THE SALSA PROJECT: EXTENDING THE SALSA PROGRAM TO FAMILIES

The SALSA (Student’s As Lifestyle Activists) program is a unique primary prevention, school-based intervention that aims to improve the health and wellbeing of high school students, their families and the school community. The program seeks to motivate and guide young people to make well-informed choices regarding their general health, nutrition and physical activity levels.

The SALSA program uses an innovative student centred approach, whereby university and senior high school students participating in the program become the drivers of both the teaching and the learning process. This occurs when, trained university students coach Year 10 students as Peer Leaders, who then educate their younger peers (Year 8) through four structured lessons. The Year 8 students develop their own healthy lifestyle goal and a healthy action plan to create a supportive school environment. The program provides participants with opportunities for both learning and teaching, effectively creating a “Ripple Effect” within the school and community. This effect is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Ripple effect of the SALSA program

Extending SALSA to families

Evaluation of the program indicates efficacy in increasing students’ physical activity, breakfast, fruit and vegetables intake. The SALSA program has the potential to greatly benefit the health of young people, who in turn can influence the health of the community.

However, when addressing health issues we must recognise the vital role and influence that the family unit has over the health behaviours of children. Therefore, in order to make sustainable and lasting changes in lifestyle behaviours, the SALSA program must include the family unit before it can ultimately influence the school community which consists of multiple family units.

In order to improve communication with families about SALSA messages, we carried out a needs assessment to determine the existing communication channels between schools and families and preferences for future communications. Besides using existing channels of school-based communication, such as the school’s newsletter and Facebook, participants also suggested using a SALSA app and an event at school.

We are currently undertaking several research activities. These include an evaluation of the SALSA program to determine its impact on Year 8 students and Year 10 Peer Leaders, the feasibility of a SALSA App and events to reach families.

SALSA is a partnership program with Mt Druitt & Blacktown Medical Practitioners Association, Rooty Hill High School, University of Sydney and Western Sydney Local Health District. Webpage: http://sydney.edu.au/medicine/public-health/salsa-triple-a/
Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/StudentsAsLifestyleActivists; Instagram:@studentsaslifestyleactivits