

Les parcs et loisirs peuvent contribuer à aider les gens à devenir plus actifs physiquement et donc, plus sains. Amener la population à être active et préoccupée par la crise au niveau de la santé (notamment concernant le phénomène d'obésité) en Amérique du Nord sont d'importantes contributions que les loisirs publics, les parcs, les sports et les organisations peuvent offrir.

Les parcs et les espaces ouverts dans les villes peuvent être des lieux publics qui offrent un territoire équitable et démocratique afin de promouvoir l'activité physique. Bien que les possibilités de loisirs au Canada et aux États-Unis aient été commercialisées et mises à disposition par le secteur privé, les parcs publics et les programmes de loisirs sont un « bien public ». La valeur des parcs et des loisirs dépendra, dans l'avenir, de l'articulation et de la documentation faites des avantages d'un mode de vie actif et sain pour tous les résidents de la communauté: « cela commence dans les parcs ».

Parks and Recreation, Health, and Active Lifestyles

Lack of exercise along with poor nutrition and smoking are among the top three modifiable risk factors for chronic disease and premature death according to the World Health Organization. The connection between physical activity and health has been well documented. In North America, in particular, growing concern exists regarding childhood obesity and the rising rates of inactivity among all populations. In both Canada and the US, improving physical activity levels has been consistently identified as a top public health priority. Parks and recreation are a key means to enable citizens to be active and to address healthy living.

Public parks and recreation programs exist in most cities in Canada. The purposes of these programs are to provide safe, healthy, reasonably-priced, and meaningful recreation and park opportunities for local citizens. These local agencies are often the most visible link to all community residents including children, youth, families, people with disabilities, and older adults.

Just participating in sports, outdoor activities, and other active recreation pursuits does not lead directly to good health. That active involvement, however, promotes physical activity, stress reduction, and a sense of enjoyment, which can lead to healthier individuals and more livable communities (Godbey & Mowen, 2010). In many ways, leisure pursuits are an important way to promote health and prevent cardiovascular as well as other diseases. Therefore, public parks and recreation organizations should be considered an essential part of the health care system.

Beyond Personal Motivations to Social Ecology

Some people are personally motivated to exercise and be active. However, although most people know that healthy living is good for them, they are more likely to be active when they are in environments that nurture this activity. Public health professionals have adopted a systems approach to examining health behaviors such as smoking and being physically active. Social ecological systems refer to people's relationships with their physical and sociocultural environments. The general thesis of ecological models of behavior is that environments restrict or discourage some actions and promote or

encourage other behaviors. In essence, people are more likely to be active if they have opportunities easily available to them. If people do not have places and spaces to be active, they are less likely to be active regardless of how motivated they might be.

An overemphasis on psychological and educational approaches to physical activity promotion has dominated the leisure and sport literature until the past ten years. The personal message in many ways has been “just do it.” This focus on individual behavior is important, but it may present only part of the picture regarding how people can be encouraged to participate in outdoor, sport, or recreation activity. Ecological efforts can add explanatory value beyond the personal factors that influence people’s involvement and participation in physically active recreation.

The social ecological approach to healthy living generally addresses other areas in addition to personal motivations and constraints including interpersonal and social support, community and organizational settings and amenities, and public policy. Therefore, individual constraints and motivations for physical activity can be better understood by examining the social, physical, and political environments in which people live.

Personal and Social Environments

At the heart of leisure behavior lie the notions of meaningfulness and enjoyment. Active lifestyles are more likely to occur when people find their involvement to be fun. Perhaps the one attribute that makes public parks and recreation different than all other public services is that the focus is on the enjoyment of meaningful activities. Recreation providers can help promote the idea that having fun and being physically active can be complementary. Not everyone, such as some government officials, appreciates the emphasis on enjoyment. Certainly parks and recreation professionals additionally have emphasized instrumental benefits they provide such as stress reduction and positive youth development. However, these outcomes occur through the modality of fun. People who find an activity enjoyable are likely to repeat the activity. Therefore, the focus of parks and recreation organizations is on helping people find enjoyable activities that will promote their mental and physical health.

For many individuals, being active is more likely to occur in the social presence of other people (The

Community Guide, 2011). This observation is particularly true for many women. Social environments address two dimensions. One aspect especially among women is that having a leisure partner is essential for perceptions of safety as well as opportunities to find encouragement and to socialize while also being active. Walking groups for women, for example, have been successful in many communities. A second dimension relates to social support. Individuals often need to feel that others such as family members and work colleagues support and encourage their physical activity involvement. Further, what an individual does is shaped by the cultural meanings of activities as well as social interactions. Thus, when physical activity is considered, the social context regarding relationships, roles, and cultural meanings comes into play. In most cases, community environments can encourage social interactions and active living.

Community Environments

Leisure research about physical activity in recent years has centered on what environmental conditions are necessary to contribute to participation and enjoyment. Researchers have shown that the design of communities and the presence of parks, trails, and other public and private recreational facilities affect people’s abilities to reach the recommended levels of physical activity that lead to good health (Godbey & Mowen, 2010). Parks and recreation programs and areas in community settings can encourage physical activity if they are designed and maintained with accessibility and people’s interests in mind. Further, community recreation and park providers must assure that opportunities are available to all people regardless of demographic characteristics. Health disparities sometimes associated with gender, race and ethnicity, and social status may be exacerbated if opportunities to be physically active are not made available to all through community recreation and park planning.

Parks offer a unique outdoor community setting. Being outdoors is strongly correlated with being physically active. Individuals can be active in indoor places such as fitness and sport centers, but the outdoors is often an important motivator for activity. Researchers have confirmed that the presence of trees and grass is related to greater use of the outdoors, more social activity in the outdoors, better mental health, and the possibility of more walking. Studies also have shown that proximity to parks and open spaces is usually highly associated with more

physical activity if the outdoor spaces are perceived as safe and well maintained. Communities should be designed so that all people have a park/trail within at least one mile (or less) of their residence. Further, access to attractive large public open spaces is associated with higher levels of walking.

The outdoor environment that is available through community parks provides exposure to nature and greenery. The outdoors can facilitate opportunities to teach children, in particular, about biophilia or a love for the outdoors contrasted to biophobia, which is a fear of the outdoors. Louv (2005) in his book, *Last Child in the Woods*, provided a compelling argument for the need for accessible outdoor opportunities especially for children.

Sports in community programs also offer the potential to promote physical activity. However, research has shown that men are more likely to participate in sports in the US and that children's participation in youth sports does not necessarily mean they are more physically active or more fit. Free play may lead to higher levels of activity for both boys and girls than formal competition opportunities. Parks and recreation can offer both the structured as well as unstructured opportunities for play.

Beyond the physical activity health dimensions of community parks and recreation, the Trust for Public Lands (2011) also identified benefits of parks such as reducing urban sprawl, providing places for community gardens, reducing air pollution, and global warming, and reducing accidents and mental stress. These benefits are clearly linked to health.

To summarize aspects of parks and recreation as community environments that facilitate physical activity and health, several points can be emphasized. The idea that "if you build it, they will come" may not be as simple as it sounds. First, in addition to design, programming and staffing are important components regarding how parks and recreation facilities are used. Programs and events are often important catalysts to bring people to parks and recreation facilities. Second, partnerships are essential for creating interest in the use of parks and community recreation facilities. The future opportunities regarding public parks and recreation will likely be directly related to the extent of the collaborative and cooperative formal and informal agreements that can be developed in communities. Finally, social marketing is a necessary area that

may help promote parks and physical activity in the future, but much is yet to be learned about the potentials of social media.

Policy Considerations

Policy applications and implications are a key ecological piece of positioning parks and recreation as an environment for active and healthy living (Mowen & Baker, 2009). The most important policy concern is to assure that parks and recreation programs are financially resourced and supported. Budgets are always tight in communities and many services are necessary. However, parks and recreation are not just amenities but also necessities. Therefore consistent and sustainable funding must be a priority policy.

Other policies relate to the placement, location, and design of park and recreation opportunities. Priorities should assure that parks and recreation facilities are available to all people and that they are distributed equitably in communities. Policy issues may also relate to program design and implementation. These programs from a policy perspective should address all community members including individuals who sometimes are overlooked such as people with disabilities, lower income families, and older adults. Further, as noted previously, policies in communities should acknowledge the centrality of partnerships, collaborations, and sponsorships with other governmental agencies, the not for profit sector, and private businesses and industries. The days of operating alone are past and the future of livable communities will be a result of strategic community partnerships. Citizen advocacy will be essential to ensure that appropriate policies are adopted and implemented.

Conclusions

Parks and recreation can contribute to helping people become more physically active and thus, healthier. Getting people active and addressing the health (i.e., obesity) crisis in North America are important contributions that public recreation, parks, sports, and leisure organizations can make. Parks and open spaces in cities can be public places that offer an equitable and democratic venue for promoting physical activity. Although recreation opportunities in Canada and the US have been commercialized and made available through the private sector, public park areas and recreation programs are a "public good." The value of parks and recreation for the

future will depend on articulating and documenting the benefits of active and healthy living for all community residents—“it starts in parks.”

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