

Science Says...

About Leisure Participation for Children with Disabilities



This Forum aims to mobilize stakeholders towards collectively finding solutions to promote leisure opportunities for children with disabilities. At the same time, this dissemination event will launch a network of partners, facilitating priority setting and participatory action, fostering successful implementation and future collaborations.

Our **vision** is to create a stakeholders' network that will work collaboratively to share information and propose solutions, and generate scientific evidence that will support health promotion initiatives, ultimately enabling children with physical disabilities to pursue leisure activities that promote physical and mental health.

Leisure activities are those voluntary activities that children choose to do when not at school/work or performing self-care or domestic tasks, and are comprised of active-physical, recreational, social, skill-based or self-improvement activities. Participation in active-physical leisure activities has several physical health benefits (e.g. decreased risk for cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, osteoporosis). Furthermore, participation in social, physical and skill-based activities promotes mental health and well-being.

Approximately **4.6%** of Canadian children are limited in the type of activities they can do.

What does research tell us about leisure participation in children and youth with physical disabilities?

- Children and youth with disabilities participate less in leisure activities than peers without disabilities.
- The activities they partake in are more passive and home-based, with less engagement within the community and with individuals out of their family
- Children and youth with physical disabilities most often participate in unstructured recreational (e.g. TV, computer games) and social activities, but indicate they would prefer to participate in more active-physical as well as social activities with their friends.

Children with physical disabilities are at elevated risk for decline in their health status due to physical inactivity, enhancing risk for chronic health conditions in adulthood.

For children with disabilities, leisure participation facilitates development of skill competencies, promotes peer interactions and enables children to develop personal interests and is essential to a healthy development. Adolescents and adults with physical disabilities emphasize how accessing leisure activities of their choosing is important to their quality of life.

Families of children with disabilities may experience greater stress and caregiver burden. Participating in leisure activities as a family is related to positive effects on adaptive coping and family cohesion.

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Several factors are known to either facilitate or limit participation, including:

- ✓ activity limitations (e.g. communication, mobility, intellectual challenges)
- ✓ self-esteem, self-concept
- ✓ child's mastery motivation
- ✓ increasing age (children participate less as they get older)
- ✓ resources in the community (e.g. physical access, community adapted programs)
- ✓ awareness of existing resources and adapted programs
- ✓ social supports such as peers, teachers and others

Policies make a difference!

Studies on leisure participation in the European union showed that children with cerebral palsy were most likely to be involved in leisure activities in Denmark, due to differences at a policy level that enable community integration and participation. Participation levels were also related to the neighborhood where children lived in the UK.

Most policies for children with disabilities in Canada support adapted sports and provide some limited financial supports to families. Nonetheless, in spite of existing policies, there is a lack of support to participate in a broader variety of activities and accessibility to community-based activities.

The context makes a difference!

Changing the environment (modifying the activity, providing aids/adaptations, or other environmental factors such as transportation and attitudes) are more likely to enhance participation than trying to 'fix' the child.

What don't we know about participation of children and youth with physical disabilities?

A few studies are now developing interventions to promote participation through rehabilitation interventions within the environment, but we don't know yet how features of the environment (to include community programs, policy changes) can more effectively promote participation.

There is a lack of comprehensive rehabilitation services (e.g. health promotion programs) for older children and adolescents, at key transition points where leisure challenges increase.

The time is now!

The Canadian Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights presented "Leveling the Playing Field", summarizing issues pertaining to leisure for individuals with disabilities in response to the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, Article 25. In this report, different stakeholders identify numerous barriers to leisure participation that must be addressed by provinces and municipalities to promote equity in the pursuit of healthy lifestyles.

Several initiatives are being created to promote participation for all Canadian children (e.g. ParticipACTION). *Opportunities must be created to specifically develop behaviors, environments, services and policies that promote health through leisure for children and youth with disabilities.*

Researchers' evidence, parents' expertise, children and youth's lived experiences, clinicians' know-how and policymakers' vision; together we can develop strategies and spark ideas that can effectively promote participation for children with disabilities.

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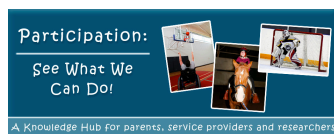
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<http://www.childhooddisability.ca/>



<http://participation-environment.canchild.ca/en/index.asp>



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