



Research Report on the Social Impact of partnering with community leisure centres

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

To redress inequality in opportunities for people with Down syndrome to participate in dance and fitness classes by exploring an operating model suitable for sustainable replication throughout Victoria.

WHAT WAS INVOLVED?

- Based on an identified need for e.motion21 programs, this research explored the potential for e.motion21 to partner with community leisure centres such as the YMCA, to use their facilities as a sustainable model for replication across Victorian communities.
- The social impact of partnering with community leisure centres was examined by surveying and interviewing e.motion21 participants and families, volunteers, teachers and YMCA staff and members.

WHO DID WE SPEAK TO?

- 17 parents (mainly mothers) completed an online survey
- Responding parents were aged between 39 and 66 years of age and had been attending e.motion21 classes with their child between one and six years. The ages of the e.motion21 participants ranged from 11 to 29 years, with more parents of boys (67%) responding than parents of girls. Parents from six of the nine e.motion21 venues responded to the survey.
- 10 e.motion21 staff, 4 YMCA centre managers/staff, and 6 YMCA members completed an online survey
- 14 telephone interviews were completed with parents and staff

WHAT DID WE FIND?

- Most parents viewed holding classes in a community leisure centre as a positive experience for their child and for the parents themselves.
- But some parents and volunteers preferred a more exclusive environment where they felt the focus was on their child and not always on advocating for inclusion.
- The social connections established through e.motion21 were considered extremely important for the children and their parents
- On the whole, parents were satisfied with the venues, although a strongly recurring theme was a desire for a location for parents to sit together and socialise while their child was engaged in classes.
- The views of parents about access to community leisure centres was mainly favourable, but this was not a consensus.
- For example, one father commented:
“I never really liked [the] recreation centre. So public access, I don’t really care... I don’t see that doing dance classes...that I should be having to do public advocacy as well, you know, that we keep our lives together might just be enough.”

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- In contrast, one mother commented:

“The dance classes are currently in a community facility and I think that promotes social inclusion...for 12 years or so my son attempted what we call day programme, [which] can be very isolating...so this [current class] is in the community and my other children [can] attend. And indeed while we’re sitting here, people go in and out of marital arts classes, other dance classes”.

- Dance instructors, volunteers and community leisure centre members and managers were mainly positive about the use of community leisure centre facilities by e.motion21 participants.

- One instructor noted:

“we got a lot of feedback early on from [community leisure centre] members...saying it was great seeing our participants in our t-shirts and being part of it”; and in relation to non-community centre venues “the negatives [are] that it is stuck within that disability sector and that disability world and we’re not seen, or a part of the community and we’re not engaging with community and it’s not inclusive.”.

- One volunteer, however, was not as positive about the community setting:

“I understand the strategy behind having a venue that’s out in the general community so that our dancers are part of the wider community. But I don’t feel that there is any direct benefit from that to them or for others seeing [that] children with a disability can be part of a broader environment.”

IN SUMMARY

- There was a mix of positive and negative views across parents and volunteers about the benefits of holding e.motion21 classes in community leisure centres.
- It was clear that the classes provide for many parents an opportunity to be social, and several described these moments as ‘brief respites’ that give them a break from carer duties. These social aspects should not be overlooked as parents are the gatekeepers responsible for driving their children to and from the venues and without their support the participants would be unlikely to get to class.
- One mother described her responsibility for her child as being ‘joined at the hip’. For some parents, the classes were an opportunity to relax and they did not want to be constantly needing to advocate for inclusion. Mostly though, parents were favourable of having the classes located in community settings and emphasised the benefits of social inclusion.