Effectiveness of Peer Mentoring in a Prolonged Senior Fitness Program

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INTRODUCTION

Although many older adults start to participate in regular exercise, lack of guidance often results in program inefficiency and discontinuation. The peer mentor model has been used successfully elsewhere and has been theorized to be effective in fitness settings. The purpose of this study was to document the retention rates, effectiveness of peer mentors, and the perception of participants in comparison to subjects trained by qualified Kinesiology student mentors. Stage 1 of this study identified 30 older adults with a mean ± SD age of 68.6 ± 4.9 years to participate in a 35-week physical training and mentorship skill development program. After the 35-week preparation program, 60 new participants were recruited for Stage 2 and divided into two groups: 1) Student Mentored (SM) group (N=30); and 2) Peer Mentored (PM) group (N = 30). Mean ± SD age of the recruited subjects was 67.8 ± 6.1 years. The 35-week intervention program for the new subjects included three 75-minute training sessions per week. The exercise programs for the SM and PM groups were identical. SM and PM group subjects completed a battery of fitness tests at the start and conclusion of the intervention to include: 30-second sit-and-stand and arm strength, leg endurance (1-minute standing, standing and seated), 60-second chair stand, balance (Forward Reach) inch and (8-foot Balance Walk) yard. Peak Performance Tests were conducted to assess participants’ functional capacity. Exercise programs were designed with the capacity for improved physical function of older adults.

METHODS

Participants (N = 60)

- Trained by either Peer-Mentors (N = 30) or Student Mentors (N = 30).
- 35-week structured training program with 3 sessions per week.
- Pre- and Post-Training assessments of: upper and lower body strength; upper and lower body flexibility; aerobic endurance; agility; and balance.
- A 20 question self-reported survey assessed: program enjoyment, perceived program benefits, and effectiveness of Peer-Mentors.

RESULTS

- In both SM and PM groups 19 of 30 participant completed the 35-week program (63% retention).
- Survey scores (based on 7-point scale) in both SM and PM group indicated a high level of program enjoyment and perceived benefit.
- Effectiveness of Peer-Mentors was similar to Student-Mentors (84% and 91%).
- Peer-Mentors were positive role models (6.2 ± 1.3; 87.8%).
- Peer-Mentors influenced exercise adherence (5.6 ± 4.1; 83.6%).
- Peer-Mentors influenced exercise effort (6.1 ± 1.3; 87.3%).
- The experience of being a Peer-Mentor provided enjoyment, motivation, responsibility, and a sense of ownership (6.3 ± 1.1; 90.5%).
- Program produced substantial physical improvements in strength, flexibility, aerobic endurance, agility, and balance (range of improvement: 11.2% - 58.0%).

CONCLUSION

- An exercise program that utilizes Peer-Mentors as training partners for older adults has a positive influence on participation rates, overall retention, and physical fitness.
- The overall effectiveness of this structured program demonstrates the capacity for improved physical function of older adults.
- Peer-Mentors enhance the overall effectiveness of an exercise program by improving attendance and enjoyment.
- Through positive modeling within the community, Peer-Mentors can represent an organization and actively recruit membership improving the long-term sustainability of the program.
- The responsibility of new participant recruitment and training empowers the Peer-Mentors and instills a sense of program ownership.

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