

SUPPORTING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY
AND HEALTHY EATING



Team Prime Time & Prime Time Games

Fostering self-esteem and positive attitudes through supportive relationships

From a healthier weight and improved physical fitness to better academic performance and a lower risk of depression, healthy eating and physical activity promote a range of positive outcomes for young people. However, most children and adolescents do not meet the recommended dietary and physical activity guidelines, putting them at an elevated risk for several immediate and long-term health conditions, including obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Poor nutrition and physical inactivity also have broad societal consequences. From a national security perspective, only 2 in 5 youth aged 17-24 are “weight-eligible and physically prepared” for basic military training. And the economic costs are steep: In 2019 alone, childhood obesity was linked to an estimated \$1.3 billion in medical expenses.

Afterschool and summer programs are key partners in efforts to keep young people healthy, active, and engaged. They help young people build lifelong healthy habits by providing daily meals and regular opportunities for physical activity; offering engaging experiences like gardening, cooking healthful foods, or trying out new sports; and fostering supportive relationships between students and staff that encourage nutritious eating and excitement about physical activity.

Team Prime Time

Los Angeles and Inglewood, California

3,570

Average number of students served

85%

Students from low-income families

Main funding sources:

- ▶ Contracts with Los Angeles Unified School District and Inglewood Unified School District
- ▶ After School Education and Safety (ASES) grant
- ▶ Expanded Learning Opportunities Program (ELO-P)
- ▶ Private Foundations

Overview

Team Prime Time is an afterschool program serving middle and high school students in California’s Los Angeles and Inglewood Unified School Districts. It offers a range of activities, including academics, arts, STEM, athletics, and a leadership component centered around its full-inclusion sports program, Prime Time Games. Prime Time Games gives two underserved populations—low-income youth and students with disabilities—the chance to compete alongside each other in a variety of sports, including basketball, soccer, and flag football, in the only sports league of its kind.

A typical day for students

Middle and high school students participating in the leadership component of programming, Prime Time Games, engage in 10 weeks of training, practice, and play during the fall, winter, and spring seasons. In the first two weeks, peer coaches—students without disabilities—complete an evidence-based online training to develop strategies for facilitating practices and games for their teammates with diverse needs and accommodations. The peer coaches

learn drills; practice emotional regulation, communication, and body language techniques; and role-play scenarios before being paired with students with disabilities, known as the athletes.

Then, there are 4 to 5 weeks of in-person practice, during which peer coaches and athletes are paired together to prepare for games and matches. During practice, coaches and athletes are not expected to master their sport, rather, both parties develop relationships and trust, while athletes learn the foundational skills necessary for safe participation on game days.

The last few weeks of the program are dedicated to games where participants play other Prime Time Games teams in their league. Game days are typically once a week and provide students a varsity-like experience by allowing them to host home games, travel to away games, and invite parents to cheer them on. The 10-week season culminates in “Championship Saturday,” hosted by the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) athletic department every spring, where participants compete in a day-long sports tournament with the support of UCLA’s student-athlete volunteers.

Program characteristics

As a full-inclusion sports program, Prime Time Games is built around the strengths and needs of students with and without disabilities and provides peer coaches and athletes with the support needed to form healthy and authentic relationships with one another.

The Peer:Pair model is essential to the program’s structure and effectiveness. Each athlete is paired with a peer coach, allowing them to play as a unit on the court or field. Accordingly, all games are played with an even number of participants on each team. For instance, rather than a standard 5-on-5 basketball game, the program intentionally offers 6-on-6 basketball games so that each athlete has a partner on the field who plays alongside them, providing guidance and instruction as needed. Peer coaches also play a significant role in executing Prime Time Games’ governing principles—controlling space, pace, and safety—to ensure game environments remain conducive to each athlete’s success.

In addition to the Peer:Pair model ensuring accessibility for athletes, the structure also fosters an environment for genuine relationships to develop between peer coaches and athletes. Although seasons are only 10 weeks, the program intends for participants to play season after season and year after year, which allows genuine relationships to form. To support relationship-building, the program ensures that Peer:Pairs are maintained across seasons, maximizing opportunities for coaches and athletes to learn from one another and deepen their friendships—especially considering the program’s high season-to-season retention rate. Additionally, because coaches and athletes attend the same schools, these relationships not only carry over into the school day, but participation also improves peer coaches’ and the broader student body’s attitudes toward their classmates with disabilities, contributing to a more positive school climate through meaningful and consistent interactions and athletes’ involvement in school sports.

Challenges

For more than a decade, the overall physical activity grade for children and adolescents has been a D-. At the same time, young people are far exceeding their recommended intakes of sodium, saturated fats, and added sugars.

Healthy eating and physical activity decline as children enter adolescence. Data from the National Survey of Children’s Health found that only 26% of children aged 6-11 engage in 60 minutes of physical activity per day, and this decreases to 14% among 12-17-year-olds. Additionally, 14- to 18-year-olds have the lowest Healthy Eating Index score—a measure of diet quality—scoring just 51 out of 100.

Immediate and far-reaching consequences. Children who are inactive and have a poor diet are at risk of becoming overweight or obese, which in turn places them at risk for several health, mental health, and social issues, including high blood pressure, high cholesterol, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and bullying. Long-term consequences of inactivity and unhealthy eating include obesity in adulthood and a number of health concerns, such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, cancer, heart attack, and stroke.

Differences exist accessing healthy foods and physical activities. Due to structural and environmental barriers, youth of color and young people from low-income families are less likely to meet recommended healthy eating and physical activity guidelines. For example, children from low-income families, Black and Hispanic children, and children living in rural areas have a higher likelihood of living in a food-insecure household than children nationally. Additionally, girls and children with disabilities have far fewer opportunities for physical activity than boys and children without disabilities.

Read [Building Healthy Habits and Healthy Futures: How Afterschool Programs Are Supporting Physical Activity and Healthy Eating](#) to learn more.

Relatedly, the program's relationship-oriented structure creates mutually beneficial experiences that support the physical, social, and emotional development of all participants while addressing their individual needs. For athletes, participation in Prime Time Games is often their only opportunity to experience interscholastic sports. Through the program, they interact with their peers in a team setting and improve their physical activity self-efficacy by participating in sports in a fully inclusive, supportive environment. For coaches, Prime Time Games allows them to develop their leadership skills and sense of impact by assuming a mentor role for their peers, while also improving their ability to relate to others by working alongside people different from them.

Outcomes

Prime Time Games has a positive impact on participants' social and emotional development, perspectives toward peers with disabilities, graduation rates, and post-secondary success. A research study evaluating the program's effects on peer coaches' attitudes found that 100% believed their interactions with students with disabilities to be fully cooperative, and 89% felt their partnerships were of equal status. For athletes, participating in Team Prime Time fosters a sense of belonging, with one athlete expressing, "Being a part of the team is like being a part of a family. It makes me feel like I blend in well." Additionally, a post-program survey found that participants had higher social awareness and self-management scores on the Los Angeles Unified School District School Experience Survey than their non-participating peers. Finally, peer coaches demonstrate strong high school completion rates and post-secondary success, with 96% of peer coaches graduating on time and 85% of Team Prime Time participants enrolled in college, trade school, the military, or employed full-time.

Program history

In 2000, Peter Straus, who operated several youth sports camps, founded Team Prime Time after partnering with the Los Angeles Unified School District to provide programming for low-income middle schools based on his sports camp model. After a few years of successful programming at one Los Angeles middle school, Team Prime Time sought to expand its services in hopes of adopting a leadership program that would allow their low-income students, who were often improperly perceived as needing mentorship, the chance to be mentors themselves and make a positive impact in their communities. Under that premise, Prime Time Games was founded in 2004 and began as a full-inclusion sports program serving both students with and without developmental disabilities. By 2012, the program had expanded to high schools in the greater Los Angeles area. Since then, the Prime Time Games model has grown exponentially, with its reach extending to several states across the U.S., including Hawaii.

Recommendations

for fostering self-esteem and positive attitudes through supportive relationships:

- ▶ **Use full-inclusion program models as inspiration.** Programs must be inclusive by design, meaning the needs of students with disabilities should be integrated into the program's structure, rather than treated as an add-on. This ensures that youth with and without disabilities benefit from the programming.
- ▶ **Set your staff up for success.** Students with disabilities will benefit from programming only as much as instructors are prepared and confident in their abilities to work alongside them. Invest in training and equipping mentors and staff with the techniques and skillset needed to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities.

