

SpaceRacing on planet Earth

Increasing participation in physical activity through community sport and active recreation

This project is part of a VicHealth funding program known as PICSAR, which aims to increase participation levels in community sport and active recreation among people with disabilities and those from low socio-economic, Indigenous and new-arrival communities.

The organisation

Orienteering Victoria (OV) is a sporting association of 11 clubs, with seven based in metropolitan Melbourne and four in rural and regional Victoria. It encourages and promotes orienteering as a competitive sport as well as a recreational and educational activity. It also respects, conserves and maintains, by whatever means practicable and expedient, the forests, parks and other outdoor areas where orienteering may be conducted.

The project

This project is part of a four-year VicHealth-funded 'Linking Project' undertaken by Orienteering Victoria to try and link participants of school and community orienteering into local orienteering clubs and mainstream orienteering events.



Four *SpaceRacers* blaze a trail to the next 'space station'. Image courtesy of Neil Barr for Bendigo Orienteers.

School children embrace open spaces

The story

SpaceRacing has become a hit sport with school children in the Bendigo area. Despite connotations of astronauts and aircraft, this activity has the participant's feet firmly planted on Earth. *SpaceRacing* is a modified version of orienteering especially developed for primary school-aged children.

OV has been working with schools for a number of years, mainly using the school grounds as a course with occasional visits

to nearby parks. OV's project officer, Jim Russell, has worked intensively with several local schools and found that while there was great enthusiasm for the sport this wasn't translating into new club members.

Local club Bendigo Orienteers started thinking of ways of making the sport more attractive to school children and their families. Their hope was to increase participation in the sport and as a result increase their membership base. From this, Saturday morning *SpaceRacing* was born.

More information about Participation in Community Sport and Active Recreation (PICSAR) is available on the VicHealth website at: www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/picsar

The basic aim of orienteering is to find your way through bushland, forest or urban streets, by using a map and compass to tick off one control (checkpoint) after another in the shortest possible time.

SpaceRacing's modifications make it a safer and more attractive orienteering option for children and families. These events are only ever run in safe spaces and parks with clearly defined boundaries. Participants are never required to cross a bitumen road and all activities are done in pairs. Working in pairs helps to build confidence and a team ethic. The course time is restricted to half an hour and participants are scored by the number of controls they successfully reach, rather than time taken.

SpaceRacing is especially attractive to children as it employs up-to-the-minute electronic technology instead of the punch cards which are common with orienteering. A 'space key' is fitted to the child's finger which has to be inserted into a 'space station' (the control) once it has been reached. Sometimes GPS technology is also used. Data from this is downloaded into a computer after the event, which enables the children to see where they went and how their journey compared to other participants.

OV recognised the value of parents to both support their children's participation and as potential members themselves. To encourage parental participation, the club runs a 'Kids Rules' day where the children participate with a parent or adult and show them what *SpaceRacing* is all about. As *SpaceRacing* is held at a different location each week, the club is totally dependent on the parents' enthusiasm. Not having their support can impact on the sport and its sustainability.

The club also actively encourages and supports its members to undertake Working with Children Checks to increase the number of adults available to take part or assist with the implementation of the event on the weekends.

Mindful of the fact that primary school children often lose enthusiasm for the sport once they get to secondary school, Bendigo Orienteers is also exploring ways of engaging secondary school students.

"We need to lift the bar with older kids. We need to work out how we accommodate that step from safe parks to forests and bushlands with young people who aren't adults yet. We have started mapping some 'safe' areas for this transition. They are forest areas but they have clearly defined boundaries," Jim explains.

Promoting *SpaceRacing* in orienteering publications has resulted in interest in the program from across Australia. Initiatives that engage children are very attractive to other clubs. The recruitment of children is an essential strategy for the sustainability of all sporting clubs and orienteering is no different.

Orienteering Victoria's work with the children in the Bendigo area appears to be gaining a healthy momentum. Jim is particularly proud of a local school he has worked with for a considerable time.

"Eaglehawk North Primary School became very involved and enthusiastic about orienteering from day one. They recently came second in the Victorian Primary Schools Western Zone Orienteering Championships. They 'lost' to a school that has had a very long history of orienteering. Just to get to the final was a great buzz for the Eaglehawk kids. Their physical education teacher told me that coming second to that school was just like coming first!" Jim says.

For more information on
Orienteering Victoria go to:
www.vicorienteering.asn.au
Email: voa.netSPACE.net.au
Telephone: (03) 8846 4140

PICSAR

Sport and active recreation organisations are well placed to assist VicHealth in addressing the health inequalities that result in poorer health outcomes for many groups in the community.

They have a tradition of providing opportunities for individuals and groups to:

- participate in physical activity,
- connect with other members of the community,
- feel part of their local community, and
- develop knowledge and skills that can be used in a range of contexts.

The Participation in Community Sport and Active Recreation (PICSAR) Program comprises three funding programs:

- State and Regional Grants
- Active Participation Grants
- Active Club Grants

The first two programs are long-term investments that work with State Sporting Associations, Regional Sports Assemblies, statewide peak agencies and regional organisations to increase participation in physical activity in specific target populations.

A learning snapshot from the independent evaluation being conducted by Monash University/ARTD Consultants shows that:

1. partnerships are perceived as beneficial to program delivery
2. it is important that staff (paid or voluntary) have the required skills to implement activities
3. sports at all levels should consider adapting policies and activities to provide greater flexibility to promote inclusion.