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Case study

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Community integration and mentorship
for social-emotional learning

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Coaches are the link between an organization and programme participants and they ultimately define the experiences of the children and youth. CoolPlay pays great attention to the selection of coaches to make sure that they have the interpersonal skills and the background to establish a fruitful relation with participants, and understand what they are going through and what they need. Through extended training and monitoring it provides them with the tools and knowledge to be credible positive role models and to support and advise young people.

Overview

CoolPlay provides sessions consisting of a mix of sport and life skills in the most vulnerable and least developed areas of Cape Town. These urban areas and townships are characterized by high levels of violence, both outside and inside schools¹ and low school completion rates.² For example, a survey conducted by several S4D organizations in Cape Town noted that 50 per cent of children reporting that they recently saw a weapon at school. It is not uncommon for girls to be victims of gender-based violence^{3,4} and abuse, while boys are subject to peer pressure to join gangs and are at high risk of becoming drugs and alcohol users. This results in psychological distress in children⁵ (see Figure 1 for overview of the problem CoolPlay addresses).

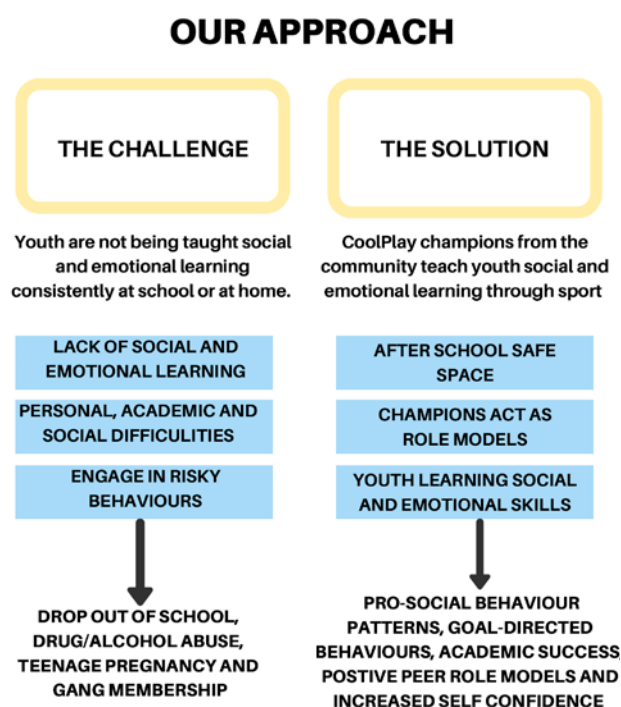
To be in the township you need to have confidence because your peers push you to do the same things that they do; but these kids who go to sessions develop their self-esteem and can make their own decisions.

Coach and teacher

CoolPlay, started in 2010 and partners with primary and secondary schools that are under-resourced and teachers, who have to manage large classes and do not have time to facilitate after-school programmes. So far, CoolPlay is operating in 47 schools and provides trained coaches to these schools to facilitate after-school sessions. Teachers are involved in the sessions and receive training so that they can bring the values of the programme to their regular classes as well. CoolPlay generally runs its activities during school terms, with two to three sessions per week. However, on occasion, if the children ask and there is interest from the team, coaches can organize a 'holiday' version of the sessions, with informal activities that children from all schools can participate in.

For CoolPlay, sport is a means for children to experience different life skills (see Figure 1). It is an after-school S4D programme with an integrated social-emotional learning component. The main sports offered are rugby, which is typically attended by boys, and netball, which is preferred by girls, but every participant

Figure 1: Problem and solution overview

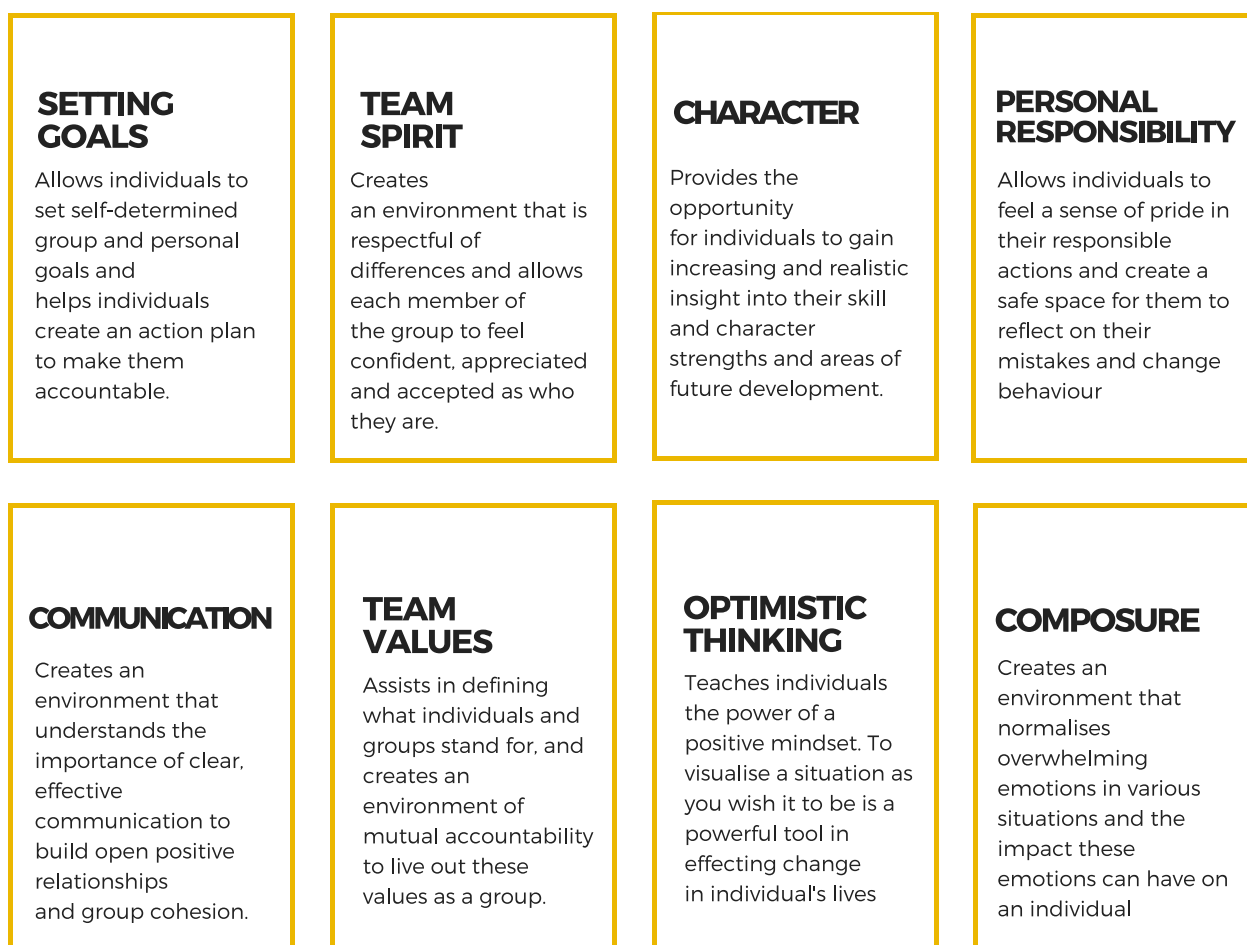


is free to choose which sport to practise, and new sports, like cricket and football, are being added. Each session starts with a check-in with participants, in which the coach can understand how they are feeling that day and children and youth are given the opportunity to share anything they might want to share. The life skills covered by the programme are organized into eight coaching cards (see Figure 2 for topic areas), and the coach can decide each day which card to use without having to follow a pre-set order. Children and coaches can discuss the skills while they play the sport.

Coaches: focusing on the person

Coaches are generally young people with a similar background to the participants. They live in the area of the partner schools and are recruited because they experience the same environment as the children, so the children can better relate to them. They are selected for being passionate about working with children and youth and being interested in personal and social development but there is no prerequisite in terms of sports knowledge as CoolPlay trains coaches on sport and many other aspects (see section 'A good coach'). Coaches work part time with 2–3 groups each. In most cases female coaches facilitate netball while male coaches cover rugby and this tends to match the

Figure 2: Session topic areas



CoolPlay has provided me a platform to become a mentor, I always had the leadership quality, the skill, but before I didn't have a way to use it. Now I can assist young black women in my township.

gender of participants, but mixed sessions are encouraged. The only exception to this is that female coaches are strongly preferred for conducting sessions about topics like menstrual health with adolescent girls. Sometimes graduates from the programme go on to become coaches and are assigned to younger groups to preserve an age gap between them and the participants. Graduates are in a great position to become coaches because having been participants themselves they can understand the children and their experiences better and their relative youth makes them more approachable than older coaches. Overall, it provides credible role models that children can relate to.

A good coach

The coach makes the difference. He or she has to understand the coaching cards, have a good attitude, understand and be able to relate with participants so that they can feel comfortable to talk and share. Coaches have to be role models. As one of the coaches put it, "Kids look up to us, see you on a daily basis, you cannot tell children to do something and in the weekend they see you doing the opposite." As it is not uncommon for participants to live with their grandparents and to lack a parental figure, children can find a 'sounding board' in the coaches. Younger coaches are sometimes seen as older siblings while coaches in their late 30s and 40s can even become parental figures.

All coaches who were interviewed reported that their work can be very taxing emotionally, for example one said "you see a lot of social issues girls are dealing with, you come across abuse or rape stories, or general mistreatment". To deal with such hard realities, coaches find help in the mentoring that is provided by the programme and in the conviction that what they do in the sessions helps the children and youth to learn how to react to such situations. The programme

acknowledges that coaches are also human and have off-days or feel low sometimes. On these days, the session might take a slightly more serious tone.

Despite hearing personal stories from participants and needing to establish personal connections, coaches must remain professional at all times. Some participants need more attention and "more love because they are not getting it anywhere else" but coaches have to find the right balance and make sure that they give attention to everyone. One of the coaches shared that this takes a lot of introspection and that after each session she asks herself questions about how she interacted with participants to see what can be improved. The strong safeguarding training that is given at the beginning provides the framework within which coaches should operate.

Training and mentoring

CoolPlay trains coaches to successfully lead the sessions. This includes training on:

- the sports
- how to facilitate
- how to be a referee
- gender equity and sensitivity training
- life skills (see *Figure 2*)
- workshops on their own social and emotional development
- safeguarding
- hard skills (e.g., computer skills and literacy) on an ad-hoc basis through other providers.

Safeguarding is an extremely important training module. Coaches must know how to react when sensitive situations arise and need to follow the right steps to deal with them. It is prioritized because of the communities that participants come from and the difficulties they face. With little support in communities for mental health, for victims of abuse, and other issues – coaches have to be equipped with the tools to identify problematic issues and to follow the correct channels to refer participants who need additional help to social workers within the schools. The extensive

child protection training received by coaches helps them identify children who may need extra assistance, and they also follow up with teachers to help identify participants with behavioural issues and see if it is indicative of child protection issues.

Considering how important the coach is, a lot is invested in building the resilience and socio-emotional capability of the coaches as adults. If coaches are unable to deal with their own issues it will be difficult for them to show empathy to the children and their problems. To tackle this, workshops about social and emotional learning are organized so coaches can learn how to manage their own emotions before they go out and lead the sessions with children and youth. One of the coaches interviewed shared that before joining CoolPlay he was lacking confidence and couldn't stand up and speak in front of people and share his emotions, but the training he received helped him to overcome this and he is now fully comfortable interacting with participants and leading sessions. CoolPlay also continues to provide mentoring for the coaches who, being able to deal with their own issues, can walk children through the same process. Coaches have chances to debrief with their own mentors, who help them deal with feelings and stress. One of the interviewed coaches noted that these meetings have been helpful to her because she learned how to manage the various sources of stress that she has, such as work, school and personal life, "laying down what your stresses are and identify which ones are worth stressing about".

CoolPlay also helps coaches to make a plan for their lives, to identify objectives and the steps required to reach them. For example, one of the coaches was supported in receiving a scholarship to become a certified teacher. CoolPlay encourages participants to pursue tertiary education and provides mentoring for participants who become coaches so that, after a 'gap-year', they can resume their studies.

What does the programme do for the learners?

Participants of the programme are children and adolescents enrolled in schools in urban areas and

townships in Cape Town. The head teacher of one of the schools reported that "some of those kids don't see a better future. They face poverty, there are gangs, unemployed parents, substandard housing shared with extended families, they don't have their own room where to study and sleep, no money to buy shoes, to play but through CoolPlay the kids see their problems with different eyes." School staff, both management and teachers, observe great improvement in the children who attend the sessions: they learn discipline, they learn to set goals and to work hard, they gain confidence and a sense of belonging and pride for their school and team.⁶ The head teacher also noted that since CoolPlay arrived at the school, enrolment has increased, and children who live far away are more motivated to come to school. However, despite the improvement in life skills that is witnessed by coaches and school staff, there doesn't seem to be a direct effect on academic performance. Nevertheless, "parents are happy because their kids are busy in a programme that also makes them work on themselves and learners get opportunities. For example, one mother said that 'it's the opportunity of a lifetime'". Furthermore, programme staff find that children gain confidence and resilience as a result of the sessions, while those who were shy at the beginning start opening up and expressing themselves after some time.

The programme aims to give children and adolescents the opportunity to access a positive adult mentor and provides a safe space where they can express themselves and find a sense of belonging. The longer a child is in the programme the greater the positive impact, and the majority of children attend regularly and for long periods of time. CoolPlay also tries to ensure continuity with the programme even after transition from primary to secondary school. Indeed, if they operate in a primary school, they also try to cover the secondary schools where children tend to go from there. Attendance and participation can be boosted by making the children feel as if they are being considered and cared for. Coaches keep track of the goals that children set up for themselves, so as to help in achieving them. As of 2021, a leadership programme was launched to help adolescents see paths for their own development after high school.

Relationship building

The organization puts the relationship between coaches and participants at the centre of its programming. This is done through conversations around the coaching cards which are a fundamental part of the methodology. When sessions start with a new group, the first quarter is generally dedicated to making the participants feel comfortable and surer of themselves. After this, the relationship building can take place on a more solid base.

Coaches reported that the best way to get children to trust them and open up is by being open and honest first. “When you keep pieces of yourself from them, they can see that you are not being open”, so coaches find that sharing their struggles and experiences is a good way of connecting with participants. This also gives the coaches an opportunity to show the children how they face and get through certain problems so that young people can see a positive example. Coaches at times go even beyond the programme. For example, one coach reported having a participant from Zimbabwe who couldn't speak Afrikaans and therefore couldn't interact with the rest of the group. The coach started giving him classes twice a week until he got to the point where he was able to communicate with his peers.

As might be expected, it is easier for female coaches to connect with girls and for male coaches to connect with boys, but this is not restrictive. Indeed, one of the female coaches interviewed had recently started following a group of boys in the rugby leadership programme. She explained that once they got to know each other and the boys realized that she was not judging them for their choices, they started to be open. They were even able to discuss how they felt about society's expectation them to be muscular and violent. Further, mixed groups may help the breaking down of gender norms. A male coach reported having a group in which some girls were playing rugby with the boys. At first, the boys regarded girls as weak. He focused the conversation at the beginning of the sessions on making the players understand that boys and girls can do the same things and subsequently reported seeing the boys and girls playing together.

Including families, schools and teachers

Aware that children only spend a limited amount of their time in CoolPlay sessions, coaches strive to know and share in other important environments in the lives of the children, namely their families and schools.

The coaches regularly visit participants at home, to get to know the families and make them aware of CoolPlay and its aims. When possible, coaches stay in contact with parents via WhatsApp, something which proved to be an especially useful during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, during school closures and lockdowns, even if it wasn't possible to conduct regular sessions, coaches shared exercises that could be practised at home with the participants' parents. By staying in touch with the families during the pandemic, it was possible for coaches to identify those that were struggling the most. CoolPlay then looked for a sponsor to help the families most in need.

I hope they see me as a mentor. I am not perfect nor do I try to be seen as that. I hope they see me as an example or a guide out of the township. In the township you hope for a way out and I am on my way out.

Female coach

Collaboration with the schools is crucial for the functioning of CoolPlay, and one of the criteria for selecting new schools for rollout is the willingness of the school management to cooperate. Since it takes place after school, integrating CoolPlay with school activities is fairly easy. While schoolteachers participate in the sessions and receive training, all the planning and reporting is done by the coaches. Teachers work closely with coaches, and since they spend more time with the children, they have more opportunities to talk with them about life skills. This is an additional benefit, as some them decide not to participate owing to other hobbies, lack of interest, or because they live far away and find it hard to remain at school until late. But if their teachers are experienced with the eight coaching cards, they may still be exposed to the programme. One teacher,

who is also a coach, said that he uses the coaching cards also when teaching his usual physical education classes. Further, this engagement of teachers may also provide other benefits. One of the teachers explained that since he started being involved in CoolPlay, there are new dynamics between him and his students, they respect and listen to him more. The programme also gives children who struggle academically a chance to feel that they are capable and valued.

Finally, every few months, tournaments are organized and teams from different schools get to play together. They are held across different areas to raise participants' awareness of people from different backgrounds and communities. These events are an occasion for communities to be exposed to CoolPlay's work. There is generally a positive feedback, with community members coming as spectators and offering snacks to the players. They provide an opportunity for all stakeholders in the process (children, parents, community, teachers, coaches, school leaders) to come together.

¹ Burke, J., 'South African army sent into townships to curb gang violence', *The Guardian*, 19 July 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/19/south-african-army-townships-gang-violence>>, accessed 5 May 2021.

² Sampson, E., 'Exploring the Experiences and Perceptions of Teachers and Learners on The Effects of Sport for Development Programmes on Education Outcomes in Western Cape Schools', master's thesis, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 2019, <<https://open.uct.ac.za/handle/11427/30861>>, accessed 5 May 2021.

³ Wood, Katharine, and Rachel Jewkes, 'Violence, rape, and sexual coercion: Everyday love in a South African township', *Gender & Development*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1997, pp. 41–46, <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/741922353>>, accessed 5 May 2021.

⁴ Forde, S., 'Gender-based violence, gang violence and military deployment in Cape Town', LSE blog, 17 September 2019, <<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2019/09/17/gender-based-violence-gang-violence-and-military-deployment-in-cape-town/>>, accessed 5 May 2021.

⁵ Shields, Nancy, Kathy Nadasen and Lois Pierce, 'The effects of community violence on children in Cape Town, South Africa', *Child Abuse and Neglect*, vol. 32, no. 5, May 2008, pp. 589–601, <<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0145213408000550>>, accessed 5 May 2021.

⁶ See also: Sampson 2019.

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