

News

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16

Teens taught to shoot for stars

RONAN O'CONNELL

The 16-year-old Aboriginal boy smiles broadly as he makes a startlingly honest admission.

"If I wasn't here right now I'd be getting drunk and that and getting in trouble," Kookie Garlett says, watching his friends as they play basketball at Swan Park Leisure Centre.

The teenager is one of the success stories of the centre's Midnight Basketball program, designed to keep local youths off the streets on Saturday nights.

Kookie said he had barely missed a night since the program started in Midland two years ago and it had allowed him to make new friends and steer clear of unwanted police attention.

Sports Minister Terry Waldron said the program, which also runs in Armadale, had helped reduce the number of children from the two areas being picked up by police under the Northbridge curfew over the past two years.

In the first six months of this year, police had picked up just 51 children from the Armadale and Midland areas, compared with 100 in the same period of 2009.

Program co-ordinator Griffin Longley said it revolved around basketball tournaments, but also saw the children take part in team-building exercises, life-skills seminars and group meals.

It aimed to engage local youths aged 12 to 18 and provide them with a diversion from crime, drugs and alcohol abuse.



Positive program: Kookie Garlett, youth worker Mark Hardwick and Timmy Yorkshire discuss game tactics. Pictures: Simon Santi

"A lot of these kids don't want to be at home at night because things are pretty bad with their parents so they just end up roaming the streets, which inevitably results in them getting into some sort of trouble," Mr Longley said.

"It's amazing how once they

spend a bit of time here involved in the program they seem to relax a lot more and show much less anger."

On the night *The West Australian* visited the leisure centre, Australia's most decorated basketballer Luc Longley, Mr

Longley's brother, was leading the kids through some team challenges.

Despite having won three NBA championships playing alongside Michael Jordan for the Chicago Bulls in the mid-1990s, Longley was an unknown to the children.



Opportunity: Kookie in action.

But the respect they showed him as he explained the exercises highlighted the value they place on being involved in the program. Misbehaviour is not accepted.

Outcare youth worker Mark Hardwick said he had been shocked by the transformations of some of the children.

"If you give these kids the choice of doing something positive, then most of them will basically grab that opportunity and will actually become better kids," he said. "One thing they do get here is really positive adult role models and we sort of try to set examples for them."