

WellSpring

Supporting the Physical Activity Needs of Women of Low Socio-economic Status

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The Issue: Physical Activity and Low Socio-economic Status (SES)

Since 2000, more municipalities across Canada have been offering targeted programming and scheduling for families, women and low income groups.¹ But did you know that women in disadvantaged circumstances—including immigrant women, multicultural women, low-income women, and single-parent mothers—report that they do not receive enough information about local opportunities for physical activities and sport?

These disadvantaged women may have different attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours



toward physical activity and sport than women in the mainstream culture. For example, a particular culture may find it unacceptable for women to temporarily remove themselves from the obligations of family and work in order to exercise.² As a result, they may not be sure of how to build physical activities into their lives.

What's in This Article for You?

- The Issue: Physical Activity and Socio-economic Status
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The Response: CAAWS Focus Groups

In 2008, the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) hosted a series of focus groups for female health promoters and mothers of low socio-economic status (SES). The mothers included multicultural, new immigrant, and aboriginal women, as well as unilingual francophones living in anglophone communities. In the focus groups,



the mothers shared their insights and experiences about physical activity throughout their lives. They discussed the barriers that prevented or limited them from participating in physical activity opportunities throughout their lifespan as well as within their communities.

What Was Heard

Over a two-month period, focus groups were held in communities across Canada. At these events, the project researchers spoke with low SES mothers about a range of topics related to physical activity. Here is what they heard.

Defining physical activity

Focus group participants were asked, “What does physical activity mean to you?” Three key themes emerged.

1. Physical activity means physical movement and involves a range of activities, such as caring for and playing with children, on-the-job activities, leisure-time physical activities and exercise.
2. Physical activity is about overall health—both mental and physical. Participants spoke about stress reduction, time for oneself, improved self-esteem, weight loss, improved energy levels and healthy aging.
3. In the Aboriginal and multicultural immigrant focus groups, women reported that physical activity provided a sense of social acceptance and inclusion.

Physical activity includes activity that is part of our daily life. Activity around the household, work activity—mopping the floor, cleaning, cooking, washing, looking after the baby.

Immigrant mother, Calgary.

Physical activity trends

For many of the mothers, sport and exercise participation peaked in their school years. In particular, they were most involved in sport activities in high school.



Household chores and child care are the most common daily physical activity throughout adult years. Walking is the most common form of exercise in the adult years.

Physical activity levels

Low SES mothers who work outside the home have consistently higher levels of physical activity than mothers who are not employed. Both working and non-working mothers spend similar amounts of time on household and caregiving activity, activities of daily living and sports and exercise activity; however, mothers employed outside the home also take part in work-related physical activity.

Physical activity is about . . . mind and body. When you walk, you have more energy. It's a feel good thing; sometimes when you're not fit, you may go in depression. [sic]

Immigrant mother, Ottawa

Barriers and Challenges

The women in the focus groups identified many barriers affecting their ability to become, and remain, physically active. Some of the most common barriers mentioned were:

- financial (e.g., child care, transportation, program costs)
- social (e.g., lack of flexible programming, discrimination, social exclusion)

- physical (e.g., lack of sport skills, body weight/body image concerns)
- cultural (e.g., language barriers, lack of awareness, lack of social and family support systems)

Possible Solutions

So what can you do to support the physical activity needs of low SES mothers in your community? Here are some of the solutions proposed by the disadvantaged women and health promoters in the CAAWS focus groups.

Education and awareness

- Take steps to educate disadvantaged women in your community of the benefits and importance of physical activity to women's health.
- Encourage mothers to be physically active in their leisure time.
- Provide awareness-raising initiatives and support groups that educate men (i.e., spouses) about the importance of physical activity for women, ultimately encouraging men to support their wives' physical activity goals.

Back home, all my brothers know how to bike; I never learned. Even if we wear pants, we don't even know how to ride bikes, because this was wrong.

MULTICULTURAL IMMIGRANT MOTHER, OTTAWA

Financial support

- Seek partnerships to offset the costs of physical activity programs (e.g., used equipment donation from a sporting club, community volunteer hours from high school students, etc.). Partnerships could focus on subsidized programming, free equipment and clothing, transportation needs and child care.
- Become familiar with successful subsidy programs, such as Woman Alive/femme Active, and use their best practices in your own programs.

- Advocate for a national program for low SES women that is modeled on Woman Alive/femme Active.

Like my husband, he does anything he wants. He has plenty of time after work. He has groups where he exercise, whereas me—I'm stuck with the kids all the time. No obligations for the man to look after the kids.

Muslim mother, Ottawa

Appropriate communication

- Be prepared to provide print materials in a variety of languages, perhaps in partnership with a local immigrant organization. More non-English speaking women will find out about physical activity programs if they can read about them in their own language.
- Embrace a diverse workforce by hiring employees and/or using volunteers who speak the mother tongue of your participants.

Mentoring

- Consider developing a physical activity mentorship program. Disadvantaged women need to be able to identify with their mentors. As one focus group participant said, "We want women with stretch marks."
- Use volunteers, professionals, or active mothers with a keen interest in helping others as mentors.
- Remember that mentorship programs support the notion that "People connect to people, not to agencies or programs."³

Child care

- Provide free or low-cost child care for young children so that mothers can participate in programs.
- Offer physical activity programs that integrate the mother into the child's physical activity or sport program.

Working with practitioners,
organizations, and
communities to improve the
health and quality of life of
all people through physical
activity.

Looking Ahead

We know that culture and ethnicity influence participation in physical activity, especially for multicultural immigrants to Canada. Most new immigrant women arrive in Canada in good health, but their health status changes over time due to financial hardship; work- and resettlement-related stress; inadequate social support; changing health behaviours; and cultural, economic and systemic barriers to appropriate health services⁴.

Currently, only 58 percent of Canadian municipalities offer discounted fee structures for families—that's just over half. A very small fraction—only 19 percent—report having child care facilities available for mothers.¹ We need to do better if we want to support the disadvantaged women in our communities. If health (physical and mental) is largely influenced by the social environment, health practitioners need to make social context a main point of intervention.

This article was adapted with permission from the Mothers in Motion focus group report: Unequal Opportunities, Unequal Outcomes: Physical Activity Beliefs and Behaviours in Low Socio-economic Status Mothers in Canada (2009).

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