



The Research File

Information for professionals from the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute

Schools Conducive to Physical Activity

Health education and physical education undoubtedly constitute the most powerful factors in the school environment that influence student physical activity behaviours. Beyond these factors, however, Wechsler and colleagues identified four less obvious environmental influences on physical activity at school: recess periods, intramural sports, physical activity facilities, and psychosocial support for physical activity.

Recess Periods

Recess periods are meant to complement physical education, not substitute it. They promote physical activity by simply getting children outdoors. Indeed, research shows that young children who spend more time outdoors tend to be more active. Children are not active throughout the entire recess, however: studies show that they engage in physical activity for about 48–60% of recess, and in vigorous activity for only 21% of recess.

Children have been shown to be more active at recess when trained playground supervisors implemented a games intervention. Yet it is when recess play is left unstructured that students are more likely to develop social skills such as negotiating, cooperating, and resolving conflicts.

In light of these findings, schools might boost physical activity during recess by

- having staff encourage students to be active;
- providing students with space, facilities, equipment, and supplies that are appropriate for their age and meet safety standards;
- providing organized physical activity for those students who want it and supervise unstructured play to enforce safety rules and prevent aggressive behaviour.

Intramural Sports

Unlike interscholastic sports, which emphasize competition and winning, intramural sports emphasize participation and enjoyment without pressure and can be offered to students with a wide range of abilities.

Intramural sports may be beneficial for boys and girls who lack the skills or confidence to play interscholastic sports or who dislike competitive sports altogether. They provide opportunities to practice skills taught in physical education courses and can be integrated with before- or after-school programs to interface with child care.

When setting up intramural programs, ensure that

- students have a choice of activities;
- every student can participate regardless of ability;
- students have the opportunity to be involved in planning, organizing, and administering the programs.

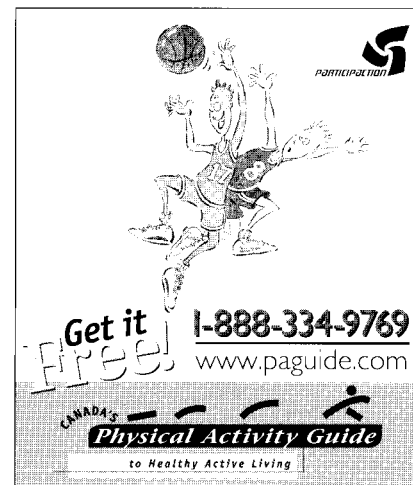
Supportive Facilities

Children are more likely to be active when they have access to a variety of convenient, safe play spaces and facilities and to sports and exercise equipment. Schools can increase access to their facilities and grounds before, during, and after the school day, on weekends, and during summer and other vacations.

Psychosocial Support

The school psychosocial environment can support active choices by helping to define accepted norms. Norms are shaped in part by the types of physical activity programs offered, and in part by the messages students receive from school officials about the importance of physical activity. Students receive messages through:

- **Policies** Enacting school policies on physical activity shows commitment, provides guidance and direction for school staff, and helps to establish normative behaviour. One such policy might dissuade teachers from using physical activity to punish students for misbehaviour, encouraging them to resort to other disciplinary strategies.
- **Administrative support** School administrators can provide psychosocial support through simple gestures such as periodically attending recess periods in the schoolyard, honoring students in the intramural program, including news about physical activity in the



school newsletter and in presentations at parent or staff meetings, and getting involved in a school health council.

- **Role modeling by staff** Because they spend a great deal of time with students and have considerable influence over them, school staff can be powerful role models. Schools can make it easier for staff to become physical activity role models by sponsoring health promotion programs for them.
- **Cues** Cues are stimuli that trigger physical activity behaviour by either suggesting the performance of a new behaviour or reminding students to make active choices.
- **Incentives** Rewards such as sports water bottles can be given to students for meeting specific physical activity goals.

The Case for Environmental Change

The authors caution that it is unrealistic to expect just one or all of these four environmental influences to produce major improvements in student physical activity behaviours without the support of families and other important community-based constituencies. The fitness industry, community-based programs, government agencies, and the mass media must also contribute to changing a culture that pushes children toward sedentary lifestyles.

For More Info ...

Wechsler, H., Devereaux, R.S., Davis, M., & Collins, J. (2000). Using the school environment to promote physical activity and healthy eating. *Preventive Medicine*, 31, S121–S137.

