were then used to compare treatment conditions for change in physical activity over time between low-active and active participants. Nutrition variables were recoded as dichotomous variables (e.g. less than 2 servings of fruit/day or more 2 servings/day) and treatment groups were compared using Chi square tests. Baseline and follow-up results were also compared using Chi square tests.

Results

Physical activity and sedentary behavior

Three days of pedometer step counts resulted in a stable index of physical activity, $ICC = .71$ (.60-.79). At baseline, there were no significant differences between intervention and control groups for boys' (Table 1) or girls' mean steps/day (Table 2). At follow-up, boys in the intervention group increased their step counts by 956 ± 4107 steps/day, while those in the control group decreased their step counts by 2409 ± 3489 (Figure 2). A repeated measures ANOVA indicated a significant group-by-time interaction effect, $F(1,40) = 7.4, p < .05, d = .80$. Similarly, girls in the intervention group increased their physical activity by an average of 999 ± 1999 steps/day over the six month study period, while girls in the control group decreased their activity by 2781 ± 2537 steps/day (Figure 2). This was also a significant group-by-time interaction effect, $F(1, 46) = 29.6, p < .001, d = 1.2$. In the control group 15 boys were classified as low active (mean steps/day 9104 ± 3091) and 20 girls (8773 ± 1852) at baseline. In the intervention group 19 boys (10132 ± 2717) and 18 girls (9383 ± 2135) were classified as low-active at baseline. The change in step scores (posttest – baseline) for low-active participants was significantly different between treatment conditions ($p < .001$, control group = -1918 ± 2508 versus intervention group = 2342 ± 2626). There were no significant differences between treatment conditions for those participants classified as active at baseline. The intervention did not have a significant effect on any of the sedentary behavior outcomes.

Dietary behavior

The findings from the nutrition behavior questions are reported in Table 3. There were no statistically significant differences between the intervention and control groups for any of the dietary outcomes at baseline or at follow-up. However, two significant

1 within-group changes (i.e. baseline to posttest) were identified. The number of boys in
2 the intervention group who reported eating three or more snacks each day decreased from
3 47% to 21% over the study period, $\chi^2 = 4.0$, $p = .043$. Girls in the intervention group
4 increased their intake of fruit over the study period with approximately three quarters of
5 participants reported eating two or more serves of fruit each day at follow-up, $\chi^2 = 4.8$, p
6 $= .028$.

7 *Process evaluation*

9 Attendance at school sport sessions was high in both treatment and control groups
10 (approximately 80% of sessions attended). Following the completion of the intervention,
11 only a small percentage of participants (11%) in the intervention group reported wearing
12 their pedometer everyday. Almost two thirds of participants indicated that their parents
13 had never read or signed their physical activity and nutrition handbooks. External
14 motivation provided by email support was relatively ineffective and the mean of
15 participants' responses to this item was 3.06 ($\pm .94$). Approximately half of the
16 participants reported that their involvement in *Program X* had encouraged them to join a
17 gym or fitness club and two-thirds suggested that their involvement had resulted in them
18 being more active with their family members.

20 **Discussion**

21 The primary objective of this study was to evaluate the impact of a school-based
22 intervention incorporating pedometers and email support on physical activity, sedentary
23 behavior and healthy eating in adolescents. The *Program X* intervention had a significant
24 impact on the physical activity behaviors of those classified as low-active at baseline but
25 not on those classified as active. This finding confirms the evidence from previous

1 interventions with adolescents, that self-monitoring with pedometers is an effective
2 strategy for promoting physical activity among low-active individuals, but not for
3 adolescents who are already meeting physical activity guidelines [15, 16]. The
4 intervention also had a positive impact on reducing energy dense/nutrient poor snack
5 consumption among boys and increasing fruit intake among girls.

6 Previous interventions have demonstrated that goal setting with pedometers is an
7 effective strategy for increasing physical activity with adolescents [15, 16]. The GSOP
8 was one of the first physical activity interventions with adolescents to use pedometers for
9 self-monitoring and resulted in significant increases in physical activity [16]. In the
10 LEAF intervention, pedometer goal setting was combined with an enhanced school sport
11 intervention and found a significant impact on low-active adolescents, but not in
12 adolescents classified as active at baseline [16]. Both interventions were quasi-
13 experiments and involved relatively short assessment periods. In their review of physical
14 activity interventions among youth, Van Sluijs and colleagues [15] noted that the
15 methodological quality of studies was limited and that future studies should include
16 longer-term follow-ups. While a one year follow-up would provide stronger support for
17 the efficacy of the *Program X* intervention, the 6-month results provide evidence for the
18 feasibility of this intervention.

19 Because the timing and assessment protocols were consistent between control and
20 intervention schools, alternative interpretations for the decline in physical activity found
21 in the control schools need to be explored. The control group program was not designed
22 to be a physical activity promoting program and did not target any mediators of behavior
23 change to increase exercise adherence outside of the school sport sessions. It is important
24 to note that the study period represented the period of time (age 13 to 18yr) associated
25 with the greatest decline in physical activity over the lifetime [1, 30]. Therefore, students

1 may already have been on a downward trajectory. Alternatively, it is possible that the
2 baseline assessments did not provide an accurate measurement of physical activity.
3 Although studies suggest that reactivity to wearing pedometers does not exist in children
4 [31], we cannot discount the possibility that the baseline step counts were slightly inflated
5 and the novelty of wearing the devices at post-test had decreased, thereby introducing a
6 response bias.

7 It is interesting to note that post-intervention, the majority of participants no
8 longer wore their pedometers regularly. We suggest that in the early stages of the
9 intervention, pedometers are used to provide participants with a reminder of their step
10 targets and the need for physical activity. As the intervention progresses, participants may
11 become aware of the amount of activity necessary to achieve their step targets, and
12 therefore, no longer wear their pedometers or the novelty wears off. It is possible that the
13 reintroduction of the forced use of pedometers at post-test acted as a "booster" for the
14 intervention group, which contributed to the significant group-by-time interaction effect.
15 However, the authors cannot discount the possibility that there were some systematic
16 differences between the treatment groups that contributed to the differences, as
17 participants were randomly allocated to conditions at the school level.

18 Boys in the intervention group significantly decreased their consumption of
19 energy dense/nutrient poor snacks from baseline to follow-up. Reducing the consumption
20 of energy dense/nutrient poor foods was one of the ten health messages of *Program X*.
21 Prevalence of snacking is associated with Body Mass Index (BMI) in adolescents [32, 33]
22 and may be a contributing factor to the development of pediatric obesity [33]. Girls in the
23 intervention group increased their fruit intake from baseline to follow-up. A bigger
24 impact on dietary intake may not have been observed for many reasons including the low
25 intervention intensity of the nutrition component relative to the physical activity

1 component and low sensitivity of the dietary intake tool. The intervention components
2 and outcome measures designed to promote healthy dietary behavior may need to be
3 further refined to promote sustainable changes.

4 Recent reviews of physical activity [12] and nutrition interventions [13] indicate
5 that strategies to include parents in the intervention process are warranted. For example,
6 Haerens and colleagues [13] found that their school-based physical activity intervention
7 involving parent support resulted in larger effects than their intervention without parental
8 involvement. Previous studies have noted that getting parents to attend meetings
9 regarding school-based interventions is difficult [34] and to overcome this, we included
10 strategies that did not place unnecessary time demands on parents. In the current study,
11 parents were provided with monthly newsletters outlining the benefits of physical activity
12 and healthy eating. According to the participants, only a small percentage of parents
13 signed the handbooks weekly. However, because we did not survey parents, we cannot
14 determine the true extent of parental involvement. For example, many parents did not
15 sign the handbooks regularly, but we cannot be sure that they were not involved in the
16 home-based tasks. It may have been beneficial to include an information session for
17 parents to outline the program rationale and objectives in an attempt to engage parents
18 more formally. Furthermore, two-thirds of intervention participants indicated that their
19 involvement in the program had resulted in them being more active with their family
20 members. Considering these findings and the results from previous interventions,
21 identifying ways to engage parents in interventions to promote physical activity and
22 healthy eating is clearly a research priority.

23 Participant perception of the efficacy of the email-based support was modest,
24 suggesting that the email component was not an integral component of the *Program X*
25 intervention. A recent review of Internet-based interventions concluded that interventions

1 that included interactive technologies need to be refined and more rigorously evaluated to
2 determine their potential for health behavior change [35]. In our study, the majority of
3 email addresses provided by the students were school-based addresses and they may not
4 have been accessed as regularly as students' social email addresses. This potentially
5 indicates that students were not interested in being contacted in this way or that they did
6 not perceive this method of contact to be engaging or of value. Future studies could
7 examine whether other web-based methods could be of greater appeal in the context of a
8 physical activity interventions or could incorporate on-line social support strategies using
9 websites such as Face Book and My Space, which are popular with teenagers, to facilitate
10 behavior change.

11 There are a number of limitations in this study that should be noted. First, the
12 efficacy of *Program X* alone is not known and so we cannot be sure how it or the add-on
13 components contributed to changes observed in the control and experimental groups. This
14 could be addressed in further studies by the addition of a non-intervention control group.
15 Second, the randomization of students to intervention and control conditions occurred at
16 the school level. Third, ideally this study would have evaluated the impact of the
17 intervention on physical activity using accelerometers. Fourth, this study did not report
18 the effect on the intervention on social cognitive variables to identify potential
19 mechanisms of behavior change. Another important limitation is that the adolescents
20 were volunteers and a selection bias may have been introduced because those most
21 enthusiastic will have been more likely to volunteer first.

22 In conclusion, a school-based intervention incorporating physical activity
23 monitoring using pedometers was successful in promoting physical activity and selected
24 healthy eating behaviors in adolescent boys and girls.

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