



Evaluation of Desert West Youth Volleyball Program

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Desert West Volleyball Evaluation

The development of self-identity, self-esteem, and social relationships plays a vital role in adolescent girls' overall growth and well-being (Pfeifer & Birkman, 2018). During adolescence, individuals undergo significant changes in their sense of self and their understanding of their place in the world, which, in turn, influences their personal growth and development (Backes, 2019). These aspects can also be shaped by the environments in which they participate, such as sports involvement. While previous research has acknowledged the positive impact of sports in shaping these factors (Anderson-Butcher, 2019; Eime et al., 2013; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005), research has also highlighted potential negative impacts of sport participation on youth development (Jayanthi et al., 2013; Merkel, 2013). Therefore, it is important to conduct a more nuanced examination to fully understand girls' unique experiences from engaging in youth sports.

Context

The Desert West Community Center is located in Maryvale, Arizona. Maryvale is a diverse community of over 230,000 people, including a population of nearly 80% Hispanic, and 10% Black/African-American. Further, Maryvale is considered a low-income community, with a poverty rate over 20%, and low levels of educational attainment (only around 10% of residents have a college degree). In 2018, a gift from Mike and Cindy Watts was provided to the College of Public Service & Community Solutions at ASU. The gift targeted efforts to support community programs in Maryvale, where the Watts grew up. One result of this gift was the creation of the Design Studio for Community Solutions (DSCS) at ASU. Following extensive community input, DSCS

identified community sport and recreation as a key community need. To address this, DSCS partnered with Desert West Community Center to expand the community center offerings, and attract more families. Part of this partnership involved the creation of a recreational youth volleyball program in the fall of 2023. The program started with 20 participants in its first eight-week clinic in fall 2023. As the program grew, it expanded to two clinics by spring 2024, with a waiting list for the six-week session.

The Present Study

In order to evaluate the program, we implemented an arts-based data collection approach to assess the following question:

What benefits do participants receive from a youth volleyball program?

Methods

In this evaluation, 16 female athletes aged 8-12 who engaged in a volleyball clinic were invited to depict themselves in various contexts—school, playing volleyball, and at home—through a drawing exercise. Subsequently, they participated in interviews structured around their drawings. Based on the drawings and interviews, we identified several key themes: 1) Strength through sport; 2) Feeling excitement in improving skills; 3) Creating social bonds; and 4) Pride in teaching others. Below we discuss these findings in more detail.

Findings

Strength Through Sport

One prominent theme that we identified from the interviews was the empowerment the participants experienced through their engagement in volleyball. Words such as "strong," "powerful," and "happy" were frequently used to describe their feelings while actively participating in the sport. Ella¹ articulated this sentiment, stating, "So volleyball makes me like, more outgoing. More powerful." Other athletes echoed this empowerment theme throughout the interviews, with Julia expressing, "So I can feel like I can, like I can be better and stronger and like throw the ball and stuff. Like my arm doesn't feel weak like you feel strong." This sense of physical strength and confidence contributed significantly to self-perception, highlighting the positive impact of physical activity, specifically volleyball, on their sense of self-empowerment.

Feeling Excitement in Improving Their Skills

Another notable theme was the participants' enthusiasm for learning and improving their volleyball skills. Several participants mentioned specific skills they were focused on honing, demonstrating a strong desire for personal growth and development within the sport. Ava exemplified this commitment to skill enhancement. She remarked, "Serving is my favorite thing because I get better at it every day," This can be seen in Julia's drawing, which includes Julia practicing at school and at home to get better (see picture 1). Moreover, the challenges posed by playing against more advanced teammates were seen as opportunities for personal growth, as noted by Ella: "I think it's

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

just like getting to know other girls that are stronger than you and playing against them, which kind of makes you want to challenge yourself more harder." The focus on continuous improvement highlights how volleyball participation fosters intrinsic motivation, leading to personal development and skill acquisition through physical activity.

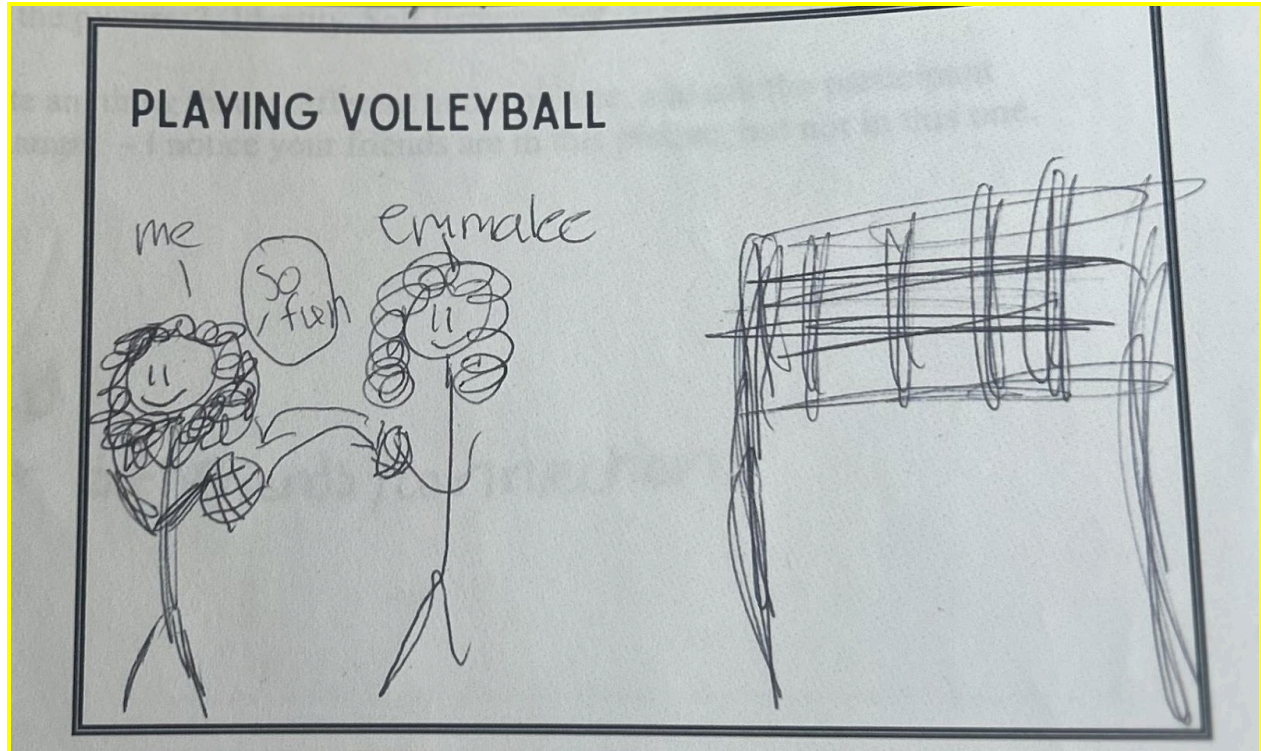
Picture 1 (Julia)



Creating Social Bonds

Analysis of the interviews also highlighted the significant role of volleyball in fostering social connections and a sense of belonging among the participants. Many expressed that their closest friendships were formed through volleyball, emphasizing the social aspect as a pivotal component of their experience. Julia articulated this sentiment: "Most of my friends are here." This was also demonstrated by Nina, who made close friends with another participant during volleyball practices (see picture 2). Despite initial apprehensions or stereotypes associated with the sport, such as Melaney's initial perception of volleyball as "girly," the camaraderie and inclusivity within the volleyball community led to a sense of acceptance and belonging: As Christina noted, "I feel like I guess a part of something." Christina's comment further exemplified this sense of community and support, "I feel like if I'm messing up, I feel like I think it's still fun because, like, I don't think anyone's judging me." The collaborative and supportive environment created through volleyball enhanced their social connections and contributed to a positive and inclusive atmosphere where they felt valued and accepted.

Picture 2 (Nina)

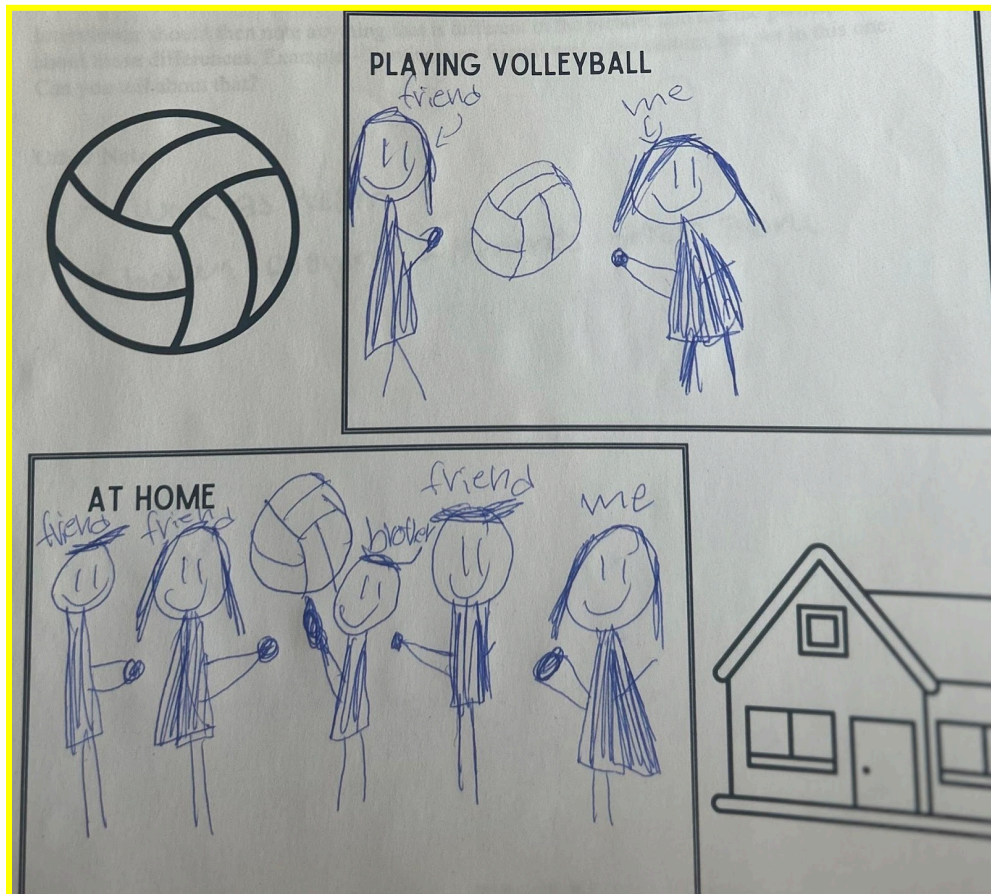


Pride in Teaching Others

A notable discovery was the participants' enthusiasm for teaching and sharing their volleyball knowledge with others. Several participants expressed joy and satisfaction in helping their peers improve their skills, demonstrating a sense of leadership and mentorship both at school and during practice. May's statement, "I show them how to play. I teach them the hand techniques. But what happens if the ball is too low or too high? So, like I show them that it's fun," reflects this sense of pride and responsibility in guiding others. Similarly, Mia highlighted the value of teaching, stating, "I teach her how to serve because she will always try to give up on everything. And then yeah, I just make her try her best." This aspect of teaching and mentorship enhances understanding and mastery of the sport and instills confidence and leadership skills that

extend beyond the volleyball court. This is demonstrated by Ava, who would coach her friends during school and play with her family at home (see picture 3).

Picture 3 (Ava)



Conclusion

The findings from this study offer valuable insights into the multifaceted impact of volleyball participation on young girls. Beyond the physical benefits of activity, such as strength and agility, volleyball provided a platform for empowerment, personal growth, social connection, and leadership development. These findings align with existing research emphasizing the holistic benefits of sports participation, particularly in promoting self-confidence, resilience, teamwork, and social integration among youth.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing effective sports programs that cater to young athletes' diverse needs and aspirations, fostering physical fitness, holistic well-being, and personal development.

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