

Physical Activity within a Comprehensive School Health Model

POPULATIONS WITH ADDITIONAL BARRIERS TO PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Comprehensive School Health is an internationally recognized framework for supporting improvements in students' educational outcomes while addressing school health in a planned, integrated and holistic way. It is not just about what happens in the classroom. Rather, it encompasses the whole school environment with actions addressing four distinct but inter-related pillars that provide a strong foundation for Comprehensive School Health:

- social and physical environment
- teaching and learning
- healthy school policy
- partnerships and services

In Comprehensive School Health's holistic approach, physical activity is broadly defined and includes not only physical education classes but also daily physical activity programs, intramural programs/clubs, interscholastic sports, walk-to-school programs, ride-your-bike-to-school programs, classroom walking programs and other programs or activities organized by schools or through community partnerships that get students and staff moving.



Physical activity: *any body movement of skeletal muscles (i.e., muscles that attach to bones) that uses energy.*

Public Health Agency of Canada

Physical inactivity is an issue for all Canadian children with the majority of Canadian youth between the ages of 12 and 17 not active enough for optimal growth and development¹. However, there are a number of sub-populations where there are additional barriers and concerns.

ABORIGINAL YOUTH

Physical activity levels of Aboriginals have traditionally been very high. However, over the years, these levels have decreased significantly² and the majority of Aboriginal youth do not meet the recommended guidelines for physical activity³.

Aboriginal youth are more overweight, have higher levels of type II diabetes and are less active compared to non-Aboriginal youth^{4,5,6,7,8}. Aboriginal youth who are physically active and whose diet is nutritious are less likely to have suicidal thoughts⁹.

First Nation adolescent males and females prefer different types of physical activity. Participation in traditional physical activities, outdoor activities, team sports and/or activities of greater intensity are preferred by First Nation males, whereas individual activities of more moderate intensity and/or household chores are preferred by First Nation females¹⁰. Therefore, it is important that these preferences are considered when developing strategies to increase physical activity within a Comprehensive School Health approach.

Adolescent males are more likely than females to be members of sport teams or participate in sport and/or physical activity lessons on a daily basis (36.8 percent for males and 27.9 percent for girls)¹¹.

Recommendations from the 2002/03 First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey (RHS)¹² to increase physical activity opportunities identify the need for various social and health service agencies that serve Aboriginal families to address community issues more holistically. For example:

- establishment of partnerships between schools, churches, recreation providers, police and Aboriginal community organizations; and
- more effective use of existing school facilities – schools should become community centres that are always accessible for Aboriginal youth.

FEMALE ADOLESCENTS

Participation in physical activity and sport has been found to increase self-esteem, which is a growing concern among female youth. Active female youth typically have¹³:

- higher levels of self-esteem and improved physical health
- lower levels of depression
- decreased levels of stress
- lower levels of disturbed sleep
- decreased feelings of loneliness

Despite the many benefits associated with physical activity, the rate of participation by female youth remains low and decreases with age¹⁴. There is a dramatic drop off between grades 6 and 10. Females who are inactive as children and adolescents are less likely to be physically active as adults¹⁵.

If a female does not participate in sport by the time she is 10 years old, there is only a 10 percent chance she will be physically active when she is 25¹⁶.

A British Columbia study found that once physical education classes become optional, only 10 percent of female high school students enrol¹⁷.

In 2006, the Nova Scotia Department of Education published a report highlighting promising practices related to increasing female youth participation in physical education. These promising practices included¹⁸:

- a variety of course options that have a focus on lifelong activities
- the use of community resources and facilities as a part of the course
- student involvement and choice related to the content of the course
- student centred assessment and evaluation
- additional options such as certification (e.g., fitness leader)
- a focus on personal health and fitness
- the option for gender segregated activities
- the opportunity to develop physical activity skills and physical literacy

This report also stated that research has shown that when females discuss values related to physical education they consistently report the importance of an environment where respectful behaviour is expected of all participants (e.g., providing a safe and inclusive environment) and a positive social atmosphere where the focus is on having fun.

NEW CANADIANS

Youth who have recently immigrated to Canada are less likely to participate in organized sport compared with youth born in Canada¹⁹ – particularly if English is a second language. Challenges related to participation identified by Canadian ESL students include language difficulties, unfamiliarity with activities and other commitments[®].

The 2001 census indicated that the percentage of foreign-born Canadians was at its highest (18 percent) for 70 years. Since 1996, one-third of new Canadians have been younger than 25.

It is important that we continue to further understand the barriers and facilitators new Canadians experience in relation to participation in physical activity and sport. Particularly, a deeper understanding of new Canadians' experience within the school context is needed because this context can provide a sense of community and inclusiveness for these youth as they transition into Canada.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Although the research is plentiful on the benefits of physical activity for people with disabilities, there are more barriers to participation for this population. Children and youth with physical disabilities are less likely to be included on traditional sports teams. In addition, students with disabilities in rural areas and in smaller Canadian towns and cities are not provided with or exposed to physical activity opportunities (e.g., wheelchair basketball, goal ball, sledge hockey).

Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are the most common support within school systems for Canadian children and youth with disabilities. The purpose of the IEP is to describe a special education program and/or service required for a particular student and to identify learning outcomes that are a modified/alternative to curricular expectations. IEPs for physical education/physical activity should be developed.

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