

## Active Living: Making It Easy and Popular (In Other Words: People Want to Be Active, But May Find It Difficult)

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According to surveys, almost half of Canadians are “on their way” to becoming physically active (Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute, 1995). While they are likely to see the health-related or other benefits of an active lifestyle, some may lack the necessary “willpower” to incorporate physical activity into their daily lives. Others may not see being active as a priority. Still others will encounter unexpected barriers that, unless overcome, can prevent them—sometimes permanently—from taking the “first step” towards an active lifestyle.

Bill Smith, from the Academy for Educational Development, summarized social marketing and behaviour change approaches as making things “fun, easy and popular” (Smith, 1999). This idea is part of creating social and physical environments that support active living. In creating these supportive environments, we go beyond just urging people to “be active,” to actually helping them to become and stay active.

The Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute (1996) listed the most common barriers (as reported by Canadians) to active living:

- lack of ability and skills;
- lack of access to information;
- inconvenient programs and services;
- not enough/ill-suited programs and services;
- cost of programs and services;
- lack of social support;
- unsafe environments;
- lack of proper maintenance of facilities.

### Creating Environments that Encourage Activity

Many inactive Canadians intend or want to be active. But they face either real or perceived barriers, such as the ones outlined above. By understanding these barriers, we can begin to help inactive Canadians to act on their good intentions. Below are three concrete examples of these barriers.

Bicycling is a fun and popular activity. Sixty per cent of

Canadians would like to bicycle more. But 53 per cent of Canadians believe that cycling is dangerous because of vehicle traffic (Go for Green, 1999). Our programs and services need to deal with this perceived barrier.

We lament the alarming implications of physical *inactivity* among our children and youth, e.g., the hours they spend in front of televisions and computers. Yet we do little to address parents’ perceptions of the outdoor environment as insecure or unsafe. Although abduction is the greatest fear of parents, traffic injuries are the leading cause of serious injury and death among school-aged children and youth (Go for Green, 1999).

Walking remains the number one activity choice of Canadians. Encouraging people to walk around the block as a first step to active living seems simple enough. But when the sidewalks are covered in snow and ice, older

Canadians and those with other physical restrictions can be confined to their homes for weeks. In addition, 25 per cent of Canadians are afraid to walk in their neighbourhood at night (Statistics Canada, 1995). Barriers such as these keep some Canadians from participating in even basic and popular physical activities.

The following are some practical ideas for making your physical activity event or program “barrier-free.”

### Location, Location, Location...

*When urban functions exist within a reasonable distance from each other, there is more likely to be an “active” response from the user (Sherwood & Bradshaw, 2001).*

You might host activities that use facilities located close to target audiences in order to shorten distances and encourage participants to walk, cycle, or use public transit (be sure to provide information on bus routes or shuttles). Since we want people to integrate active living into their daily routine, we need to encourage travelling by active forms of transportation. Neighbourhood-based programs also increase opportunities for social interaction and ongoing participation.

Convenience is important. Along with distance, consider the time constraints on today’s families. Scheduling activities in locations that are complementary to other family activities increases the likelihood of participation. Use community schools, places of worship, and locations near workplaces, shopping, and other daily destinations.

### Social Networks: Making Active Living Popular

*The sociocultural environment is a determinant of health and physical activity (Health Canada, 2001).*

If you are aiming to convince a segment of the population to become active or to participate in your programs, find out which friends, family members, or others have the most interpersonal influence. Ask these influencers both to encourage your audience to become active and to reinforce positive behaviour.

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Social norms are another very powerful way of promoting active living. Showing people that most people in their community are active may encourage them to become active themselves.

Since people seek out opportunities to establish social networks, locating active living opportunities near community meeting places—outdoor markets, community centres, shopping malls, cafés—increases the likelihood of participation. By providing spaces and opportunities for people to socialize and interact, we can position active living as a social tool for community building.

Neighbourhoods with high-density housing, such as high-rise apartment buildings, require special attention and effort in order to engage residents. High-density areas usually produce reduced social interaction and less active living. The availability of communal or public spaces and parks is vital to encouraging recreation and social activities in these areas (Oldenburg, 1989).

### **Safety and Attractiveness Count**

*An environment that is unsafe, polluted, or unattractive will not induce active living lifestyles (Sherwood & Bradshaw, 2001).*

To promote a safe and attractive environment:

- ensure a clean, safe, chemical-free environment that is appropriate for the activity;
- plan a “barrier-free” environment for *all* potential participants, regardless of age or ability;
- encourage participants to use safe routes to events or programs, including dedicated bicycle lanes and sidewalks that are continuous, well lit, well maintained, and visible.

Over the longer term, advocates of active living increasingly need to point out the relationship between the built environment and the lifestyles of that environment’s residents. We can work together by making the health and urban planning fields and the public aware of how the built environment positively or negatively influences healthy lifestyles.

### **Conclusion**

As decision-makers, professionals, and leaders working at the local level, consider the implications of policies and actions related to physical and social environments. Wherever possible, work with people who can make changes to the physical and social environments in your community. These people can help remove some common barriers or make it easier to integrate physical activity into all aspects of our daily lives.

For more information on retrofitting physical environments, visit [www.goforgreen.ca](http://www.goforgreen.ca). To find out more about SummerActive 2001, visit [www.summeractive.canoe.ca](http://www.summeractive.canoe.ca).

*Citation references for this article are available on request or from the Alberta Centre for Well-Being web site ([www.health-in-action.org/Well-Being](http://www.health-in-action.org/Well-Being)).*

### **The Benefits of SummerActive**

SummerActive is an ideal opportunity to promote policies and programs that make active living fun, easy, and popular. SummerActive can be an ideal time to:

- advocate, announce, or show the progress of policies and programs that remove some of the most common barriers to active living in your community;
- promote the concept that everybody’s first step to getting active is different (e.g., talking to a health professional or physical activity expert, is a first step for many people);
- combat the myth that getting started on regular physical activity is hard;
- advocate for new, value-added partnerships to address common barriers to physical activity in your community;
- organize physical activity opportunities and demonstration events that call attention to common barriers and offer solutions to these barriers;
- take advantage of tools and information about proven approaches and strategies for addressing common barriers faced by different population groups in your community;
- highlight physical activity participation rates in your community;
- involve community groups that have a strong and positive influence on your audiences in the planning and delivery of your SummerActive activities.

### **About Us...**

The Alberta Centre for Well-Being has been providing information to Alberta practitioners, researchers, and organizations since 1989.

The Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks & Wildlife Foundation supports the work of the ACFWB through base funding and specific project funding.

Alberta Health and Wellness and Health Canada support associated projects.

The ACFWB is affiliated with the University of Alberta Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation as a research centre.

The ACFWB has four main objectives:

- conducting and disseminating research on physical activity;
- educating practitioners and organizations about health in the context of active living;
- strengthening networking opportunities for Alberta health promotion practitioners;
- informing practitioners about physical activity resources.

ACFWB services and resources include:

- over 25 research reports;
- resources on older adult physical activity, including the video and discussion guide *Acting Our Age*, and the Ever Active Adults course for activity coordinators in Alberta seniors' lodges;
- resources on workplace active living in Alberta, including a needs assessment report and a program standard and audit tool (forthcoming).