

Best practice framework for engaging older people in physical activity



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Development of a framework to guide physical activity programs for older people



Background and purpose

The Victorian Active Ageing Partnership (VAAP) was established by the Victorian Government in 2015 to increase opportunities for participation in physical activity programs for older Victorians, especially those who are socio-economically disadvantaged and isolated. In order to facilitate partnerships and capacity to achieve this goal, VAAP set out to develop a Best Practice Framework for the Delivery of Older Persons' Physical Activity Programs.

Research to inform framework

The peer-reviewed and grey literature were searched for articles and reports published between 1995 and 2015 that examined the attributes of programs, and elements of workforce and organisational capacity, that influence participation by older people in organised physical activity programs. There were 2044 titles identified, and following screening and full-text review, 28 articles and reports were included in a literature synthesis. This highlighted key elements of program design, facilitator skill and organisational capacity that affected successful engagement with older people. Two rounds of consultation were undertaken with 15 experienced deliverers of physical activity programs for older people in Victoria to validate and refine the factors which were included in the final framework.

Domains and elements of framework

In the domain of program design, the elements identified which facilitate reach and ongoing participation by older people are:

- accessibility – achieved by affordable fees, convenient venues, availability of transport, and cultural appropriateness;
- friendliness – shown by being welcoming, supportive, and offering social get togethers;
- safety – with appropriate exercises, referrals for assistance, and availability of hydration;
- observable benefits – including fun, increased energy and improved performance and functioning.

In the domain of leader skills and qualities, the attributes that are reported as influences upon the willingness and confidence of older people to participate are:

- expertise – demonstrated by appropriate training, broad knowledge about exercise, skills in monitoring and assessment and first aid qualifications;
- responsiveness – including enthusiasm, personal attentiveness, adapting exercises to participant abilities and communicating regularly;
- nurturing approach – shown by encouragement, group building, inclusive decision-making and cultural sensitivity;
- connectedness – to practice updates, local services and referral systems.

The elements of importance in the domain of organisational capacities were found to be:

- values – including diligence and care, positive ageing and social equity;
- networks – with groups and agencies that can provide volunteers, new participants, and program guidance from health professionals;
- resources – offering funding to reduce fees, comfortable and safe venues, equipment and storage, and change rooms;
- policies and systems – for risk management, staff development, and flexible and supportive conditions for group facilitators

The complete findings of the literature synthesis will be available at move.org.au/VAAP in coming weeks.