

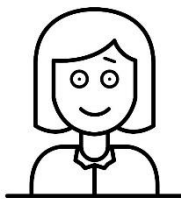
The role of community sports clubs in adolescent mental health: the perspectives of adolescent males' parents¹

WHAT WERE WE INTERESTED IN?

In Australia, in a given year, just over 14% of adolescents aged 12-17 years will have a mental health problem.² When it comes to seeking help, research shows that adolescents often turn to their parents³ and that parents' understanding of mental health is important to early recognition of a problem. We know that adolescents prefer informal sources of support, and that boys are less likely than adolescent girls to seek help. We wondered if community sports clubs might be a good setting to introduce mental health education and prevention activities to parents, coaches, and athletes. This early research examined parents' understanding of mental health and their perspectives on the role of clubs in promoting better adolescent mental health.

WHAT DID WE DO?

In 2015, we conducted 10 focus group discussions with 46 parents of adolescent male athletes, involved in swimming, cricket, tennis, AFL, soccer, and basketball across the Illawarra region of NSW. We asked questions about their mental health knowledge, attitudes towards help-seeking, family dynamics, and what might help or hinder parents taking part in mental health programs run through a sports club.



WHAT DID WE FIND?

We found that parents worried about their child potentially developing a mental health problem, their own ability to respond to it, and they wanted more mental health information in general. Some of the parents already had experience with mental health disorders, but described not knowing enough before that. In particular, parents described not being able to recognise the difference between normal adolescent behaviour and symptoms of a more serious problem, and lacked confidence about where, when, and how to seek help from professional services.



Parents did know about effective self-help and supportive strategies, and viewed it as their responsibility to help their children. Parents' views were mixed on whether sports clubs were the best place for mental health programs – some saw sports participation as beneficial to wellbeing, a place to connect, and meet other parents; some noted the potential for sports pressures (e.g. burnout, injury, competition) to have negative impacts on adolescents. In some cases, parents did not perceive a need for mental health education if their child did not currently have a problem

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Programs run through community sports clubs should build on parents existing knowledge, by helping parents to distinguish signs and symptoms of developing mental health problems, to discuss mental health with their adolescents, and to better understand the available support services. Parents were in favour of making these types of discussions more 'normal' and effective programs would help to boost their confidence about knowing what to do. In rolling out such a program, parents noted there would be some barriers (e.g. lack of time), and while not all parents viewed sports clubs as having a responsibility for mental health education, most were open to the idea. This told us that developing mental health programs for parents associated with sports clubs is worth investing in.

Further reading

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