

Family Access to Municipal Infrastructure for Leisure: Young Children (FAMILY)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Project Team

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Introduction

Strathcona County aims to maximize recreation facility use and increase the variety of physical activity opportunities year-round by considering social inequalities in the access and use of these spaces. Working in close partnership with Strathcona County Recreation, Parks and Culture department, and Family and Community Services it was identified that Strathcona County is particularly interested in understanding the unique supports and challenges that low-income families experience when accessing local recreation facilities.

Issues

Regular physical activity during early childhood is critical in maintaining a healthy, active lifestyle later in life.^{1,2} Despite the many health benefits of physical activity and active play, Canadian children are not meeting physical activity guidelines.³ One third of Canadian children are overweight or obese⁴, spending only four hours per week participating in active play.⁵ Examining how young children's active behaviours are affected by opportunities in their community environment (for example, green spaces, indoor recreation facilities, playgrounds, and outdoor swimming pools) can provide insight in to how to increase physical activity at this critical developmental stage.

Purpose

Building on the gaps in current research and community identified needs, the purpose of this project was to understand the facilitators and barriers that parents/guardians of young children (ages 3-5 years of age) with lower income experience when using (or attempting to use) public indoor recreation facilities and outdoor spaces in the community.

Approach


We employed a Photovoice approach to learn more about parents' experiences when trying to encourage their children to be physically active and play in Strathcona County. This community-based participatory research approach uses a combination of photography and discussion, which enables researchers and policy-makers to see through community members' eyes the facilitators and barriers to engaging in healthy, active behaviours.⁶


Selected Findings

Overall, participants presented a consistent message regarding the facilitators and barriers of engaging in recreation (indoor and outdoor) in Strathcona County. They emphasized the importance of physical activity and the accompanying physical, mental, and social health benefits. As a means to achieve this, participants often advocated for the value of unstructured, free-play time and the opportunity to engage in free-play in the community, both indoors and outdoors. Generally, participants admitted to being less active outdoors during the winter months due to amenities being closed, poor lighting, and fewer outdoor activities to choose from.


Participants highlighted that Strathcona County feels like a safe community, and appreciate the many resources and opportunities for recreation offered by Strathcona County. Specifically, participants recognized the value of the Recreation Access Program for facilitating access to recreation facilities and the accompanying recreation program subsidies. However, it was heard that there are cultural barriers preventing new Canadians from participating in recreation, including lack of awareness of safety provisions (e.g., lifeguards and lifejackets at swimming pools) provided by facilities.

“When we had one car, I visited Kinsmen Leisure Centre less often. I mean I could take the bus, but in the winter time it’s hard.”
– Participant 7





“The kids are excited to go to the park, but we can’t stay for very long because once the sun starts going down, it gets dark.” –Participant 4



“I haven’t used the Fun Factory [at Millennium Place], because the hours are terrible. They’re not open on weekends, which is hard for single moms like myself who don’t have the opportunity to get out during the day.”
– Participant 8

Implications

The impact of this research is already being felt locally in Strathcona County, and will continue to influence recreation planning in Alberta, as well as other Canadian communities focusing on access to recreation for preschool-aged children. Strathcona County has begun to address many of the issues raised by participants, and is eager to work across departments in considering the broader community environmental barriers that families with preschoolers face when trying to engage in physical activity. The project team is currently undertaking a rotating community exhibit of the Photovoice findings to engage families, community leaders, and policy makers in Strathcona County around issues of access to recreation. Further, the findings from this Photovoice project will also be used to inform decision making for Phase Three of the Open Space and Recreation Facility Strategy (OSRFS), impacting the ability of future generations to increase physical activity and active play in their community.

This project demonstrated that community residents feel that financial support and free access to recreation facilities, as provided by the Recreation Access Program, positively increase accessibility to indoor recreation facilities year-round. This model can be replicated by municipalities across Canada, with evidence from Strathcona County supporting the benefits of financial support for recreation in contributing to preschool-aged children's early childhood development. This project reinforced that simply investing at the programming level, facilities can accommodate low income families with preschoolers by considering flexible program scheduling, a measure that does not require financial investment but has large implications on the ability of families with preschoolers to engage in recreation programming. Through this project, it is clear that simply investing in the physical infrastructure for recreation facilities is not enough; cost of access, programming, and the surrounding community environment (e.g., social opportunities or public transportation) all implicate recreation facility use.

References

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