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Helping Kids Connect: Participant and Staff Perspectives on Facilitating Social Relationships in a Physical Activity-Based Positive Youth Development Program for Youth From Low-Income Families

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Physical activity-based positive youth development (PYD) programs are designed to nurture personal and social assets in youth, and in underserved populations, often provide unique opportunities for physical activity and mentoring. Supportive relationships with peers and adults in such programs are associated with positive changes in developmental outcomes (Ullrich-French, McDonough, & Smith, 2012). In this case study, we examined youths' and staff members' perspectives on interpersonal relationships within a physical activity-based PYD program, their understanding of what experiences and interactions within the program help or hinder forming high-quality relationships, and their perspectives on how those relationships affect youth and transfer to contexts outside of the PYD program. We interviewed 20 youth and 6 program staff about their perspectives on social experiences in the PYD program, and conducted follow-up interviews with 10 youth participants 8 months later. We developed a figure describing youth and staff perspectives of program context factors, and how elements of interpersonal relationships among youth and between youth and staff affect youth intra- and interpersonal assets, and transfer to community contexts such as home, neighborhoods, and school. These findings provide insight into ways to promote positive social relationships in PYD programs in ways that are meaningful to youth.

Keywords: friendship, peer acceptance, mentoring, low-income, case study

Youth from low-income families (i.e., living close to, or below, the poverty line) are at greater risk than more affluent youth for poorer physical and mental health, and behavioral outcomes (Goodman, Slap, & Huang, 2003; Votruba-Drzal, 2006). Youth programs that serve this population have the potential to enhance multiple dimensions of well-being. Positive youth development (PYD) programs are based on the premise that all people have the potential for change, and that personal and social assets can be learned (Benson, Scales,

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Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006). Physical activity is an excellent context for PYD programs because, when intentionally designed, physical activity can provide an involved, interactive, emotional, and social context for teaching life skills (Bean & Forneris, 2016; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005). PYD programs for youth from low-income families can help address barriers to physical activity faced by youth in this population, who have fewer resources and are less likely to be active (Holt, Kingsley, Tink, & Scherer, 2011; Janssen, Boyce, Simpson, & Pickett, 2006). Research is needed examining the experiences of youth from low-income families in PYD programs to develop intervention techniques that meet their needs and foster well-being (Lerner et al., 2014).

Although there is not a unified theory of PYD, most theories applied in this field emphasize social relationships and social contextual factors as mechanisms of asset development (Benson et al., 2006; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Lerner, Johnson, & Buckingham, 2015; Snyder & Flay, 2012). From the perspective of social ecological theory, individual characteristics, social relationships, social contextual factors, and the larger culture reciprocally influence each other and contribute to youth development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). This theory identifies different levels of the context as the individual's intrapersonal experience within a domain (microsystem); interpersonal interactions, such as with program staff and peers (mesosystem); interactions among others in the context, such as staff interactions and program structure (exosystem); and the larger social context such as the larger community and culture (macrosystem). During late childhood and early adolescence, interpersonal interactions with significant adults and peers at the mesosystem level provide competence information, and relationships and feedback from adults and peers contribute to self-perceptions (Harter, 2012). Peer acceptance and friendship are important contributors to socioemotional development (Hartup, 1996), and are associated with positive self-perceptions and physical activity participation (McDonough & Crocker, 2005; Smith, 1999). Providing a supportive and caring climate through the program social context at the exosystem level is also important for promoting adaptive outcomes (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Gould, Flett, & Lauer, 2012; Holt, Sehn, Spence, Newton, & Ball, 2012). Considering youth social experiences within a social ecological theory lens can allow for consideration of interplay among factors across each of these levels (Holt, Deal, & Smyth, 2016).

Consistent with theory, social connections with peers and adult staff in PYD programs can foster personal and social assets in youth (Benson et al., 2006; Bond et al., 2007; Catalano et al., 2004; Gano-Overway et al., 2009; Rhodes, 2004). Physical activity-based PYD programs provide opportunities for involvement and interaction with peers and adults in a socially valued context. There is evidence that if programs are intentionally structured, and peer and adult relationships are positive, they can teach life skills such as cooperation, teamwork, goal setting, conflict resolution, and leadership (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Holt & Neely, 2012; Holt, Tamminen, Tink, & Black, 2009; Weiss, Smith, & Stuntz, 2008).

Peer and youth-staff relationship factors such as belonging, peer acceptance, and staff involvement, structure, and emotional support experienced during physical activity-based PYD programs are positively associated with changes in physical and global self-worth, motivation, hope, psychological need satisfaction, and social responsibility across the program period (McDavid, McDonough, Blankenship, & LeBreton, 2017; McDonough, Ullrich-French, Anderson-Butcher, Amorose, & Riley, 2013; Ullrich-French, McDonough, & Smith, 2012). Even programs as brief as four weeks have been shown to be associated with gains in PYD outcomes over time (McDonough et al., 2013; Ullrich-French et al., 2012). Gains made in hope and self-esteem during brief (4–6 week) summer PYD programs for youth from low-income families are maintained as long as 4–11 months later (Kirschman, Roberts, Shadlow, & Pelley, 2010; Ullrich-French & McDonough, 2013). There is evidence that life skills such as responsibility and honesty intentionally taught in sport-based PYD programs can transfer to other contexts over time (Weiss, Bolter, & Kipp, 2016), and that positive youth-staff relationships are associated with transfer to other contexts such as school (Anderson-Butcher, Cash, Saltzburg, Midle, & Pace, 2004). However, research is needed that considers factors that may be meaningful in transfer (Gould & Carson,

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2008; Turnnidge, Côté, & Hancock, 2014), particularly among youth from low-income families, who are a relatively understudied population.

Exposure to new opportunities for physical activity, inclusion, building confidence, and learning life skills are elements of physical activity-based PYD programs that youth from low-income families value (Holt et al., 2013). Previous studies adopting a quantitative approach have shown that characteristics of social interactions or the social context such as autonomy support, relationship quality, and caring climate predict psychosocial outcomes, demonstrating the importance of social relationships with this population in the PYD context (Gano-Overway et al., 2009; McDonough et al., 2013; Ullrich-French et al., 2012). Additional work is needed on what youth perceive as ideal contextual conditions and interpersonal interactions that create positive relationships and social climates and support transfer to other life contexts. Several qualitative studies have asked youth from low-income families about their experiences with and perceptions of the impact of PYD programs. There is evidence that youth in competitive sport, school-based, afterschool, and summer PYD settings perceive that they can gain positive developmental outcomes from participation in such programs, including positive social relationships, life skills, prosocial behaviors, and psychological outcomes (Bean, Whitley, & Gould, 2014; Holt et al., 2012; Meléndez & Martinek, 2015; Riciputi, McDonough, & Ullrich-French, 2016).

Although previous studies have identified peer and staff-youth relationships as being an important outcome of participation and contributor to building developmental assets, there is an outstanding need to ask youth what types of social interactions or features of the program context support building those positive relationships with staff and other youth, and how they affect their experiences within the program and in other contexts. Youth living in poverty are relatively underrepresented in the literature, and PYD programs are well positioned to make an impact on this population, who tend to be underserved in terms of physical activity and life-skills programs. Therefore, we were interested in uncovering unique insights that youth in this population can provide about their experience with the social context in PYD programs; a qualitative case study approach was considered appropriate. The purpose of this case study was to examine youths' and staff members' perspectives on interpersonal relationships among peers and staff within a physical activity-based PYD program, their understanding of what experiences and interactions within the program help or hinder forming high-quality relationships, and their perspectives on how those relationships affect their experiences within and outside of the PYD program.

Method

Methodology

We used a youth-centered philosophy, which emphasizes children as social actors who affect and are affected by their social and cultural context (Christensen & Prout, 2002), and case study methodology (Stake, 2005) to guide research design and analysis. The youth-centered philosophy informed the choice to focus primarily on youth perspectives by sampling youth in the program, and following them over time. Case studies focus on selected issues within a bounded system that provides opportunity for learning about a phenomenon. Case study is particularly appropriate for this research question because it allows for idiographic examination of the perspectives of multiple individuals within a bounded context (Stake, 2005). Aspects of this case study were used for intrinsic program evaluation purposes (understanding the effects of this particular program); however, the primary purpose was to provide insight into the experience and outcomes of social relationship development within physical activity-based PYD programs for low-income youth (Stake, 2005). The case study included consideration of the structure, history, physical setting, economic, and political context of the program; interviews with youth and staff in the program; and researcher interpretations of the emergent issues related to the research questions.

We adopted a pragmatist philosophical perspective, which focuses on the nature of experience (in contrast, e.g., with approaches that focus on the nature of reality), and holds that actions and beliefs result from past experience, are influenced by the social context in which they occur, and the shared beliefs that result from common experiences and worldviews

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(Morgan, 2014). The focus on experience and action in a personally meaningful social context was considered particularly appropriate for examining youths' experiences with and beliefs about how actions and relationships in the PYD context affected outcomes, in a context in which participants share similar experiences in the program, and with living in poverty. Qualitative data with youth and staff were collected during (youth) or immediately following (staff) program time in private locations close to the program location.

The Context

The case was a physical activity-based PYD program serving youth from low-income families surrounding a large university in the Midwestern United States. The program is a former National Youth Sport Program, which was a federally funded summer sport-based day camp serving youth from low-income families throughout the United States from 1968 to 2006. After federal funding was cut in 2006, this program continued to operate supported by local funding, and evolved into a comprehensive PYD program, incorporating physical skills and integrated personal, social, and character development lessons. The program aim is to promote hope and possibility by fostering healthy, active youth. The program curriculum is designed to address personal and social assets and healthy living through all program activities. The curriculum is structured around weekly character development themes promoting respect (acknowledging and valuing the worth of each person), care (showing genuine interest in, and concern and compassion for, others), responsibility (being reliable, dependable, and accountable for one's own actions), and trust (believing in others to be reliable, responsible, caring, and respectful).

All staff members receive three days of training preceding the program pertaining to staff duties, the character development curriculum, lesson planning, activity station orientation, and program operations (e.g., bus transportation, meal service, inclement weather, emergency procedures, attendance, payroll, equipment, etc.). Within those three days, seven hours are spent on the character development curriculum training and how to foster self-esteem and positive social interactions. Staff were provided with a handbook that further elaborated on the training and offered practical methods to implement that training (e.g., games and discussion starters). Curriculum training was designed and delivered by the first and second authors, who are sport and exercise psychology professors and have experience with PYD curriculum design, delivery, and evaluation, and a sport and exercise psychology graduate student research assistant who was also a staff member of the camp. The curriculum training included classroom instruction, discussion, lesson planning, games, and role-play addressing how to build positive relationships with youth, how to integrate the weekly character themes into lesson plans, and how to incorporate the character concepts during unstructured time, teachable moments, and conflict resolution situations. The social relationship and character training was based on principles of fostering a mastery climate (Epstein, 1989), cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1990), meeting basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and promoting PYD through games (Holt, Tamminen, & Jones, 2007). These principles were incorporated into games, social problem-solving scenarios, life skill activities, and conflict resolution techniques.

The program runs from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. Monday through Friday for 20 weekdays in the summer, with a 4-day long weekend at the midpoint. Access to the program along with breakfast, lunch, snack, transportation, equipment, and some clothing (e.g., t-shirts, swimsuits) are provided to participants free of charge to reduce economic barriers. The program served 296 youth (148 male, 147 female, and 1 not reported) age 9–16 (M_{age} = 11.56 years, SD = 1.61). Participants have diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (35.1% Latino/Latina, 33.8% White, 18.6% Black, 9.8% Multi-Racial, 2.0% Asian, .3% American Indian or Alaska Native, and .3% not reported). To be eligible for the program, youth must qualify for the United States Department of Agriculture free or reduced price lunch program, which is available to youth from families whose household income does not exceed 185% of the poverty line based on household size, which for a family of four was a maximum annual household income up to $37,000 USD.

Participants were organized into 20 age-grouped teams with 11–17 male and female

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participants and one leader who is responsible for guiding their group throughout the day. Teams were paired by age (i.e., the two youngest groups were together, etc.), and those two teams rotated through the various program activities each day together. Each activity station was staffed with at least one dedicated instructor, and additional support staff and camp administration staff assist with program delivery, day-to-day challenges, and promoting the character concepts. Seventy percent of the program time was devoted to physical activities including soccer, judo, volleyball, fitness, cooperative games, sharbade, basketball, swimming, and walking for transportation between activity stations. Mealtimes occupy 15% of program time, and 15% includes nonphysical activities such as art, computers/writing, health, and service learning. Character concepts were embedded within all activities, including physical and nonphysical activities, and through informal interactions during mealtimes and transitions between stations.

Participants

Youth were purposively sampled to represent the range of ages, gender, ethnic backgrounds, and prior years of experience in the program, based on demographic information obtained from camp records. One child was selected from each of the 20 teams to participate in an interview. Because the teams were gender-balanced and age-stratified, and traveled with an age-matched team, we sampled one male and one female from each of the odd- and even-numbered teams, respectively. Prior to the data collection, a list was developed of two to four youth from each group who would be randomly selected to be invited to participate, and that would result in a sample reflecting the age, gender, race/ethnicity, and program experience balance in the program, based on demographic information obtained from camp records. Based on staff observations, we also aimed to sample youth who were relatively engaged, or having positive program experiences, and relatively disengaged, or having more negative program experiences. We sampled staff who represented the various roles in the program by interviewing three leaders, two station instructors, and one support staff.

Twenty youth (10 girls and 10 boys) and six staff from the PYD program were interviewed for this study. The youth participants ranged in age from 9–16 years (M_{age} = 11.7 years, SD = 1.75). Eight participants were White, eight were Latino/a, two were Black, and two were of Asian descent. Based on program eligibility criteria, all youth came from low-income households. Prior participation in the PYD program ranged from 0–4 years, with 12 participants in their first year of participation. Of the six staff participants, two were White, one was Latina, two were Black, and one was of Asian descent. Five of the staff members had been working for the program for at least two summers. Two of the staff participants had been youth participants in former years. Three worked as group leaders, two were station instructors, and one worked as support staff with youth throughout the program. We did not collect staff age, but all were young adults.

Procedures

The university's institutional review board deemed this project exempt because it was part of a larger program evaluation (McDonough et al., 2013; Riciputi et al., 2016; Ullrich-French & McDonough, 2013) including all participants, and data collection was part of the program activities. Data reported in the current study had no overlap with the previously published studies. Consistent with the approved procedures, parents were verbally informed about the program evaluation at the time of program registration, and parents and participants had the opportunity to decline participation in the study. One semistructured interview was conducted with each of the 20 youth and six staff on the 16th day of the 20-day program. Youth interviews focused on their social relationships with staff and other participants in the program, ways in which program activities helped or hindered developing relationships and feeling included, and how they felt their relationships with peers and staff impacted their experiences within the program, and in other contexts in their lives (at home, in their neighborhood, and at school). Staff interviews addressed relationships with the youth in their care, relationships with other staff, feelings of inclusion in the program, how the program affected inclu-

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sion and exclusion among youth, and how they thought their relationships with youth and staff personally affected them. Interviews were conducted during program time rather than following program completion to reduce barriers to participation such as transportation and disruption to childcare arrangements, and prior to the last four days of the program to avoid disrupting other end-of-program activities. But interviews were conducted toward the end of the program, so youth and staff had the opportunity to experience the program and form relationships.

Eight months after the end of the program, attempts were made to contact the parents of all 20 original youth participants by mail, to follow up on their child's perspectives regarding how participation and social relationships in the program impacted them during the school year, when the program was not in session. Interviews included questions about social relationships with staff and other participants, experiences in the program that helped or hindered developing relationships and feeling included, and how relationships with peers and staff impacted their experiences at home, in their neighborhood, and at school.

Eleven parents or guardians contacted the researchers to volunteer for the study, but one parent ultimately decided not to have their child participate due to transportation barriers. The other 10 parents/guardians and youth provided written consent/assent to participate in the follow-up interview, which were conducted after school at the local middle school. More male ($n = 7$) than female ($n = 3$) youth participated in the follow-up. Follow-up participants ranged in age from 9–14, and four were Latino/a, four were White, and two were of Asian descent. Six had been in their first year of participation in the PYD program at the first interview (range = 0–3 years of prior participation). For both the initial and follow-up interviews, several interviews had to be conducted simultaneously to minimize disruption to program and afterschool activities; therefore, the first author and five research assistants each conducted six interviews. All research assistants completed training on conducting qualitative interviews with the first author, who has extensive experience with qualitative interviewing, and mock interviews to practice with the interview guide for this study. Interviews ranged from 17–45 min, with most being in the mid to upper end of that range, and were audio recorded.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by a research assistant, and an inductive thematic analysis was conducted primarily by the lead author (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo 10 software (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2014) was used for data storage and organization. Each interview was checked for accuracy and in the first phase of analysis read in its entirety for its overall meaning, noting initial ideas. Second, initial codes were generated by inductively identifying text containing ideas relevant to the research question, and labeling them to the key idea expressed. This process of initial coding was inductive. Although the authors were aware of theory related to the study, at the initial coding stage, the aim was to identify all ideas relevant to the research question that were raised by the participants, and evidenced in the data. Third, codes containing similar ideas were grouped as themes, and higher-order categories were developed to group related themes and identify connections among themes. A heuristic figure, adopting the levels structure of the social ecological model, began to be developed during this phase to depict the themes and connections among them. In the fourth phase, themes were reviewed by rereading the transcripts and examining the data extracts, and codes and themes collapsed, grouped, or broken out into separate themes as necessary to ensure themes were both distinct from each other and internally coherent. We also examined the list of themes and codes, and their relationships in the figure. In the fifth phase, we defined and named the themes and subthemes. During this phase, we explicitly considered the theoretical frameworks related to our research question, as the social ecological model provided a useful way to inform our thematic map and how to conceptualize the interrelationships among the individual, relational, within-program context, and larger contextual elements evident in our analyses. In the sixth phase, a description of the findings was written, illustrated by representative quotations. Although the six phases were sometimes iterative, and knowledge gained during analyses re-

quired returning to previous phases, the data analysis generally followed a progression through these six phases.

To address rigor and study quality, we adopted a relativist approach to choose criteria consistent with the methodological approach and philosophical underpinnings of the study (Burke, 2016). Credibility was addressed through seeking to make a substantive contribution through providing a novel (youth and staff) perspective by primarily sampling youth participants, interviewing them over time. We sought to provide comprehensive evidence through providing multiple quotations and perspectives from participants across our sample throughout our report, who were purposively sampled to provide diverse perspectives. We aimed to interpret and present findings that are internally coherent and coherent with theory by including in our analysis an explicit consideration of prior theory, and presenting our results in a form that expresses the connections among concepts. Finally, we endeavored to enhance transparency using the approach of critical friends (the coauthors) to scrutinize interpretations made during analyses conducted primarily by the lead author (Smith & McGannon, 2017).

Results

Findings are depicted in Figure 1. In the text, category headings have been formatted to align with the figure such that the highest order themes are bold and capitalized (all caps in the figure); first level subthemes are bold and italicized; second level subthemes are bold, italicized, and underlined; and lowest level codes are italicized. The inner oval contains youth and staff perspectives on **youth assets** fostered in the program, and affected by interpersonal relationships and program context. The middle oval depicts behaviors participants perceived fostered or hindered building **interpersonal relationships *among youth*** and ***between youth and staff***. The outer oval of Figure 1 depicts elements of the **program context**, which, from the ***youth perspective*** and ***staff perspective***, fa-

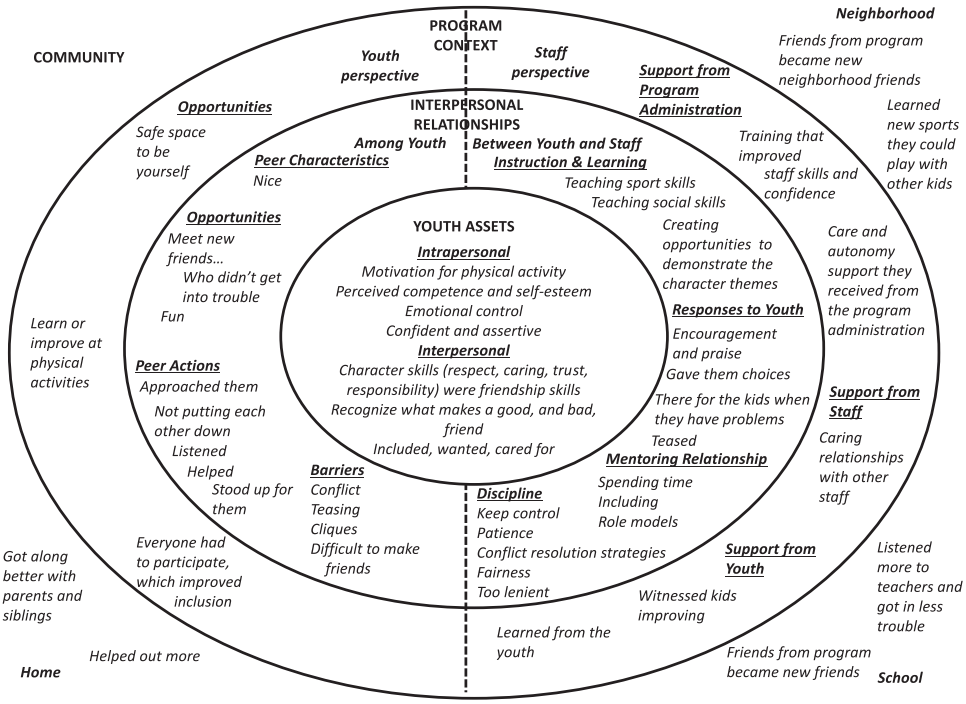

Figure 1. Figure depicting program context and relationship factors affecting youth assets and transfer.

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cilitated or hindered relationships and nurtured change in youth. The space outside of the outer circle represents youth perspectives of the influences of the program at the **community** level, including perceived transfer to ***neighborhood***, ***home***, and ***school***. An aim was to examine how **interpersonal relationships** and **program context** affect **youth assets** and transfer to the **community** level, so the results are described, with subthemes in italics, beginning with the **interpersonal relationships** level, then the **program context**, **youth assets**, and finally the **community** level. Quotations are identified by the participant race/ethnicity, gender, age (youth) or position (staff), and in camp (T1) versus follow-up (T2) for youth.

Interpersonal Relationships

Among youth. The left side of the interpersonal level in Figure 1 depicts factors identified by youth that made it easier to form peer relationships in the program than they experienced in other contexts. Several kids remarked that a helpful ***peer characteristic*** was how *nice* the kids in the program were, and how the expectation that other kids would be nice helped them make friends "They treat me real nicely, and they're not mean to me" (White female age 11 T1). Some youth provided specific examples—

> They are being nice to you, and they're . . . telling you good things about themselves and yourself. Interviewer: Can you give me an example? Youth: Um, [other child's name], we were playing basketball one time. And my ball, I shot the ball and it bounced off real hard, and it went all the way over there. And he got it for me. (Latino male age 10 T1)

The program provided ***opportunities*** to *meet new friends* through being with other kids, and through techniques the staff used: "Like they'll partner you up with people that you haven't been partnered up with, and like some people that you haven't talked to, and so like that makes you get to know them" (Latina female age 11 T1). Staff noticed that kids cemented close relationships quickly—

> There's a couple of kids on my team that I thought they knew each other from school, but yesterday I found out that a lot of them just met here at camp. And they act like they're best friends, they've been friends for years. And I'm like, I asked them where, like what schools they went to. And I found out they've never met each other before camp. So it's definitely had a big effect on them, on as far as, um forming friendships go. They've gotten a lot closer these last four weeks. (Asian female leader)

Many kids noted that they not only had the opportunity to meet kids and form friendships, but that the kids they were bonding with *didn't get in trouble*, and that would help them keep out of trouble themselves. "If I'm hanging around my, like good people, which I am, like, I think it'll have an effect on my life. Like, you know, I'll be a good person" (Latina female age 11 T1).

> At home, there's like nobody to hang out with pretty much. And here there is a bunch of people to hang out with and makes friends with. But um, my mom gave me some choices of people [in the neighborhood] to hang out with, because the rest of them are like bullies. And here you could choose whoever you want to, to be a friend. (White female age 13 T1)

Friendships were also easier to form while kids were having *fun* together—

> My friends, they um, talk to me, they play games with me, they play sports, and we have like a really good time. We, um, talk. And that's, um, that's most likely why I go to this camp, so my friends and I can play with each other. (White male age 11 T1)

Helpful ***peer actions*** included that other kids *approached them* to initiate friendships, which was explicitly encouraged in the program through activities and lessons on how to introduce themselves. One participant described how new friendships formed: "At first I didn't know them. And they just started talking to me. So they, we become friends. And then we talked to each other. And then, and then, we just started playing. And now we're like best friends" (Latina female age 12 T1). Other kids generally *not putting each other down* contrasted with other contexts in their lives, so the program helped them build friendships: "I don't get picked on as much as, or like, a lot [as] from school. I don't get made fun of as much" (Latino male age 10 T1). Kids identified that their friendships grew closer when kids *listened* to them, *helped* them, and *stood up for them*, things that many of them explicitly linked to the intentional character development lessons integrated into the program. Helping was commonly noted as an example, and was particularly important if it led to kids being included in an activity: "I don't really know how to swim, some people like volunteer to help me if they know how to swim like some campers, they like

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sometimes help me, like float" (Asian male age 10 T1).

Barriers to positive peer relationships included *conflict*, *teasing*, and forming *cliques*.

> They were really snotty. And they acted like, they acted like they were in the "in" crowd. Like they uh, they always stuck their nose up at you and they always made fun of you and called you rude names and stuff. (Latina female age 10 T1)

Conversely, some kids reported valuing cliques because they had in-group status: "In my group, I'm kinda like, I fit in pretty good. I'm kinda like the joker of the group, you know. I crack jokes and everything. And everybody smiles, you know, eh. It's, my group is cool and exclusive" (Black male age 16 T1). But almost all youth emphasized these negative experiences were infrequent: "Sometimes they might like not like my opinions and stuff. So that's only sometimes" (Asian male age 10 T1), or not a big deal, or they could only recall problems that did not personally involve them: "Sometimes there's fights and stuff, but I haven't gotten in one" (Latina female age 10 T1). A few youth also found it *difficult to make friends* because they felt like outsiders: "[My friendships] usually last a couple weeks. Plus, rarely, some of them actually last for the entire camp, for me anyways. I've seen people like together, but they knew each other before camp, I didn't know anyone before" (Asian male age 12 T2).

Between youth and staff. On the right side of the interpersonal level in Figure 1, ways that staff facilitated peer relationships are shown. Several aspects of the ***instruction and learning*** interactions among staff and youth were identified as important for forming relationships. Teaching *sport skills* was discussed often by youth, as physical activities provided opportunities for inclusion.

> It was really fun. Interviewer: What was fun about it? Youth: That you were in sports and they were always round tellin' me how to do it and everything, if you didn't know how to do it. . . . Nobody was really perfect at everything. And everyone was learning something. (White male age 9 T2)

Similarly, *teaching social skills* gave kids tools to build friendships: "He, like, tells us to get along, and shake hands and just ask each other questions about their life, what you like" (White male age 11 T1). Youth also noted the importance of staff *giving them the opportunity to demonstrate the character themes* of respect, caring, responsibility, and trust so they could earn praise and feel closer to staff members.

Staff ***responses to youth*** that youth identified as important included receiving *encouragement and praise*. Youth also felt closer to staff who *gave them choices*: "I had to switch my group . . . I asked one of them and they agreed. 'If you're not having a good time then we have to do something about that.' That's something pretty nice they did" (Asian male age 12 T1). Staff identified that being *there for the kids when they had problems*, and do so in a way that maintained a caring relationship, was a considerable responsibility, as staff helped problems from the mundane to very serious—

> A lot of them tell me about like personal things, like "oh my mom's in the hospital," or something with my grandparents and can you help me. Can you teach me to put on a tampon and stuff. So, a lot of them, it's pretty close. . . . I do not just end my relationship now . . . Usually on the last day of camp I'll give them my phone number, in case if they have problems during the school year . . . and a lot of them end up like calling me. (Asian female leader)

Several staff members recounted having to be receptive to kids through bouts of anger and misbehavior, to understand what some kids were going through, and to be able to more effectively help. In one example where a girl was severely misbehaving—

> I pulled her out of her group. And I was like you know what, go ahead and scream, do what you need to do, but when you're done it's my turn . . . She yelled, I yelled, we talked, so she missed an entire station. And we talked, I got to know her. Um, I found out that she's in a group home, you know, she came from an abusive family . . . She'd never been to a camp like this . . . Once I took the time and talked to her and really got to know her I, I, you know, she's, she's really a nice girl. She just has a lot of pent up anger. (Black female support staff)

And many of the kids recognized and appreciated that the staff were there for them: "They're the ones who can help you out if you're in trouble or something. They, they keep a pretty good eye on everyone" (Asian male age 12 T1).

Not all staff responses to youth were helpful though. When staff *teased* kids, kids sometimes found this as alienating from the staff member and from their peers because it gave other kids potential ammunition to use against them. For example—

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> He always, like, calls me, like, he sometimes calls me [name of a TV character] and stuff like that. And I do not like it. He's a team leader, and I do not really like it when he calls me [the character's name] . . . Like, [the other kids] sometimes think, they are also like, they are like, start laughing and stuff. (Asian male age 10 T1)

Fostering a ***mentoring relationship*** between staff and youth was very important. Both youth and staff participants overwhelmingly spoke of the importance of staff *spending time* with and *including* youth—

> I get along with [my team leader] pretty good, you know. We, we sometimes talk, you know what I'm saying, about anything and everything, you know. And, uh, he's really cool to hang out with. Well, and that's, and I think that's cool that he's really cool too . . . He sometimes be a part too. He plays the games with us too. (Black male age 16 T1)

As one of the instructors explained—

> I make a point of trying to talk with them individually when they are in the class with me . . . I share my life stories with them, my experiences and that tends to open up the door for them to share and talk about their experiences. And I try to, whenever possible, sit down and work with them while they are working and that usually creates the atmosphere of total conversation. (Black male instructor)

Staff perceived that acting as *role models* of positive relationships was important for helping youth build relationships.

> It makes me evaluate the type of person I want to be or the type of person I am. You know, and how I approach people, how I come across, 'cause I'm preaching to these campers, you need to be, you know, you need to be careful of your body language, your mannerisms, but the same goes for me too. (Black female support staff)

How the staff dealt with problems through ***discipline*** was also recognized by youth as being important for helping them develop good relationships. Discipline was challenging for many staff members: "It's kind of hard sometimes for me like because I'm not really a strict, strict person so if somebody does get into trouble I'm like, I'm kind of shy. So I've gotten better with that" (Black male instructor). But being able to *keep control* and minimize negative behavior was highly valued by kids, and something they recognized as generally being done in the program—

> Say somebody was like being rude that team leader would say "stop being mean and become friends." It works kind of well. Like um at my old camp, a bunch of people would be mean and here if a bunch of people be mean, the team leaders do something about it and at my old camp, like hardly nobody would do anything about it. (White female age 13 T1)

Dealing with problems with *patience* calmed the kids, and diffused conflict: "They have made me more mellow because of how they don't yell at you all the time. If you have a nice environment then you will be nicer yourself and more mellow" (White male age 13 T1). Youth noted that the *conflict resolution strategies* taught by the staff improved their relationships—

> [The staff are] always, like telling us to kind of, like apologize to [kids we have hurt], or try to learn other people's names, or something like that. And then next thing you know you are like hanging around them. It's cool. (Latina female age 11 T1)

Maintaining *fairness* was also important: "They treated everyone like they were the same" (White male age 12 T1). But there were times when the staff's behaviors hindered relationships. In particular, kids felt alienated from staff who were unfair, or *too lenient*. "He goes easy sometimes. He doesn't like, if they keep on doing it, he won't give them a warning or anything" (White male age 9 T1).

Program Context

Youth perspective. The program structure created ***opportunities*** for participation, skill development, and self-expression that had a positive impact on relationships. The program was a *safe space to be yourself*. When asked why she felt like she fit in, one girl said, "Because I'm me. We all in our true ways. And it's all just cool" (Black female age 12 T1). Most youth felt better about themselves when they had the opportunity to *learn or improve at physical activities*: "I'm actually better at sports than I think I am" (White female age 11 T1). Learning sport skills was viewed as a social skill, as it increased opportunities to play with others: "A few days ago when I couldn't swim, all the other kids were playing in the deep end while I was in the shallow. And so now I can swim, so I get to do that" (Latina female age 10 T1). The program had a rule that *everyone had to participate, which improved inclusion*. Requiring everyone to participate reduced exclusion due to lack of skill.

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> When you want to play basketball and you know you're not good at, you're not very good at it, they let you play anyway . . . It feels nice and makes you fit in pretty nice because usually I do not play that much sports . . . People do not say that you're a bad sport or nothing they just say you can keep trying and you're good. (White male age 12 T1)

The key to effectively using this rule in a positive manner seemed to be focusing on supporting involvement rather than enforcing a rule so that youth did not feel controlled: "Cooperative games is one, well, maybe because we have to, or maybe they just want to. I have no idea, but I'm involved all the time and like sometimes, like that's cool" (Asian male age 12 T1).

Staff perspective. Support from the program administration that was integral in facilitating relationships included *training that improved staff skills and confidence* in promoting a positive social environment. An instructor said "I really appreciate the manual, the training manual. So it's like, we went through the expectations together as a group. So that's like everybody started with a greater understanding, even if they haven't been here before" (Black male instructor). A staff member whose responsibility it was to address discipline problems explained that it was helpful to have conflict resolution methods introduced in the training and to practice talking about them with the kids because "When I actually sat down and talked with the campers, it was easy for them to [say], 'Well I feel this way, you know. Things are going, going on at home and I'm so frustrated,' or whatever" (Black female support staff).

Staff appreciated the *care and autonomy support they received from the program administration*. A male instructor especially appreciated that he was asked to talk to community leaders who toured the program: "I get to share my story, and I get to share it with people who come and want to find out about [the program]. I, I'm encouraged to share my story about what I am trying to do" (Black male instructor). This support created a positive work climate, and modeled how to be caring and autonomy supportive with the kids.

In terms of ***support from staff***, the staff spoke about how their treatment by the program administrators encouraged them to develop *caring relationships with other staff*. One staff member put together a box for staff to submit notes when they noticed other staff doing something in line with the character development themes—

> We actually go out, like um, looking for things like, like [another staff member], helped out a camper today, he was being caring, so I'll, I'll, I'll write it down. So it actually, we're actually picking out other things so, the fact that we, like, put each others' names in there, they're like, "Oh, you, you, you noticed" and it gets us like talking. (Asian female leader)

Staff emphasized that while their job was often exhausting and challenging, ***support from youth*** was rewarding. Staff *witnessed kids improving* and *learned from the youth*. "I've got a couple of kids that were in my group from last year. One who has really improved in swimming actually helps out some of the kids that struggle in swimming this year. He's been more respectful . . . this year" (White male leader). A staff member who spent considerable time with youth who struggled behaviorally recounted several inspiring examples of kids improving—

> Some of the stories they tell you, you know, "I'm getting along better with my siblings." Or, you know, "If he or she makes me mad, I just walk away from it." Or, you know, "I am trying out for this." "I, I'm taking care of my brothers and sisters." So you, you hear a lot of stories. [One participant's] foster mom has called me a number of times, she said "I don't know what you're doing, but keep doing it, because she doesn't argue with her foster sisters as much anymore." She says, "She does the chores, I do not have to get on her to do it, and she actually listens, be-, and before she blows up." (Black female support staff)

Youth Assets

Youth identified a variety of ways in which factors at the interpersonal relationships and program context levels contributed to ***intrapersonal*** and ***interpersonal*** assets. Kids recognized their *motivation for physical activity* improved when they had other kids to be active with—

> I just want to say that I like this camp. It is awesome. Interviewer: Can you give me an example of why it's awesome? Youth: It has been the exercise, and I needed it . . . we do exercise with people and not just do it by yourself. And I really, like, get encouraged by them to, like, do more exercise. And yeah, I do more exercise. (Latina female age 14 T1)

Many kids provided examples of how their *perceived competence and self-esteem* improved as a result of being able to make friends and have positive interactions with other kids: "I made some friends, and I liked that, because it makes me feel like I am a good kid" (Asian

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male age 10 T2). "People don't say that you're a bad sport or nothing. They just say you can keep trying and you're good. It feels great, because, um, you can do anything like that" (White male age 12 T1).

Many youth found that the lessons on *emotional control* gave them skills and a new perspective on their behavior and how to solve problems—

> If you're like really mean they teach you a lesson. 'Cuz it's not that you're mean, but it's just that you get so-so just mad. But you're not mean. Although, and, then you, and then they just tell you to chill. And then you're, you do not get mad. (Latina female age 12 T1)

The overall experience of being included by so many kids and supportive adults also led to kids identifying that they had become more *confident and assertive*: "It kind of made me more, uh energetic, friendlier, and all that kind of good stuff . . . I'm a friendlier person then I thought. Like I thought I was really, really shy and timid. But apparently I'm not" (White male age 13 T2).

The kids pointed out that the *character skills (respect, caring, trust, responsibility) were friendship skills*. "[The other kids and staff] influenced me to be nicer and not, like stuck up. Yeah, I learned some more stuff to treat my friends better. Um, like instead of talking all the time, I can listen a few times. Like if I want to butt in, I shouldn't, and let them finish their sentence or something" (White male age 9 T2). Being in a context in which a large number of kids were intentionally being taught about friendships and social skills helped several kids learn to *recognize what makes a good, and bad, friend*. "I learned that you should be yourself. And not try to fit in with people that don't, like, sort of like you for who you are . . . At camp, everybody accepted you for who you are . . . I noticed a difference between those friends [and kids] at school, that they always talk stuff behind your back sometimes" (Latina female age 14 T2).

The most commonly discussed asset was feeling *included, wanted, and cared* for. "I'm included in everything and it is just like we're all included and having fun" (White female age 10 T1). "When I came here, was here, I was trying to interact with all the other campers, but um, I don't know any of them, 'cause I don't know any of them from my school, I only know my cousins and they're in different groups than I am. And um, I'm starting to get, I'm starting to be really good friends with some of them, three of them. I think I'm doing great" (Latino male age 10, T1). "Now I have more friends, and, um, some people I can talk to on the phone. I never used to have any friends. Now I do" (Latina female age 10 T1).

Community

Many youth participants also discussed ways that those experiences and skills transferred to home, neighborhood, and school contexts, shown in the outer corners of Figure 1. At ***home***, kids identified that they *got along better with parents and siblings*, and *helped out more* as a result of what they had experienced in the program, and assets they developed. For example, one White male (age 9, T1) explained how staff and peers in the program role modeled responsibility, and he applied this skill when interacting with his parents: "If my team leader tells someone to do something, they might not argue. So I can go home and not argue when my Mom tells me to do something" (White male age 9 T1). Other youth echoed his view about applying social skills learned in the program at home with their families.

> You get to take, get more along with your family and things. 'Cuz you learn things from here. Like when, like, if you were out to fight your family, and you didn't know nothing about this, to calm down and things. Well, and here you learn things. Like you go up to them and say "sorry" and things, and you just do not walk away. (Latina female age 12 T1)

Transfer to the *neighborhood* similarly emphasized that *friends from the program became new neighborhood friends*. "Some of the kids [from the program] in my neighborhood, like if they're outside and they have no one to hang out with, either they come up to me if I don't have anybody else to hang out with, or I go up to them. And it's just like at camp" (White female age 13 T1). Furthermore, youth *learned new sports they could play with other kids* in their neighborhoods, which allowed them to use their sport and social skills to be more included.

> I get to know more games and can play with my friends outside [of the program], not only at camp, but like other stuff that people like . . . I like, like before we only used to only play basketball but now that I learned more games from camp like share with my friends . . .

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> we learn, like, we like, gets me closer to my friends and stuff like that. (Asian male age 10 T1)

At ***school***, *friends from the program became new friends*. "I have more friends than I actually thought I did. Some of my friends actually go to my school . . . We know we will get along. We won't have to, like introduce ourselves again and do all that stuff again" (White female age 10 T1). "Um, the kids at school hang around me more since I've went to [the program]. I have more friends" (Latina female age 10 T2). Youth also reported that they *listened more to teachers and got in less trouble* at school. "[I learned that adults] have their limits. At camp, my leader was like, tied up every minute. I can notice that in school too . . . I don't ask, like too many redundant questions in class or those kind of things again" (Asian male age 12 T2).

Discussion

This study examined youths' and staff members' perspectives on interpersonal relationships among peers and staff within a physical activity-based PYD program for youth from low-income families, participants' understanding of the experiences and interactions that help or hinder forming high quality relationships in the program, and their understanding of the effect those relationships have within and outside of the PYD program. Through this work, we aimed to make a contribution to the PYD literature by considering perspectives of participants from low-income families on potential social mechanisms of development that they find meaningful. We also consider the findings from a social ecological perspective, identifying factors at all levels, and the interplay among these factors across levels. The opportunities to learn physical skills in a safe space was important. These skills allowed youth to participate in activities with peers, and make friends, in the program and other contexts, and such opportunities may not be as readily available to youth from low-income families. The integration of the life skills curriculum throughout the program was an important component of relationship-building for youth, as it provided them with a framework for understanding what a good friend is, skills and opportunities for forming positive relationships (including through physical activity), and friendships that could be maintained beyond the program. The identification by staff of the importance of the combination of staff training and support from caring and autonomy-supportive program administrators provides an important perspective on how considering the experiences and well-being of PYD staff has important implications for the program context and youth outcomes. These conditions helped create a safe and supportive culture in which youth could learn skills to initiate and develop relationships in the program and community.

The role of physical activity and sport as a vehicle for inclusion is important for many youth in this age-group, and may be particularly valuable for this low-income population. Physical activity and sport are often important social contexts for youth. Sport and games are a significant part of school physical education, extracurricular activities, recess, and neighborhood free play, and they are often a context for peer interaction. Skill level can play a role in whether youth are invited to play, if they are meaningfully included, how peers respond (positively or negatively) while playing, and in establishing social status in peer groups (Chase & Dummer, 1992). Youth in late childhood and early adolescence from low-income families often have fewer opportunities to participate regularly and become skilled in organized physical activity contexts (Eime, Charity, Harvey, & Payne, 2015). These deficits may lead to exclusion, widening the skill gap further. The opportunity to receive instruction and gain skill gave youth a boost to be able to participate in physical activities within the program, and in the community. In this study, the role that participating in fun, developmental physical activities and learning new sport skills played in peer relationships was one of the most discussed elements translated to other contexts. The rule in the program that everyone had to participate is interesting, because such a rule could have been perceived as controlling, and had a negative effect on motivation and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Instead, this rule was experienced as freeing for many children, who did not have to decide whether to participate in physical activities or not, and did not face exclusion from participation by their peers. This is an example of how choice is not synonymous with autonomy: even rules that dictate behavior can be autonomy supportive if they contribute to meeting youths' needs and are communicated in a

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supportive, inclusive manner. Future research is needed to examine the effects of such policies on motivation, and the effects of skill development opportunities on social relationship development in this population. Physical activity-based PYD programs may be well-suited to creating these conditions, as they tend to have considerable flexibility to implement policies and education around participation and inclusion.

The integration of a character development curriculum in physical activities offered in a safe and inclusive space was an important combination for social relationship development. In sport contexts in which there is no intentional effort to create a positive social climate, there is less evidence for youth asset development (Holt et al., 2012). The focus on what makes a good friend and creating opportunities to interact with other youth who are also focusing on interpersonal skills may aid developing healthy relationships. This education and social environment may be an important combination, particularly for youth from low-income families who are particularly at risk for negative peer influences (Eamon, 2002), such as pressure to join gangs (Riciputi et al., 2016). Furthermore, these opportunities may be important for youth in late childhood and early adolescence, when peer relationships are becoming increasingly important (Harter, 2012). Future research is needed to examine how to best foster these relationships in PYD programs across the late childhood-early adolescent developmental period, and to examine effects on friendships over time. In this environment, youth had opportunities to meet new friends, develop high quality friendships, and learn to discern-and have more options for developing friendships with youth who are caring and respectful and do not get in trouble. These features of peer relationships are associated with well-being (Hartup, 1996). These mutually influential relationships among children are also ways that youth positively contributed to creating the positive social context, an important outcome of effective PYD programs, and one that is sometimes overlooked in this population (Lerner et al., 2015). This finding provides further support that intentionally integrating life skill development into physical activities is an effective strategy for PYD programs for this population (Bean & Forneris, 2016; Holt & Neely, 2012).

An important contribution of this study is the finding that staff valued receiving training in skills to integrate social, character, and life skills into their activities and interactions with the youth, and manage and discipline their groups constructively; and that program administrators were perceived as caring and autonomy-supportive toward staff. It is understandable that most of the focus on PYD programs is on youth but, supporting the skills, positive social relationships, and autonomy for staff likely affects how well they create positive climates for youth (McDavid et al., 2017) and their own leadership development (Kendellen, Camiré, Bean, & Forneris, 2016). Future research is needed that considers the experiences of PYD staff and implications for youth and staff outcomes.

The case study was delimited to data from youth and staff. The decision to not include others such as parents and teachers presents limitations, particularly for examining transfer. Although all participants were able to address the interview questions, some youth were limited in their capacity to provide detailed answers. Conducting the initial interviews prior to the end of the program limited our ability to capture experiences over the full duration of the program. Our ability to contact and interview only half of the youth participants at follow-up, and that the majority of those participants were boys, limits the range of experiences represented, particularly with respect to long-term transfer. Maintaining contact with families over time is challenging, as there is considerable mobility in this population, but we felt that interviewing those we could reach was worthwhile. Finally, it would have been preferable to have one person conduct all interviews and analysis so one person experienced all of the interactions with youth and was intimately aware of the subtleties of the conversations that ensued, but this was not possible due to program constraints.

Conclusions

The study provides insight into what youth from low-income families value and find useful about their social interactions in a physical activity-based PYD program. Interventions are most effective when participants' perspectives, needs, and contexts are carefully considered

(Sue, 2006). This study provides ideas for program elements that are meaningful to youth and address concerns of importance to them in efforts to promote asset development and transfer. It would be useful for PYD programs to consider the effect of the combination of physical activity opportunities, physical and social skill development, and intentionally integrating life skill lessons on youths' experiences and outcomes in PYD programs. Furthermore, considering skill development and support for PYD staff is potentially important for both staff and youth outcomes. The unique environment of PYD programs with its focus on fun, but with intentional social and life skill lessons may create a culture and space for developing assets. Social interactions likely affect youth in ways that they do not notice or are unable to identify, but the findings allow us to consider social factors that resonate, and that they see as meaningful for their own development.

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