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A Program Where Children “Learn about Real World Issues That They Cannot Obtain in a Typical Classroom”

An Evaluation of MAMBEC

(Martial Art Mind Body Education Centre)



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Background

The increasing obesity epidemic among children, especially in Nova Scotia (Shields, 2006), has caused physical activity and recreation practitioners to focus on new and creative methods of encouraging children and youth to be active. MAMBEC (Martial Art Mind Body Education Centre) is one such example of where increasing levels of physical activity among children has taken precedence to improve physical health. At the same time, children's social and emotional health is critical. With bullying prevalent in schools, children need strategies to cope effectively with daily life. Similarly, MAMBEC has identified children's social and emotional health at the core of their program. This study presents findings from an evaluation conducted of the MAMBEC program to assist in determining its effectiveness in meeting the needs of participants as well as to explore opportunities for improvement. MAMBEC has been operating within Halifax Regional Municipality since 2003 (MAMBEC Martial Arts Inc., 2009). It is based out of three locations: Elmsdale, Cole Harbour Place, and Porter's Lake. The primary location and office is at Cole Harbour Place. Lavonne Carroll is the founder of MAMBEC and Steve Garvey joined as the managing partner/instructor in January 2008. The goal of MAMBEC "is to give children safe skills to deal with conflict at an early age and to provide them with a better understanding of the world around them" (MAMBEC Martial Arts Inc., 2009).

Methods

To obtain feedback on the program and its effectiveness, 150 surveys were administered to parents/guardians at the Elmsdale and Cole Harbour Place locations during April-May 2010 at the beginning of regular classes. A total of 64 surveys (42.67% response rate) were completed and returned. Participants seemed quite eager to provide feedback on the program as they returned the surveys quickly. As well, an incentive was offered to encourage this return.

Participants

Slightly more of the children in this study were male (60.9%, n=39). For age, they were fairly equally split between 4-7 years and 8-11 years (see table 1). The majority were relatively new to the program with only a few years experience (see table 2).

Table 1: Age of participants in study

Age	Number	Percentage
4-7 years	31	48.4%
8-11 years	30	46.9%
12-14 years	3	4.7%
Total	64	100.0%

Table 2: Years experience in the MAMBEC program

Years in program	Number	Percentage
<1 year	26	40.6%
1-2 years	20	31.3%
3-4 years	13	20.3%
5-6 years	5	7.8%
Total	64	100.0%

Just over half of the participants (n=37, 57.8%) attended MAMBEC classes at Cole Harbour Place with another 31.3% (n=20) at Elmsdale. Only three attended exclusively at Musquadoit exclusively with another four attending a combination of three locations.

Program feedback

Most enjoyable elements. When asked about what the children enjoyed most about the MAMBEC program, the top response was the martial arts skills. In this question, participants were asked to check any of the items that apply so the items total to more than 100.0% (see table 3). Protection and coping skills were the next two most popular elements of the program, followed closely by learning new life skills and understanding respect and values. There were no significant sex differences in the responses. It is important to remember these surveys were completed by parents/guardians and may represent their thoughts more than the children's.

Learning martial arts, self-protection, and coping skills were what participants enjoyed most about MAMBEC.

It would be interesting in future to obtain feedback directly from the children to allow for comparison of responses; however, some modification may need to be made of the survey to meet children's literacy levels. Other items that were mentioned not listed included: having fun, doing yoga poses, playing games, learning new skills, learning sportsmanship, helping others, and participating with the instructors.

Table 3: What participants enjoyed most about MAMBEC

Enjoyable aspects of program	Number	Percentage
Learning martial arts skills	54	84.4%
Learning to protect self	49	76.6%
Developing coping skills	46	71.9%
Learning new life skills	42	65.6%
Understanding respect and values	42	65.6%
Enjoying the exercise or physical training	39	60.9%
Meeting new friends	35	54.7%
Developing self-esteem	35	54.7%
Learning to be a good role model	30	46.9%
Getting to be on the animation team	26	40.6%
Visiting new friends	23	35.9%

Benefits of participating. When asked what participants felt the key benefits of participating included, there were a variety of responses. Learning about everyday situations, life skills, and how to cope with them were the most frequently listed benefits. These items were followed closely by improvements in self-confidence and self-esteem. Another item frequently noted was improvements in self-control and coping skills for dealing with challenging situations (such as bullying, anger, self-defence). Finally, the physical benefits of exercise, skill development, and improved breathing were noted.

Preparation for the real-world after MAMBEC. One way of assessing how MAMBEC is meeting its goal is to explore how prepared parents feel their children are when compared with others their same age. As compared to other children the same age, parents felt their

children were predominantly better prepared for the real world (n=45, 70.3%) or at least similarly prepared (n=15, 23.4%). Only one parent felt their children were less prepared. This speaks very strongly to the life lessons and physical training children receive within MAMBEC.

Most parents felt their children were better prepared to face the real world than others their same age.

Preparation for the real-world lessons learned from MAMBEC. To better understand the elements of the MAMBEC program influential in supporting the children in the real world, parents were asked to identify the most relevant components of the program. Probably the largest statement about the impact of MAMBEC is that only one participant indicated that none of the program elements had an impact; however, this participant also took the time to note that his/her child was still young. For the rest of the participants, the most frequently listed influence on their daily life were the life skills lessons (n=55, 85.9%) followed by the physical training (n=48, 75%, see table 4). Peer and adult role models were noted fairly equally with meditation as the least commonly reported.

Table 4: Aspects of the MAMBEC Program Most Influential on Child’s Daily Life

IMPACT ON DAILY LIFE	Number	Percentage
Life skills lessons	55	85.9%
Physical training	48	75%
Peer role models	41	64.1%
Adult role models	39	60.9%
Meditation	19	29.7%

Suggested improvements to the MAMBEC program. Few improvements were identified as needed to the MAMBEC program. Forty-two participants (65.6%) identified nothing should be improved. Those who identified changes suggested addition of more evening classes during the week and martial arts training within the classes, smaller class sizes with more one-on-one interaction, more information to the parents on the life skill program, more interaction during the lessons, and opportunities to purchase second-hand uniforms.

Most preferred time for the program. Participants were given several options to indicate their most preferred time to attend MAMBEC classes. When comparing where they currently attended by their most desirable times, Cole Harbour Place participants most frequently noted Saturday 1-2pm (n=20) followed closely by 12-1pm (n=19) on the same day, and Sunday 1-2pm (n=17). Participants who most commonly attended Elmsdale

preferred Friday 6-7pm (n=16), with little difference between 7-8pm on the Friday (n=11) and 6-7pm on Thursday (n=10). Musquadoit had fairly small numbers of respondents however Thursday 6-7pm was noted by two people and one on most of the weekend times. If their current times were changed, most participants would continue to attend (n=40, 62.5%) with another 15 (23.4%) unsure but noting that it might create more challenges.

Feedback to Other Parents about MAMBEC

To obtain an idea of participants' thoughts about the MAMBEC program, they were asked what comments they would share with other parents. This was an open-ended question so any items could be included within it. Interestingly there was a large similarity in the comments. Seventeen participants commented on the excellent life skills and that children learned how to protect themselves by learning "street skills" while at the same time obtaining physical activity. This was of particular for several parents who identified their children had previously been bullied and they felt MAMBEC was a good solution to help their child develop the necessary life skills. Another common response (by nine participants) was that it was simply a "fun program" or as one parent noted "it is the greatest hour of the week". The development of skills such as respect, self-confidence, self-awareness, self-protection, and role modelling were also frequently noted. As a parent highlighted, "sign up and watch your child grow". The calming effect on the children was also emphasized especially for children who had learning disabilities (such as Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) or who were shy. Finally, the caring, committed, and qualified instructors were identified as important feedback to share with other parents. A parent explained that even if the child doesn't realize s/he is learning, in the long run their will be a difference.

Testimonials from parents for the website. Many participants were willing to provide testimonials about the MAMBEC program to include on the website. These statements provided strong messages for other current and potential participants about the impact MAMBEC had upon their families. See Appendix A for all testimonials. One example was from Survey participant #061 commenting,

The MAMBEC program is an integral part of a child's learning. Here they learn about real world issues that they cannot obtain in a typical classroom setting. The instructors understand the children and care about them. This will only benefit them as they progress and grow. This program is essential!

This comment was included in this report as it summarizes very well the positive comments about MAMBEC and its impact upon children within HRM.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The evaluation of the MAMBEC program obtained feedback from 64 participants. Tremendous support was given for the positive impact upon children, especially the life skills and physical training. Parents felt their children were learning important martial arts,

coping, self-protection, and life skills in a safe, supportive, and fun environment. The instructors and peer and adult role models helped to create a space that allowed children to excel. This environment was particularly important for children who may not have previously had such positive experiences. The outcome of the program meant children were better prepared for the “real-world” than others their same age especially due to the combination of life skills lessons and physical training. To improve MAMBEC, parents were interested in more classes and martial arts training, smaller class sizes, and more information for them about the program and life lessons.

Finally, as this evaluation was conducted with parents, it would be interesting to follow-up with opportunities to gather information directly from the children. What are their thoughts on the program and how it is meeting their needs? What are their favourite elements of the program and what might they want to see changed? This feedback would be useful to then compare with parents’ responses for an overall understanding of the program and its effectiveness.



MAMBEC “is the greatest
hour of the week”.

