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## Gymnastics for all in Hong Kong

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### Abstract

This paper aims to introduce the development of Gymnastics for All (GFA) in Hong Kong and to discuss different level of promotion utilizing the Social Ecological Model. The Gymnastics Association of Hong Kong, China (GAHK) has introduced GFA programs in Hong Kong since 1994. Over the years, with the collaborations among GAHK, Hong Kong Government agencies, non-governmental social organizations, and the education and commercial sectors, GFA programs for individuals with different motor abilities and age groups have been organized to promote active lifestyle. Research studies focusing on evidence basis have been conducted to gather information to support the positive benefits of GFA. Program evaluation meetings and participants' feedback have been utilized to gather comments from participants to improve the program design. Sport administrators would understand more about GFA and ways to develop physical activity by the Social Ecological Model.

**Keywords:** Gymnastics for all, general gymnastics, social ecological model

### Introduction

In Hong Kong, more than one-third of adults is overweight or obese. According to the Behavioural Risk Factors Survey 2016, it was found that 38.8% adults were classified as overweight and obese (BMI  $\geq 23.0$ ), including 20.7% as obese (BMI  $\geq 25.0$ ) (Center for Health Protection, Hong Kong Department of Health, 2017a) <sup>[1]</sup>. In addition, 55.9% of adults (48.8% of males and 62.2% of females) do not exercise for at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise throughout the week, or do not exercise for at least 75 minutes of high-intensity exercise, nor achieve a combination of moderate-intensity and high-intensity exercise during the week, which is the recommended adequate-level of aerobic physical activity promoted by the WHO (Center for Health Protection, 2017b) <sup>[2]</sup>.

Physical activity is considered as one out of the ten leading health indicators of the public health (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000) <sup>[3]</sup>. The physical and mental health benefits of physical activity, such as reducing the risk of developing heart disease, diabetes, colon cancer, high blood pressure, breast cancer, low back pain and depression are well documented in the Surgeon General's Report (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000) <sup>[3]</sup> and the 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008) <sup>[4]</sup>. According to the results of the Behavioural Risk Factors Survey, there is a need to develop a long-term strategy to encourage people to engage in physical activity on a continuous basis and develop an active lifestyle in Hong Kong. Therefore, to promote physical activity has become one of the nine goals of the 2025 Action Plan in Hong Kong which aims to reduce the prevalence of insufficient physical exercise among teenagers and adults by 10% (Hong Kong's Food and Health Bureau and Department of Health, 2018) <sup>[5]</sup>. Gymnastics for All (GFA) would be considered as a sport or gymnastics to encourage individuals to take part in physical activity.

GFA is referred to as the "General Gymnastics", which is a discipline of gymnastics under the International Federation of Gymnastics (FIG) and was originated in European countries (FIG, 1989) <sup>[6]</sup>. GFA belongs to the aspect of gymnastics which is leisure-oriented and includes a varied range of physical activities suitable for all age groups and other target groups. People can take part in GFA with and without apparatus. GFA focuses on items that are of particular interest in the national and cultural context, and develops health, fitness, and social integration. People participate in GFA for enjoyment and to maintain and/or improve fitness, thus GFA contributes to physical and psychological well-being.

GFA also offers aesthetic experience in movement for participants and spectators. Events and competitions may also form part of GFA, and the World Gymnaestrada is the sole worldwide event officially organized by the FIG (FIG Technical Regulations on Gymnastics for All, 1992) [7].

### **Development of Gymnastics for All in Hong Kong The Establishment and Take-off Stage in 1990s**

The early stage for GFA in Hong Kong can be traced back to 1990s. Four representatives from the Gymnastics Association of Hong Kong, China (GAHK), formerly known as Hong Kong Amateur Gymnastic Association (HKAGA), attended GFA training courses in Europe in 1993 and 1994. Subsequently, as the United Nations General Assembly declared 1994 as the "International Year of the Family", HKAGA organized the first "Hong Kong Gymnastics for All" scheme with the theme of "gymnastics and family". The program included instructors' courses and training courses. HKAGA also partnered with various Hong Kong Government agencies and other commercial sponsors to promote the GFA to the public.

Contents of the GFA training courses included static stretching exercises, cardiovascular exercise, basic folk dances, chair and floor exercises, sport acrobatics, aerobic gymnastics, artistic gymnastics, rhythmic exercises with colorful balls, ribbons, hoops, and other creative equipment. Parents and children were encouraged to take part in the training courses together. Under this scheme, the first Hong Kong Gymnastics for All Festival was held in 1995. Over 2,500 participants aged from 3 to 80 took part in the festival and this event was a milestone in the history of Gymnastics for All in Hong Kong.

In 1996, the GFA for Older Adults instructors' training course was held. In total 42 instructors had completed the training and actively promoted GFA to older adults in Hong Kong. The number of programs for older adults grew dramatically, numerous training courses, fun days, seminars, and fitness and motor abilities testing sessions were organized. In addition, 100,000 exercise booklets had been published from 1995 to 1999. A video tape was also produced to encourage older adults to take part in GFA as the mode of physical activity. The booklets and video were also distributed to different centers for older adults all over Hong Kong (Cheung, 1997, 1998) [8, 9].

In the "International Year of the Elderly" in 1999, with the support of the Hong Kong Government, a GFA instructor course and ten GFA training courses for older adults were held in each region of Hong Kong, including Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. A total of 532 older adults participated in a 20-hour GFA training course from January to April, 1999. During the courses, older adults were encouraged to create different movement patterns with various apparatus according to their own physical abilities. Their final challenges were to perform their own routines for the public at the first Hong Kong GFA Festival for Older Adults in April, 1999 (Cheung, 1999) [10].

Amidst the rapid growth of GFA programs, scientific research had also been conducted to evaluate the benefits of participating in these programs. Results on the effect of GFA on physical and motor abilities of older adults revealed that after taking part in GFA training courses, older adults had significantly improved in the following physiological fitness tests: dynamic balance, flexibility, steadiness, and half-mile walk (Cheung, 1998) [9].

Moreover, a new Millennium Gymnastics for All Show had

been held with the aim to encourage more citizens to take part in GFA and celebrate the new Millennium. To prepare for this show, training courses in schools and community centers were conducted from June to December, 1999. During the Millennium Gymnastics for All Show, over 1,500 individuals performed GFA with the China National Gymnastics team to celebrate the year of 2000 and GFA has become more popular since then (Cheung, 2000) [11].

### **The Expansion Stage in the 21st Century**

Following the success of introducing and promoting GFA in Hong Kong in 1990s, the strategy for further developing this new type of sport in 21st Century was to expand the programs targeting on special populations and diverse groups as well as expanding its profile from local to international.

#### **Special Population: People with Disabilities**

The success of the new Millennium Gymnastics for All Show in 1999 created enormous public interests in GFA. The GAHK further expanded the GFA programs to the unreached population – people with disabilities. An instructor course called "Gymnastics for All for People with Disabilities" was held in 2000. Concurrently, various promotion materials such as exercise booklets were published for this special group. Subsequently, numerous outreach programs were organized in over 100 community centers for people with disabilities, such as centers for people with intellectual disabilities and hospitals from July to December, 2000.

#### **Special Population: The Early Childhood**

Children in early childhood are the other target group for the development of Hong Kong GFA in the 21st Century. The goal is to provide a systematic development strategy of GFA to the grass root population in Hong Kong. It focuses on a highly structured, accountable and scientific based program.

"The Early Childhood Gymnastics Award Scheme" was created to fulfill this goal. The scheme was funded by the Hong Kong Government through the Quality Education Fund between 2000-2002. This scheme consisted of two kindergarten teachers training courses, physical fitness testing sessions for children, fun days in GFA and the GFA award scheme.

#### **Teacher training courses**

The campaign started with dispatching the promotion material of the "Early Childhood Gymnastics Award Scheme" to local kindergartens. Administrators of kindergartens were invited to attend the introductory seminar of Gymnastics for All Award Scheme and over 60 teachers from 30 kindergartens participated in two GFA training courses. The duration of each course was 22 hours. The course contents consisted of introduction of GFA, fundamental motor development for children, physical fitness testing, gymnastic movements with ball, hoop, rope, and scarf. Teachers were encouraged to utilize gymnastic movements and created their group routines in GFA at the conclusion session of the course. Questionnaires were administered to gather feedback from the participating teachers. The findings revealed that teachers complimented the new and creative components of the scheme and expressed the interests to learn more gymnastic movements.

#### **Physical Fitness Tests**

Physical Fitness Tests of children were conducted at 8 kindergartens by the Department of Physical Education of

Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU). Fitness testing items consisted of height, weight, body mass index, percentage body fat, waist and hip measures, sit-and-reach test, standing long jump test and stroke balance test. It was recorded that 680 children including 337 boys and 343 girls participated in the physical fitness tests and the physical fitness profiles for 3 to 6 years old boys and girls in Hong Kong were developed.

### **Fun Day in Gymnastics for All**

Two fun days were conducted for children in this program. The first fun day was organized as part of a session of the Hong Kong Gymnastics Festival at the Hong Kong Coliseum. Over 500 children participated in this event and the number of spectators was about 8,000. The second fun day was held at Indoor Games Hall and over 300 individuals participated in this event. Physical fitness tests and GFA try-out session were conducted for both children and parents for introducing the knowledge of GFA, fundamental motor skills, and physical fitness.

### **Gymnastics for All Award Scheme**

The “Gymnastics for All Award Scheme” provided a challenge to children’s fundamental motor skills and gymnastic skills with ball, hoop, rope and scarf. It offered children the opportunity to set a personal goal and achieve it. Meanwhile children were able to familiarize with their body movement and gymnastics abilities. There were three levels of Award – Bronze, Silver, and Gold Awards. Certifications were given to children who had successfully performed the stunts at each specific level. Within two years, over 2,700 Gymnastics for All Awards had been issued. In addition, about 30 participating kindergartens also received funding to purchase gymnastics equipment and over 4,000 booklets were distributed to parents to facilitate the latter to learn the concept of physical fitness and active lifestyle through GFA (Cheung, 2002, 2003a, 2003b) <sup>[12-14]</sup>.

### **Program Evaluation**

Questionnaires were delivered to 28 kindergartens to collect the views and feedback of the Early Childhood Gymnastics Award Scheme. Results showed that: a) the children liked the movements, b) this program could improve children’s physical fitness, coordination, body posture, self-confidence, and c) children could also practice some of the exercise at home. Kindergarten teachers also shared their difficulties related to the implementation of GFA programs. The challenges included the lack of equipment and space in school setting, and the insufficient support of administrators, which indicated that more teachers’ training courses should be conducted in future.

Furthermore, the second scheme “Development of Generic Skills in Gymnastics Project” was funded by the Quality Education Fund from 2004-2005 which focused on the development of generic skills: communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking skills through GFA (Cheung, 2005) <sup>[15]</sup>. The Early Childhood Gymnastics Award Scheme was well received that led to the implementation of a new policy. Today the Leisure and Culture Service Department, the Department of Health of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Government (HKSAR) jointly organize the GFA training courses for kindergarten teachers with GAHK in order to promote active lifestyle to children in Hong Kong.

### **Highlight of Gymnastics for All for Older Adults in 21st Century**

Corresponded to the Chief Executive of HKSAR Policy

Address 2006, Hong Kong Government’s Healthy Exercise for Longevity Project, Hong Kong Gymnastics for All for Older Adults Leader training courses were conducted and training courses were organized at numerous centers for older adults. The aim of the Healthy Exercise for Longevity Project was to motivate older adults and their families to participate in physical activity and cultivate a healthy lifestyle. Over 80 non-profit social welfare organizations and national sports associations participated in this city-wide project in 2007-2008. As it turned out, the GFA for Older Adult became one of the highlights of the Hong Kong Government’s Healthy Exercise for Longevity Project. GFA was ranked as the second most popular activity and received numerous compliments from the participants of the whole project in terms of its venues, event management and overall performance. The participants of the Annual Gymnastics for All Festival for Older Adults increased rapidly and the oldest participant in 2011 was 107 years old (Cheung, 2007, 2008, 2012, 2017) <sup>[16-19]</sup>.

### **Unified Gymnastics For All**

In order to promote social integration among young people with and

without disabilities and encourage them to participate in physical activity together, the Unified GFA program was designed for children with and without intellectual disabilities (ID). There were 97 mainstream students (40%), 106 special school students (44%) and 40 student helpers of HKBU (16%) participated in this program and the total number of participants was 243. This project provided a platform for students to perform basic gymnastics movements together, at the same time to socialize, understand individual difference, and experience inclusion in their community. In addition, the project provided a training opportunity for coaches and university students to learn to lead inclusive activities. Moreover, the mainstream students could also learn the basic concepts of individual differences before they interacted with students with special needs. Two GFA fun days were held in a University campus, students of the participating mainstream schools created the GFA routines with students of the partner schools for ID, and the student helpers of HKBU. The development of the unified gymnastics for all program would be an exemplar for the Special Olympics Hong Kong, the mainstream and special schools on the promotion of inclusive physical activity and education (Cheung *et al.*, 2018, Cheung, 2018, Cheung 2019) <sup>[20-22]</sup>.

### **International Cultural Exchange**

One of the elements of GFA is the national and cultural context. In order to achieve this, GFA experts, namely Ms. Margaret Sikkens Ahlquist, GFA President of FIG, and Mr. Araki Tatsuo, GFA President of Asian Gymnastics Union had been invited to conduct the GFA instructors training courses in Hong Kong. The GAHK hosted the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Asian Gymnastics Festival in 2005 and 2010 respectively in Hong Kong. Participants from Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Uzbekistan, and China took part in the events. In addition, the Hong Kong GFA team took part in the World Gymnaestrada in Austria. Participants were from different countries with different cultural background who shared their cultures and values through GFA. Moreover, representatives from the GAHK also took part in GFA Colloquiums to exchange ideas and knowledge in the promotion of GFA. GFA would be a means to enhance global and intercultural understandings and world peace.

## Discussion

The Social Ecological Model is utilized to discuss the promotion of the GFA in Hong Kong. This model states that behavior is affected by and affects multiple levels of influence, namely: macro-, exo-, meso-, and micro-, which describe influences as intercultural, community, organizational, and interpersonal and individual (McLeroy *et al.* 1988) [23].

At the micro-level, the intrapersonal influence, GFA program allows an individual to perform according to his/her own ability. Everyone can achieve his/her goal, and there is no right or wrong action. Individuals can have fun and achieve a feeling of success in this activity. This would enhance self-esteem and self-confidence of the participants (Cox, 2012) [24]. In order to encourage individual to participate and to enhance motivation, the GAHK designed the award scheme which is a good means to encourage continuous participation by setting individual goals, thus can uplift the motivation level of participants.

At the meso-level, the interpersonal influence, participants can share ideas in the course of performing a GFA routine or choreography. The highlight of a GFA program is the group GFA performance. Participants also are encouraged to take part in the annual GFA Festival to showcase their stunts with teammates. This experience can foster creativity, enhance communication, collaboration skills of the individual and cultivate a sense of teamwork.

At the exo-level, the institutional/organizational influence, the GAHK works closely with social service organizations, education and commercial sectors in order to increase opportunities for participants to take part in GFA programs at the settings of kindergartens, schools, universities, NGO, elderly centers, workplaces and churches. With the partnership of different institutions and organizations, the GFA programs are reached to participants of different age groups and abilities.

At the macro-level, the government's public policy is essential to the promotion of GFA. The GAHK designs new GFA programs based on the government's policies and has been receiving supports from the government of the HKSAR for the development and promotion of GFA, which in turn encourages active lifestyle and the well-being of individuals. Lastly, through research, evidence is provided to support the positive benefits on mental and physical health through participating in GFA. Furthermore, project evaluation by questionnaires and interviews would gather participants' feedback that would help enhance and improve future GFA programs. Research and program evaluation focused on evidence basis are vital to the success for the development of GFA.

## Conclusion

GFA is utilized, not only to encourage individuals to take part in physical activity through the sport of gymnastics, but also to offer a wide range of activities for individuals with different abilities and of different ages. In addition, since GFA involves national and cultural contexts, it would help promote social integration and intercultural understanding. It also fosters creativity and cultivates aesthetic experience through participating in physical activity.

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