Physical Activity Promotion: Experiences and Evaluation of the Agita São Paulo Program Using the Ecological Mobile Model

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Background, Structure, and Message to Promote Physical Activity

A sedentary lifestyle, which affects 50–80% of the world’s population, is associated with the main risk factors for chronic diseases. For this reason stimulating an active lifestyle is critical to control and prevent these illnesses. In Brazil, as in other developing countries, there are few available data to determine the physical activity (PA) level of the population. The first national household survey in Brazil to include PA was the Living Standards Measurement Survey conducted from March 1996 to February 1997. In that survey 11,033 people (over 20 years of age) were evaluated concerning their leisure-time physical activities (LTPA). According to the results only 13% of the Brazilians surveyed reported performing 30 min or more of LTPA on 1 or more days of the week, and only 3.3% reported doing the recommended minimum of 30 min on 5 or more days of the week. In the State of São Paulo, data published in 1990 showed that a sedentary lifestyle was prevalent among 69.3% males and females (aged 18 to 70). Another important issue is the cost of this lifestyle in the health system, which is estimated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to represent about 70% of all health expenses. According to 2002 data (CELAFISCs & CDC, unpublished data), 4% (US$37.5 million) of the direct cost in public health in the State of São Paulo is related to a sedentary lifestyle. The Agita São Paulo Program (the Program) was developed to address this problem. The Program is a multilevel plan that promotes messages about the health benefits of PA and coordinates activities and interventions for broader PA opportunities among more than 37 million inhabitants of the State of São Paulo.
state of São Paulo, Brazil. “Agita” is a proper name that means more than just to move your body; it suggests also activating your mind, your social health, and even asking for active citizenship. The Program was launched in December 1996 by the Physical Fitness Research Center from São Caetano do Sul (Centro de Estudos do Laboratório de Aptidão Física de São Caetano do Sul; CELAFISCS), and the São Paulo State Health Secretariat. The Secretariat oversees the health of almost 37 million inhabitants in 645 municipalities in the state. The Program became a role model for similar programs in other states of Brazil and in other Latin American countries. The World Health Organization (WHO) has praised it as a model for other developing countries. The main goal of the Program is to change the general population’s PA behavior. The Program uses the behavior stages described in the Transtheoretical Model, which assumes that changes in behavior happen from the pre-contemplation stage through contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance stages. The Program promotes physical activity and creates messages addressing active lifestyles that are targeted to each population group at the different behavioral stage levels. The Program activities and messages are intended to turn sedentary individuals into somewhat active ones, persons who are not very active into active ones, those who are regularly active into even more active ones, and those already very active into individuals able to remain so at no risk of suffering injury. The main message used by the Program to promote the adoption of an active lifestyle was recommended in 1995 by the ACSM and the CDC. Those two groups recommended that adults accumulate 30 min of moderate intensity physical activity per day that could be done in one session or in multiple sessions lasting at least 10 min each. The needed energy expenditures can come from routine daily activities such as walking, sweeping the floor, running a vacuum cleaner, mowing the lawn, and washing windows. These activities can be performed at home (such as while doing household chores), at the workplace (both while carrying out job duties and traveling to and from work), and during leisure time (doing enjoyable activities).

The Program is coordinated by CELAFISCS, with financial support from the São Paulo State Health Secretariat. The direct costs of the Program are largely covered by the State Health Secretariat, with a budget of about US$152,000 per year. This represents an investment of less than half a cent (in USD) per inhabitant per year. In contrast, the estimated cost of illness related to a sedentary lifestyle in the state of São Paulo through the public health system is US$37 million per year—about US$1 per person per year. Forty percent of the budget amount covers educational and marketing materials, 35% human resources, 14% research, and 11% materials. However, it is important to highlight the partner groups who cover the many additional indirect costs of the Program.

The Program has two committees that are part of its structure: the Scientific Board and the Executive Board. The Scientific Board consists of both Brazilians and persons from other countries who have an academic background and experience in the area of physical activity, including its promotion. These professionals helped establish the Program’s scientific foundation and have assisted in assessing the specific activities that have been implemented. The Executive Board includes more than 300 governmental and non-governmental organizations that have joined the Program and that are directly responsible for the organization, execution, planning, and ongoing performance of the Program’s multiple actions to disseminate its message in the community. The Executive Board meets once a month to plan