

Sports Programs for Refugee Children and their Effect on Psychosocial Wellbeing in the Context of Cultural Sensitivity

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October 19th-November 13th, 2020

Abstract

Sports programs are a unique and effective way to treat psychiatric disorders in children at refugee camps. Logistically the standard western methods of helping kids cope with childhood trauma are not feasible for that many children in the setting of a refugee camp. Sports programs help with resiliency, a key factor for psychosocial wellbeing in children. The sports programs were significantly more effective when the refugees' cultures were kept in mind when developing the intervention.

Introduction

In the words of past President of the International Olympic Committee Dr. Jacques Rogge "Sport cannot cure all the world's ills, but can contribute to meaningful solutions."¹ Refugees often go through many difficult times, which can severely affect their mental health. Specifically in the Sudanese children, 88% had lack of clothing, 69.4% were hungry, and 55.1% had illness without medical care.² These sad statistics are just one example of the terrible living conditions and hardships that many refugees face around the world. The poor living conditions often aren't even the most significant factor affecting their psychosocial wellbeing. Of those same Sudanese children, 63% witnessed the death of a family member, 28% were tortured, and 9% were sexually abused.² These data are a tragedy. Due to these hardships, it is not uncommon for children to have depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, severe anxiety, or multiple other mental health conditions.²

A refugee, as defined by the 1951 Refugee Commission, is someone who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion,

nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of the country."¹ The topic of this paper is not to prevent the atrocities of war and persecution in their initial country, but how to help once they are already refugees in a camp or resettled. Therefore, it is important to have a good working knowledge of life for children in refugee camps as a starting point. Alexander Korsik et al. describe the refugee camps as mere clusters of housing in a village with some basic necessities such as food, water, and clothing.¹ B. Paardekooper et al. found that the camps are extremely crowded with little space to play games or sports for the kids.² In Lebanon, the children were barefoot with bits of metal, tires and other debris on the ground.³ Notably, 43% of the Ugandan refugees were school aged children in 2013.¹ As shown by these descriptions, not only do the children often not have toys or sporting equipment, they have overcrowding and unsafe environments.

Sports

Sports and athletics can help refugees in many different areas of life and wellbeing. Specifically, they can help at a psychological level with personal development, physical health, self-esteem, self-confidence, and empowerment.⁴ Also, they can help on a more social level with developing a social network, group cohesion, cooperation, respect, social inclusion, and inter-group relations.⁴ These benefits of sports play a major role in helping with the psychosocial effects of being a refugee. In refugee camps and large groups of patients in general, the Western approach of having an individual clinician for each patient is often not practical or feasible.⁵

Sports are a good option because they require relatively few resources and trained clinicians compared to trying to see everyone in a clinic, for example. Specifically, sports help develop resiliency, which “can be described as an inner strength, responsiveness and flexibility that some individuals have more than others, that either enables them to withstand stress and trauma completely, or helps them to be able to recover to a healthy level of functioning more quickly after a traumatic event.”⁵ Sports do this by helping children develop and grow protective qualities such as problem solving, adaptation to change, being independent and able to request help when necessary, and making social connections.⁵

Another important factor in sports is coaching. The simple act of kicking a ball might help with physical wellbeing, but in order to gain many of the psychosocial aspects of wellbeing a coach must help drive the experience. In 2003 in Bam (Iran), after the earthquake, the kids just froze after being given a ball and a field without the direction of coaches.⁵ The coaches help

“facilitate the understanding of emotions and interpersonal communication, as well as how to help develop fair play and community ethics.”⁵

Many people and organization have realized the opportunities to help refugees through sports, but one of the most well know and largest organizations is the Right to Play (RTP). It is a global organization that focuses on playing sports and games as a mechanism to educate and empower children facing adversity.¹ It was founded in 2000, and has four overarching tenets: basic education and child development, health promotion and disease prevention, conflict resolution and peace building, and community development and participation.¹ Although psychosocial wellbeing is not one of the four tenets, the ideas of child development, health promotion, conflict resolution, and community development all feed into psychological and social health.

RTP has looked at the implementation of sports programs in refugee camps around the world. They found that ball sports such as football, volleyball, and netball were the most common, but regional variety did exist.¹ Netball is a game commonly played in common wealth nations particularly popular among women.⁷ For example, there was ultimate frisbee in the Middle East, yoga in East Africa, and boxing in Afganistan.¹ It is therefore important to understand the various cultural preferences for different sports for different communities of people. A program will fail if there is no interest in the activity or if it conflicts with cultural practices.

An important example of working within the context of cultural practices is sports in young women. The rock climbing program in Lebanon faced this when women aged 14 and above refused to participate because they “had reached the age of marriage and that is was no longer

appropriate to participate in this type of event.”³ However more success was found when efforts to understand the culture and work within it were made. In Zambia, girls were not playing football and it was initially assumed that they were not interested, however they were just not comfortable in dresses and were happy to play once they got sporting pants that were less revealing.¹ Another example is in Egypt, where the girls were only allowed to play sports in the very early morning before other household duties and when they would have privacy away from men.¹

Examples of Sports Programs in Refugee Camps

The KickStart Joy Soccer Project was created in 2017 to help the youth at the Zaatari Refugee Camp, home to 80,000 refugees.⁶ The program consisted of Major League Soccer (MLS) players making a threeday training camp for boys and girls under 12, under 14 and under 18 in the refugee camp just outside Amman, Jordan.⁶ The cultural norm is for girls to attend school in the morning and boy in the afternoon, so the KickStart Joy Project worked around these schedules.⁶ Additionally girls were not allowed to play in roads and alleys by themselves because of safety, but with the band-new regulation-size soccer field and coaches the girls could safely participate in the program.⁶ The program largely did well and helped many children and youth because of the extensive planning and attention to cultural preferences. It was important to understand when boys vs. girl were allowed to play, not to play coed, and to have plenty of supervision for the girls’ safety. Also, security at the camp required submission of identification for the KickStart Joy Soccer participants, and a security check by Jordanian police before they could enter the

camp.⁶ The competing interests of the humanitarian aid groups, host nation’s security, and of the refugee youth themselves, made the entire program difficult to carry out logistically.⁶ This demonstrates that sports programs to help psychosocial wellbeing for refugee children is not as straight forward as donating a soccer ball.

The rock climbing sports project was smaller than the KickStart Joy Program due to the logistics of the sport and the size of the organization. ClimbAID is a Swiss non-profit organization founded in 2016 to bring rock climbing to vulnerable youth worldwide.³ The “Rolling Rock” is a refurbished van with colorful climbing walls, holds, pads, shoes and chalk for the kids.³ The van regularly visits the Beqaa Valley of Lebanon to allow refugee youth the opportunity to rock climb, slack line, and learn about the environment.³ Rock climbing is not a common sports program for refugee aid, but this area of Lebanon is near a famous climb that traverses the steep interior sinkhole in the Baatarra Gorge Waterfall.³ The main event put on by ClimbAid was a bouldering competition with two world cup climbers, 15 boulders, and 40 Lebanese and Syrian youth.³ One downside of the program was a lack of understanding of the culture with respect to young women. All of the girls 14 and above said it was not appropriate for them to climb.³ However, the bouldering competition was overall a huge success, with teens approaching the volunteers to “tell [them] how happy they were” and who spontaneously started “singing and dancing.”³

Conclusion

Children are 40% of the refugee population and are exposed to terrible traumas and life experiences.⁸ This predisposes them to various psychiatric

disorders as well as physical health problems. The solution to help these children is often not as simple as scheduling a visit with a child psychologist; rather group treatments are more feasible and potentially more effective in refugee camps. Sports programs help children cope and heal from the atrocities they have experienced. Attention to cultural norms and preferences is key in order to successfully bring these sports programs to refugee camps across the world.

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