



PLAY (Positivity, Leadership and Activated Youth) is a program designed to enhance the resilience and wellbeing of young people

A case study from Gateway Health's Health Promotion Team

Aim	To increase physical activity through leadership in schools.
Rationale	<p>Playtime experiences for students of all ages are essential, not only is it a source of physical activity for a generation of young people growing up in front of a screen, but it is also essential for the development of social skills, cognitive development, and academic achievement (Mulryan-Kyne, 2014). Learning through play helps children to develop and build relationships, it also allows them to learn how to share, to resolve conflicts and teaches them group skills (Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012).</p> <p>Having no friends, being ostracised, and lack of play equipment are some of the problems facing students during recess and lunchtime (Evans, 2007), the PLAY program helps to bridge this gap, it brings older and younger students together, whether they already have friends, or have no friends, it allows all students to begin building relationships with their peers, which in turn helps them begin to build resilience. Ginsburg (2011) describes resilience as the capacity to rise above difficult circumstances – an ability to recover from setbacks.</p>
Partnerships	<p>Resilient Youth Australia West Wodonga Primary School St Augustine's Primary School St Monica's Primary School City of Wodonga Deakin University La Trobe University (Wodonga) Charles Sturt University (Albury)</p>

Links to local policy/ initiatives	<p>Gateway Health – Integrated Health Promotion Plan 22-25</p> <p>RESPOND research project – Deakin University</p> <p>Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Outcomes Framework</p>
Resources	<p>Resilient Youth Australia PLAY training & resources – guidelines and games directory</p>
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To increase quality physical activity during school break times • To strengthen relationships between staff, students and the school community • To build senior student’s leadership skills in organisation, management, teamwork and communication
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 145 primary school students trained as PLAY Leaders • 6 school staff in 6 participating schools trained as PLAY Coordinator’s • PLAY games run by PLAY Leaders post training with estimated coverage of 1600 students participating across the 6 schools • PLAY leaders involved in other leadership opportunities in participating schools following the training • Funding grant from City of Wodonga for 3 additional schools to be trained in late 2024 • Additional partnership activity with 3 PLAY trained schools agreeing to run Student Voice Project using Group Model Building with senior students

The story

PLAY (Positivity, Leadership and Activated Youth) was a recommended intervention for schools from the RESPOND Wodonga Group Model Building community workshop.

PLAY (Positivity, Leadership and Activated Youth) is a program designed to enhance the resilience and wellbeing of young people. The program is an adaptation of Play at Lunchtimes (PALs) developed by Andrew Delaney for delivery in UK schools. It has been adapted by South Australian Department of Education and Resilient Youth Australia.

The PLAY program fits under the umbrella of positive psychology as it takes a strength-based approach to its training and outcomes focus on building resilience. These are some of the key concepts underpinning positive psychology which focuses on the positive events and experiences in an individual's life such as positive traits, like resilience, and on building individual strengths (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

PLAY is an ideal program that promotes leadership and strengthens connections between students while at the same time increasing physical activity. It allows greater leadership opportunities for students outside the traditional school leadership roles of and sports captains.

Resilient Youth Australia deliver a full one-day training program at each participating school for up to thirty (30) Grade 4/5/6 student leaders. Through the program training, school Student Leaders learn how to facilitate safe and fun games for other students, including younger students, at school during lunch times and recess throughout the year.

The outcome of PLAY training is that the PLAY student leaders will develop the confidence to continue running the PLAY program to their peers and younger students during lunchtimes and other break times under the guidance of PLAY school coordinator and dedicated teachers.

Resilient Youth Australia state that the PLAY program benefits the student leaders who go on to run the PLAY program by building their empowerment and responsibility. Other students who engage in the activities also benefit as it gives them a sense of belonging, they learn the importance of positive values, and it also reduces the incidences of bullying.

What did we achieve?

145

145 primary school students from six schools trained as PLAY Leaders

6

Six school staff in six participating schools trained as PLAY Coordinators

6

Six schools continue to run PLAY games facilitated by PLAY trained student leaders

3

Three of the PLAY schools were recruited to the student leadership project (school GMBs) in late 2024.

6

Six school staff trained as PLAY co-ordinators across the six schools

2025

PLAY was registered as a program on the Victorian Department of Education's Mental Health Menu for 2025

What difference did we make?

Post training surveys in terms of student confidence and skills from the training post showed that:

- 96% of students reported they strongly agreed or agreed that they had the confidence and skills to run PLAY in their schools
- 99% of students reported they were excited about being a PLAY leader

In terms of school ongoing commitment all 6 schools have continued to support the PLAY program and PLAY leaders in their schools in 2023 and 2024. Each school has a reducing pool of trained Play leaders, due to graduation of Year 6 students for up to 3 years.

In terms of additional outcomes/ learning opportunities the schools reported that the PLAY leaders had also taken up additional leadership opportunities including:

- Co-facilitating fortnightly 'sports foundation' classes with class teacher
- Contributing to a student developed children's rights charter for the school

This positive outcome was due to the schools recognising and utilising the PLAY leaders increased confidence and skills beyond the PLAY program.

The relationship has strengthened between the participating schools and Gateway Health and has led to further partnership activity. 3 of the schools participated in the Student Voice project (using Group-Model Building) in late 2024 - May 2025. The GMBs with senior students will explore ways to strengthen student voice within their school which is a school priority for the next couple of years.

A deeper dive

The issue of sustainability and the role of partnerships.

Over the last two years Gateway Health has been working on a local sustainability strategy that would enable PLAY / PALs model to become locally designed, delivered and coordinated. This would make the program available in the medium /long term to schools across Albury Wodonga and potentially further into regional areas. It would link different parts of the system allowing for adaption and alignment between and within organisations.

Initially Richmond Fellowship through Aligned Leisure, who operate the Wodonga Sports and Leisure Centre, had agreed to deliver the PLAY training through its Dual Diploma of Sports Leadership and Sports Management course. In 2022 however, Richmond Fellowship withdrew as a training provider and the course is no longer offered locally. This model would have provided a locally delivered free PLAY program including recruitment of schools and ongoing support.

In late 2022/ early 2023 GH began discussions with Charles Sturt University (Albury) through its Allied Health and Exercise & Sports Science Schools on their interest in developing a training program based on PLAY, utilising students as trainers and recruiting schools to the program. Despite initial interest they were unable to commit to developing the training module in the short term due to reduced staffing but committed to recruiting CSU undergraduate students to attend RYA training and to support schools in 2023.

In 2024, we began talks with La Trobe University (Wodonga campus). While interested in the project for its potential partnerships with schools, increased community participation opportunities for students and curriculum alignment, integration of PLAY as a placement activity for students, LTU were quickly able to identify some barriers:

- PLAY if made available across La Trobe University would need to be adapted to different undergraduate courses available on any specific campus
- Changes to curriculum would require considerable time and resources at the front end particularly the design phase.
- Education students who were the most likely group to be part of PLAY model have begun prioritising public schools for their student placements because there is funding of student placements in government schools. This would leave nongovernment schools without easy access to PLAY.

Mental Health Menu

We have concluded the local sustainable model for PLAY detailed above with the recent decision of the Victorian Education and Training to list PLAY as an approved program .

In late 2024 the PLAY program was registered as a school intervention for the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) Mental Health Menu . Public schools can now access the program using their dedicate Mental Health Menu grants. This provides a sustainable model for PLAY for new schools and current PLAY trained schools.

Recommendations & next steps

PLAY is an ideal program that promotes leadership and strengthens connections between students while at the same time increasing physical activity. It allows greater leadership opportunities for students outside the traditional school leadership roles of and sports captains.

Next steps:

1. Promote Mental Health Menu to schools for funding PLAY
2. Identify members of the multicultural community to provide cultural games training to PLAY schools.
3. Identify additional local schools to participate in the Student Voice project in 2025