

Starfinder Foundation  
Qualitative Program Evaluation

Spring 2017

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### **Introduction:**

The Starfinder Foundation is a soccer youth development organization in Philadelphia that aims to help youth to develop soccer skills, leadership skills, and academic skills. Through after-school and summer programs, Starfinder has the mission to “enhance the personal growth of underserved youth through soccer and learning experiences that engage, inspire, and motivate.”

Up2Us Sports conducted an external evaluation of the Starfinder Foundation program in May 2017. The evaluation design is a qualitative study comprising focus groups with four different groups of youth participants (two male groups and two female groups). The evaluation sought to answer the following evaluation questions:

1. What are the most significant ways that the Starfinder program helps youth participants?
2. To what extent does participation in the Starfinder program contribute to positive changes in the three program pillars of interest (academics, health/fitness, and leadership skills) in youth?
3. To what extent does participation in the Starfinder program contribute to the development of “High Impact Attributes” in youth?
4. What are some ways that the Starfinder program can continue to improve?

### **Evaluation methods:**

The evaluator conducted four semi-structured focus groups with youth participants over two days at the end of the spring program. Question prompts can be found in appendix 1. All youth who were present at program activities on the chosen days were included in focus groups, but youth were instructed that they did not have to participate and did not have to answer any questions they didn’t want to answer. Youth identifying information was removed from all transcriptions and quotes to ensure confidentiality.

### **Key findings:**

What youth participants like about Starfinder

When asked to talk about what they consider to be the highlights of their experiences of being in the Starfinder program, participants talked the most about relationships within the program and also about specific activities and games.

Many participants mentioned making friends, meeting new people, working as a team, and supporting and encouraging each other as highlights of the program. One male participant said the following:

“The highlight of the program I guess would be coming to practice and like having fun with everybody here. And kind of like connecting on that really high level... We come together as a group like a family. There's this huge bond we've all got with each other, so it's the highlight of the program.”

Some of the activities and games that participants considered to be highlights were Starfinder Olympics, soccer tennis, the spider web game, International Day, the pajama tournament, and graduation activities. Several participants also mentioned the program in general being a highlight as well as winter

or spring leagues. Additional highlights that participants brought up included the environment in general being really positive and the soccer skill building that they got at the program.

Similarly, participants were asked about what makes them want to be part of the Starfinder program. The top three responses were the people, the environment, and the soccer. These were the most common responses among both male and female participants. One male participant gave the following explanation:

“Most of the time when I'm done with school I have nothing to do and coming here and being with all of these guys, it's really encouraging and it also helped me with my leadership skills and also helped me develop my soccer skills... it's a fun place, but it's also a place that helps us to grow as people.”

Many participants expressed that their original motivation to come to the program was mostly driven by the desire to simply play soccer and stay in shape in the off-season. Several people were surprised that they got much more than just the chance to play soccer out of the program. The strong relationships and skill building outside of soccer were unexpected but appreciated outcomes of participating in the program.

#### Ways that Starfinder helps young people

Participants were asked to speak about the ways that they benefit from being in the program and what changes they have seen in themselves and their teammates because of Starfinder.

#### Program Pillar: Academics

Participants mentioned many ways in which Starfinder helps them to be more successful at school. The most common response for how Starfinder impacts their ability to succeed at school was that it requires them to improve at time management. Participants mentioned the need to balance schoolwork with time spent at the program and to plan ahead to ensure things get done. Some participants felt like it is too difficult to prioritize homework completion when getting home late after practice, while others felt like they were less prone to procrastination while participating at Starfinder. Several people mentioned that their grades had improved since joining the program and that they have lots of support available when they need it as well as motivation to get good grades. A few people also mentioned that they are more likely to participate in class after being in the program. Aspects of the program that participants felt contributed to these improvements were the tutoring, mentoring, SAT help, and college visits. One female participant described the academic benefits in this way:

“Sophomore year is way more difficult than Freshman year was, so I would expect my grades to be suffering more, but they are better than they were last year at this time. And I think it's just because the mentor meetings we have and stuff and the constant thought of setting goals is in your head from Starfinder.”

Some participants did express that they thought that the policy around grades was too strict and that participants should have more say over if they want help improving their grades or are satisfied with their current grades. This response came primarily from male participants.

#### Program Pillar: Health and Fitness

When asked about the ways that the program impacts their fitness and health, many participants felt that they were in the best shape during their school soccer season but that Starfinder was a good way to stay in good shape during the off-season. The primary reason for this was the difference in frequency of practices in the school season versus the Starfinder program. Several participants felt that the Starfinder program helped them to build stamina, improve speed, or build strength. A few participants felt that there is even more that can be done to build fitness or specific types of strength. A few participants expressed that running as a team is beneficial but that it should not be used as a punishment. One female participant had this to say about the way her fitness had improved:

“Before I would be, after a couple of sprints, I would be winded. But at this point I know that if I put my mind to it, I know I can do more... because you can't just stop sprinting, because then it affects the whole team. So you have to keep going. And when you keep going you realize, ok yeah I can do this.”

#### Program Pillar: Leadership

When asked about ways that the program helps participants in general, one of the most common responses was that it helps them to be more comfortable talking in front of people or interacting with people. Similarly, when asked about leadership skills specifically, one of the most common ways that participants felt they had improved was in communication skills. The following two quotes expand on these ideas:

“I used to be really really quiet. I wouldn't talk to anyone. I wouldn't be the first person to go up to a person and talk to them, and I wouldn't be able to speak even to this small group of people. And like now I can speak in public. It doesn't really bother me to speak to new people and make public speeches.” –Female participant

“Well communication is a big part of being a leader. It helps you talk out loud and talk in a big group and lead somebody. I think those are skills you can use out on the field because a team is built out of communication, so if we don't have it you don't have a team. And it's really useful outside as well like at a job or at school or whatever, you need to communicate. You can't just stay quiet all of the time.” –Male participant

Other leadership qualities that participants mentioned improving on were how they carry themselves, being empathetic toward others, and being able to listen to others' ideas. A couple of participants felt that they had personally not improved in this area because they had not taken advantage of some of the opportunities available at Starfinder to show leadership. Participants mentioned leadership sessions

where they are able to act out skits and practice implementing the skills they learn about as impactful in helping them in this outcome area.

### High Impact Attributes

Another goal of the Starfinder program is to help participants to develop positive attributes that can carry over from soccer to their lives outside of sport. Several of the “High Impact Attributes” or HIAs (for more information see here: [https://up2us.site-ym.com/page/HIA\\_survey\\_info](https://up2us.site-ym.com/page/HIA_survey_info)) came out in responses from participants when discussing things they have gained from being part of Starfinder. The first attribute that came up very frequently is pro-social connections, or having positive relationships with peers and adults that reinforce healthy behaviors. Both male and female participants brought up positive relationships frequently. One female participant described it this way:

“It's comfortable... I feel like, well I specifically, I don't feel like judged here. And the coaches, they seem to understand. But they seem very helpful and it feels like they only want the best for us. So it's kind of like a comfortable environment and plus everybody that you get to know is real friendly and you can joke and make new friends.”

Another HIA that emerged in the focus group discussion was that participants gained a positive identity from participating in the program, particularly through improvements in self-confidence. Similarly, many participants mentioned gaining social confidence (the ability to speak and act how you want to in front of peers) from the program. This is illustrated in the following quotes:

“I'm not very confident when I'm meeting new people, and so this program has definitely helped me in the sense where I've been able to open up to people. And outside, I've been able to open up to people more so.” –Female participant

“I think this program for anybody that like came into Starfinder any quiet or shy or embarrassed or insecure or stuff, anything like that, I think that Starfinder helps them get through that. And if they're quiet, they come out of Starfinder able to communicate better. So I think that's like a big help for some young people who are just coming to Starfinder.” –Male participant

Participants also mentioned improving in “future focus” (the ability to prioritize goals for the future and work toward those goals) through mentor meetings and with support for looking ahead to and planning for college. Lastly, there was some mention of improving in self-awareness during program participation. Some participants spoke about better knowing how they can work within a group and take on the role that works best, and one participant spoke about being able to control his temper better due to help with strategies to process emotions from one of the coaches.

### Soccer skills

In addition to all of these youth development outcomes, many participants also reported improving in their soccer skills due to participating in Starfinder. One participant described his soccer skill improvement in this way:

“I have also been struggling to get on the varsity team for my school. And I've been training, but I didn't think my training was really effective, that it wasn't really doing anything. But there were coaches here that gave me some advice and some of the drills that we did here, I do them on my own time at home, so I think that really helped.” – Male participant

### Key program elements

Throughout the focus groups, participants were asked to articulate the specific aspects of the program that contribute to all of these positive outcomes outlined above. The participants spoke a lot about the coaches at the program along with the specifics of the program activities and environment.

Overall, youth participants felt strongly that the coaches at the program were one of the best parts of being at Starfinder. The two things that came up the most frequently were that coaches were motivating and that they are easy to talk to. Similarly, participants spoke about the coaches being similar to a friend in that they are relatable and approachable. Several people also mentioned that coaches are strict when it's appropriate during practice. These thoughts are summarized in the following quote:

“I love the coaches here. They are so funny. Like they can be your friend before practice, and you can just like talk to them. Which makes it easy if you have an issue. Like you have a bunch of people you can go talk to. I would be comfortable talking to any of the coaches about a school problem or anything that I have. And then they're like fun, but then they get serious during practice. And they make it serious so then you're working hard. And they get on you if you're not working hard, which is good... So they keep it serious during practice, but they are really good people and they've created a system that we have to talk too.” –Female participant

While a majority of participants felt that coaches were easy to talk to, there were a few mixed feelings about being able to talk to all coaches. A few people mentioned that certain coaches are more difficult to talk to and there was some debate among participants about whether or not the organization has policy that limits the amount that coaches can talk to participants about personal problems.

In addition to the coaches, participants often mentioned that they gained things from the program because of the structure where they are meeting new people and in a supportive environment. They also mentioned many of the specific activities like mentoring, tutoring, team time, drills, and focus fuel being the reasons why they saw a variety of positive changes. These feelings are illustrated in the following quotes:

“Our mentors, they help, like every month we have meetings. And we set goals for ourselves and by the next meeting we should have reached that goal or at least come close to reaching it.” –Female participant

“Here, it's just a positive environment and if you mess up, people understand and you get feedback and you get the chance to improve and make up for your mistakes. And I think that's a great environment that Starfinder has. And that's like one of the reasons I enjoy coming here. Because not only can I play soccer but I can improve and also mess up at the same time.” –Male participant

### Areas for potential improvement

In addition to providing lots of feedback on ways that the program is successful in helping young people in the various areas of interest, the participants also provided their thoughts on ways that the program can be even better. When asked specifically about the coaches in the program and any things they wish the coaches would do differently, the two most frequent responses were that many felt that coaches should not use running as a punishment while others felt that coaches should be more strict. Notably, the feeling that running should not be used as punishment came primarily from female participants while the feeling that coaches should be more strict and “yell more” came from male participants.

When asked about improvements to the program in general, the most popular response was that the program should provide food for participants. Additionally, many felt that there should be a more strict process for joining the program and/or higher behavior standards for those in the program. The other frequent response was that the cohorts should be mixed up more and given the chance to get to know each other more intentionally and mix skill levels more. Other less frequent responses included that there should be more trips, that the program should be more flexible about timing to accommodate different school schedules, and that there should be more “flex days” available to participants. Despite these various suggestions, the overwhelming feeling from participants was that Starfinder is a great program that they are benefiting from being a part of.

### **Conclusion:**

In summary, based on a series of focus groups conducted in the spring of 2017, the evaluator found Starfinder to be an effective program in many aspects. Starfinder provides youth participants with a positive environment where they can play soccer, build positive relationships, and learn vital life skills. While improving in their soccer skills and gaining or maintaining physical fitness, they also learn things that will carry over into their academics and positively impact their health and ability to act as a leader. The Starfinder coaches are a large reason why the program is so successful, along with the environment and specific activities. The program appears to make a big positive difference in the lives of youth from all over Philadelphia by providing invaluable resources that would likely not otherwise be available for these young people alongside a true support system of peers and positive adult relationships.

## Appendix 1: Focus group prompts

**Youth focus groups: Spring 2017**

Thanks so much for talking to me today. My name is (facilitator's name) and I'm here to ask you all questions about the Starfinder Foundation program. I want to learn from you what it is like to participate in a program like this one. Your parents have given permission for you to talk to me, but if at any time you feel uncomfortable answering a question or being here, you always have the option to choose not to participate.

I also want you to know that we are recording your voices and writing notes, which a few people from the organization I work for are going to listen to. Even though we are recording this session, we won't know who said what when we listen to it again. You should feel free to be completely honest and know that people like your coaches aren't going to know what you say. We are interested in what a bunch of people in this program have to say, so we'll be talking to several cohorts and looking at the answers together so that we can learn from everyone's experiences.

Does anyone have any questions before we get started?

Ice-breaker: Go around the room, and ask each participant to share their best moment or highlight from being in the Starfinder program.

1. Tell me about this program. What makes you want to be part of this program?
  - o What made you want to first sign up for this program?
  - o Why do you keep coming to this program?
  - o What do you like about this program?
  - o How do you feel when it is time to come to this program? Why do you feel like that?
  - o What is your favorite part of being part of this program?
2. What are all the ways this program helps kids?
  - o Why are these things helpful?
  - o Which of these helpful things happened to you or has happened to your teammates?
  - o What is it about this program that makes it helpful in that way?
3. Can anyone share a story of how you personally have changed since you started coming to Starfinder?
4. Has anyone learned something by being part of this program that they have been able to use in their life outside of the program?
  - o What did you learn and how did you use it?
  - o How did this program help you to learn that?



5. After participating in this program, how do you feel about your physical health or your fitness?
  - How does that compare to how it was before you started in this program?
  - Would you say that being part of this program has helped you to be healthier? If so, how? If not, why not?
  - What have you learned at Starfinder that can help you to live a healthy life?
6. After participating in this program, how do you feel about your academics?
  - How does that compare to how you felt about academics before you started in this program?
  - Would you say that being part of this program has helped you to be more successful in school? If so, how? If not, why not?
  - What have you learned at Starfinder that can help you to be successful at school?
7. After participating in this program, how do you feel about your leadership skills?
  - How does that compare to how you felt about your leadership skills before you started in this program?
  - Would you say that being part of this program has helped you to be more of a leader? If so, how? If not, why not?
  - What have you learned at Starfinder that can help you to be a leader?
8. Tell me a little about your coaches at Starfinder. What are your coaches here like?
  - How would you describe your relationship to your coaches here?
  - What are your coaches really good at?
  - What do your coaches care about most?
  - What kinds of things do you usually talk to your coach about?
  - Does your coach help you learn skills you can also use in school, at home, or in your neighborhood?
  - Are there any things you wish your coaches would do differently?
9. If you were in charge of this program, what would you do differently?
  - If you could change one thing about this program, what would it be?
10. Is there anything else that I haven't asked you about that you want me to know about this program? Is there anything that we should've talked about that we didn't get to yet?

(Note: not all follow-up questions were included in every focus group based on timing and the topics already covered in previous questions)