

# Promoting the Participation of Children with Disabilities in Leisure Activities.

## BACKGROUND

Over 200,000 Canadian Children have a disability. These children, like any other, have the right to play and participate in their community.

In the past decade, lots of research has been done to identify factors helping or hindering children with disabilities to engage in leisure activities. A group of researchers at McGill University has partnered with community organizations in BC to help finding solutions to these barriers.

The objective of this project is to convey a policy dialogue - where decision-makers can learn about current research and community practices to inform future decision-making related to creating inclusive communities for children with disabilities across Canada.

## Who We Are

CHILD LeisureNET is a network of over 200 stakeholders across Canada, composed of families of children of all age groups with diverse disabilities, community and grassroots associations providing leisure activities for children and youth with disabilities, policy makers at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels, health care providers, education professionals, and researchers. The network has identified actions to promote inclusive and healthy communities.

## What is the problem?



CANADA

About 4.6% of Canadian children and youth have an identified sensory, cognitive, physical or developmental disability.

Participation in physical and recreational activities are associated with developmental outcomes, physical and mental health. However, children with disabilities in Canada face systemic challenges in accessing opportunities to engage in these activities.

Research evidence on the barriers and potential solutions to harness these opportunities exist, and point to the need to create **policies and programs that are inclusive and accessible to all.**



In **British Columbia**, over 500,000 (15%) of the population have a disability.

## What information exists?

The National Recreation Framework is a document done in a collaboration by the provincial and territorial governments across Canada, and the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association. It defines recreation as “the experience that results from freely chosen participation in physical, social, intellectual, creative and spiritual pursuits that enhance individual and community wellbeing”. The framework proposes a vision to promote recreation in communities as a way to increase individual and collective well-being, and suggests some areas to target in creating these opportunities, as well as paths to put these suggestions into practice.

## What have we done?

1) We consulted with community organizations offering or promoting leisure opportunities for children in BC and they chose the “Top 3” areas within the “National Recreation Framework”, believed to have most relevance for the inclusion of children with all types of disabilities in recreational and leisure opportunities. The three areas selected by these organizations were: **inclusion, access, and capacity building.**

2) We conducted a review of the research literature on those three areas.

Information you see in the next pages refer to the actions and implementation considerations identified in the research literature to address those three areas.

## INCLUSION

Inclusive programs allow children with disabilities to build their confidence and ability to engage in physical and leisure activities[1] and also build social skills[2], while improving their interaction with their typically developing peers – that is, the existence of programs that include children with and without disabilities can be extremely beneficial for all [3]. Recreational programs can be made more inclusive by adapting roles to fit the ability of children with disabilities[4], matching children with disabilities with mentors to support their participation[5], and creating inclusive community spaces where children with disabilities can play and engage in sports and other activities such as playgrounds with their typically developing peers[3].

See next page examples of programs across Canada that are supporting Inclusion, Access and Capacity building.



## ACCESS

Cities need to pay particular attention to the accessibility of infrastructural supports in community spaces. Personalization of leisure and physical activity programs to meet the needs of children with different types of disabilities increases the efficacy, engagement and motivation of children with disabilities, as well as the comfort level of their parents to allow their child to participate[7][8]. Financial support may also be an access measure to consider, in addition to infrastructural supports. Thinking of individual needs when designing programs, spaces, and leisure areas includes considerations for physical accessibility: adding adaptive equipment such as augmentative and alternative communication (lights for sounds, clear signing, braille), universally accessible leisure equipment (in playgrounds, pools, parks), adapted books in libraries, accessible locker rooms and changing rooms (including diaper changing stations for older children and young adults), entrances and exits, parking spaces and more[9]. Additionally, providing access includes creating opportunities to develop social supports such as the presence of peer mentors with disabilities to facilitate socialization, model strategies to participate, and to improve the independence of children with disabilities in leisure activities[7][9]. Finally, technical support in the form of specialists such as physical therapists, clinicians, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, special education teachers, amongst others; is needed to support infrastructure adaptation[8][10]. These professionals can be involved in policy and program development to provide perspectives on the needs of different individuals.

## CAPACITY BUILDING

Involving children with disabilities in recreational activities requires collaboration between the staff in centers that promote these activities, their caregivers and specialists. Workers in community spaces need to be trained to assist such children, engage them, make them comfortable and build their efficacy. Parents and caregivers need to be trained and provided with opportunities (funding supports and direct training) to assist both physically and emotionally as children embark on community leisure activities. Additionally, creating collaborative networks where skills and “best practices” are shared and learned without duplicating efforts, can greatly contribute to building capacity in a timely and financially efficient manner[1].

There are research based principles on improving the participation of children with disabilities but they are often not implemented or evaluated quantitatively. Collaborative networks could help developing common frameworks by spreading and evaluating programs. Collaborative networks could be composed of highly skilled teams including therapists, community volunteers and family members of children with disabilities; working collaboratively to help children develop skills such as reading, performing, and cycling.[13][8] [12]Physical literacy programs for children with disabilities can help them build the skills that are needed to engage in physical activities such as sports. Training on physical literacy of city counsellors and others offering sports and recreation for all children, can support building capacity and increasing the offer of programs.

## INCLUSION

### **Active, Healthy Newfoundland and Labrador:**

Putting people with disabilities at the center of recreation and sports planning keeps them visible and can help to address barriers to their inclusion. One way to do this is to prioritize them in provincial recreation agendas and policies. NL recreation and sports strategy has built collaborations with the disability community as an explicitly stated priority, with clear goals to fulfil this priority.

### **The Yellowknife Association for Community Living (YKACL):**

Focuses on increasing recreational options for children with disabilities. They provide social groups for youth and teens with disabilities to participate in with peers without disabilities. Fusion! is an example, it's a free social group for youth aged 13 to 18, with and without developmental disabilities who meet monthly to have fun and make friends. The focus of this group is to build connections in a safe and inclusive environment.

### **Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a disability:**

Works to ensure that programs and curriculums are inclusive. They ensure program and service information is available in alternate formats. They promote active living in schools by creating information kits for people with disabilities, parents, caregivers, teachers, and others to help them understand and support inclusive active living. They identify and promote successful inclusive physical activity program models and ideas. Finally, they develop and distribute curriculum guidelines on physical activity, fitness and recreation for colleges and universities.

## ACCESS

**Recreation New Brunswick:** Provides financial assistance for people with disabilities to cover activity-related expenses and for municipalities or organizations that provide recreation services to cover inclusive programming or facility related expenses such as ramps, wheelchair accessible washrooms, parallel sports programs and specialized equipment. They also organize a yearly one day event for people with disabilities to help them learn about inclusive recreation opportunities in their community.

### **Newfoundland and Labrador's Inclusion strategy action plan:**

In order to increase the number of programs that are inclusive, they provide grants for people with disabilities who need financial assistance to participate in activities such as sports, recreation, the Special Olympics. They also provide funding to non-profits and community based organizations who want to invest in making the built environment more accessible for people with disabilities.

### **County of Brant, Ontario – Can we help**

**program:** Makes recreation programs more accessible by overcoming financial hurdles to participation. This program subsidizes recreation programs for children and youth up to age 18 in the County of Brant and City of Brantford. Any resident who feels that they are unable to pay the full registration fee for a recreation program is eligible to apply for funding. Inclusion criteria varies for youth without disabilities. However, youth with disabilities (registered as Ontario Works and Ontario Disability recipients) automatically receive 100% funding. The program boasts a growing number of recipients and repeat recipients.

## CAPACITY BUILDING

### **City of Toronto – Youth Outreach Worker**

**Program:** uses young people to reach out to other young people, with consistent results. Youth outreach workers employed through Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation reach out to to all youth with a priority for the underserved including youth with disability, to provide them with information and access to local neighbourhood programs, enabling them to engage in community activities of their choice. These outreach workers act as advocates and provide general information and referral to recreation services, housing, employment, education, health and others.

### **Prince Edward Island's Disability Support**

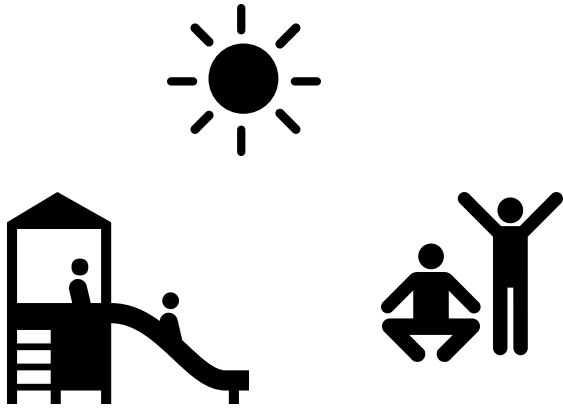
**Program:** 10% of their budget goes toward providing extended respite care to relieve the primary caregiver, while facilitating a positive experience such as a recreational opportunity for the individual with a disability. Usually this service relieves the primary care giver for up to twenty-four hours at a time. This service was created following a needs assessment to understand the situation of individuals living with a disability in the province. In this survey they identified that individuals lack opportunities to engage in leisure, and their caregivers lack respite opportunities. This solution addressed both issues.

### **New Brunswick Association for Community**

**Living:** Focuses on making necessary information available for community organizations offering recreational and cultural activities so that they can make their events accessible. They do this through training sessions, consultations with experts, workshops and through aggregating and distributing information.

## In view of these findings, the following actions are suggested:

1) City parks and gyms should provide adaptive leisure devices and architectural changes in line with best practices in inclusion and accessibility.



2) Community parks should build the capacity of their staff and have specialists available to provide information and training for children with disabilities, their families and related community organizations.

3) Funding supports and regulation enforcement should be provided for community spaces such as gyms, libraries and theatres to adapt their building designs to the needs of children with disabilities and to run integrated leisure programs.

4) Incentives should be provided for community members including parents and siblings. This could include: stipends for time spent, tax write-offs for transportation costs, provisions for free or reduced membership for family members to participate in the same programs as the child with a disability. Such incentives could promote family mentorship and participation.

5) Capacity building can be facilitated by providing High school and university students the opportunity to volunteer their skills to support the leisure participation of children with disabilities. This volunteer activity could count toward practicums, coops and course credits.

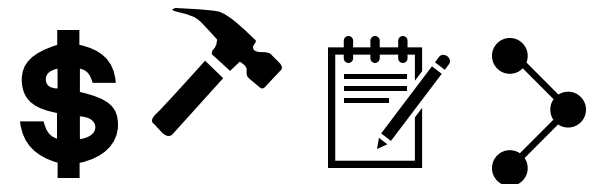
## What implementation considerations need to be kept in mind?

1) Funding allocations in the public health and social service sectors which are needed to provide adaptive equipment, pay for the services of specialists and adapt infrastructure to the needs of children with disabilities.

2) Workforce capacity constraints in community recreational centres which limit them from effectively engaging children with disabilities.

3) Changing building designs, program workflows and staff capacity in order to improve the participation of children with disabilities.

4) Building intersectional partnerships to implement policies on improving the participation of children with disabilities in leisure across social, education, community living and health sectors.



# What opportunities exist now to facilitate implementation?



British Columbia is in a unique opportunity to serve as a national champion on children's rights and inclusive communities. There are **6** particularly pertinent opportunities to be considered in this process.



**1** The **BC 2024 accessibility plan** and political will to make BC the most inclusive province in Canada by 2024. Promoting leisure opportunities for children with disabilities can be one of the building blocks in the creation of "Inclusive Communities"

**2** The increased global focus on inclusion and equity as reflected in the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

**3** Increased recognition of rights-based approaches in Canada including the Convention on the rights of the child. Canada will report on this convention next year, and provinces such as BC can be examples of best practices in promoting Articles 31 and 23 of the of the convention (relating to children with disabilities and leisure promotion).

**4** Canada reported last year on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Canada has now 4 years to act on the recommendations. Recommendations include providing services for children across provinces. BC can serve as an example for other UN states parties by leading community inclusion and access for children.

**5** The existence of The Interdepartmental Working Group on Children's Rights, co-chaired by the Public Health Agency of Canada and the Department of Justice, Canada, which aims to promote a whole-of-government approach to children's rights and to facilitate the necessary intersectoral linkages.

**6** The increasing availability of technology and third sector funding facilitating public-private partnerships for adapting services and equipment to the needs of children with disabilities.



This Policy Dialogue was created as part of the Knowledge Translation Project: A policy dialogue to promote participation in leisure for children with disabilities in BC.

All the materials were prepared with the support from the research team: Keiko Shikako-Thomas, PhD, OT, Canada Research Chair in Childhood Disability, Annette Majnemer, PhD, OT, Ebele Mogo DPH, Jonathan Lai, PhD, Maja Kalaba, MPH (**McGill University**), Vivien Symigon (**Club Aviva**), Andrea Carey (**Sports for Life**), Sheila Kennedy and Kellie Duckworth (**Sunny Hill Health Centre for Children**), Jennifer Scarr (**Child Health BC**).

For more information, questions and suggestions please contact [keiko.thomas@mcgill.ca](mailto:keiko.thomas@mcgill.ca)

This project was funded by:



# References

- [1] Temple, V. A., et al. (2016). Barriers and Facilitators for Generalizing Cycling Skills Learned at Camp to Home. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 33(1), 48-65
- [2] McConkey, R., et al. (2013) Promoting social inclusion through Unified Sports for youth with intellectual disabilities: a five-nation study. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 57(10), 923-935.
- [3] Oriel, K. N., et al. (2012). The psychosocial benefits of an inclusive community-based aquatics program. *Pediatric Physical Therapy*, 24(4), 361-367.
- Promoting the rights of Children with disabilities. (2017). United Nations. Retrieved 2 November 2017, from [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/children\\_disability\\_rights.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/children_disability_rights.pdf)
- [4] Davies, R. (2008). Magic Mushroom Theatre. *Learning Disability Practice*, 11(2), 35-37.
- [5] Glader, L. et al. (2010). Embedding field research on mentored inclusive recreation in an urban population - The evolution of opening doors: Project adventure. *Pediatrics*, 126, S165-S169.
- [6] Andrews, J., et al. (2015). Community participation interventions for children and adolescents with a neurodevelopmental intellectual disability: a systematic review. *Disability & Rehabilitation*, 37(10), 825-833.
- [7] Batorowicz, B., et al.. (2006). AAC and community partnerships: the participation path to community inclusion. *AAC: Augmentative & Alternative Communication*, 22(3), 178-195.
- [8] Fragala-Pinkham, et al. (2010) Summative evaluation of a pilot aquatic exercise program for children with disabilities. *Disability & Health Journal*, 3(3), 162-170.
- [9] Becker, E., & Dusing, S. (2007) Participation is possible: A case report of integration into a community performing arts program. *Physiotherapy Theory & Practice*, 26(4), 275-280.
- [10] Ciolek, J., et al. (2016) "Return to golf": A community based fitness program for golfers with disabilities. *Manual Therapy*, 25, e120-e121.
- [11] Kunstler, R., et al. (2017). Inclusive Recreation for Transition-Age Youth: Promoting Self-Sufficiency, Community Inclusion, and Experiential Learning. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 47(2), 122-136.
- [12] Pickering, D. M., Horrocks, L., Visser, K., & Todd, G. Adapted bikes: what children and young people with cerebral palsy told us about their participation in adapted dynamic cycling. *Disability & Rehabilitation Assistive Technology*, 8(1), 30-37
- Promoting the rights of Children with disabilities. (2017). United Nations. Retrieved 2 November 2017, from [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/children\\_disability\\_rights.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/children_disability_rights.pdf)
- [13] Bedini, L., A., r., & Thomas, A. (2017). Bridge II Sports: A Model of Meaningful Activity through Community-Based Adapted Sports. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 46(4), 284-300
- [14] Moberg-Wolff, E., & Kiesling, S. (2008). Adapted recreational and sports programs for children with disabilities: A decade of experience. *Journal of Pediatric Rehabilitation Medicine*, 1(2), 155-
- [15] Promoting the rights of Children with disabilities. (2017). United Nations. Retrieved 2 November 2017, from [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/children\\_disability\\_rights.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/children_disability_rights.pdf)
- [16] Leveling the playing field: A natural progression from playground to podium for children with disabilities. (2017). Senate of Canada. Retrieved 2 November 2017, from <https://sencanada.ca/content/sen/committee/411/ridr/rep/rep07jun12-e.pdf>
- [17] Bassett-Gunter, R. L., et al. (2017). Targeted physical activity messages for parents of children with disabilities: A qualitative investigation of parents' informational needs and preferences. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 64, 37-46.
- [18] A Framework for Recreation in Canada 2015. (2017). <http://lin.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/framework-for-recreation-in-canada-2016.pdf>. Retrieved 10 November 2017, from <http://lin.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/framework-for-recreation-in-canada-2016.pdf>

# References

- [19] Accessibility 2024 - Province of British Columbia. (2017). [www2.gov.bc.ca](http://www2.gov.bc.ca). Retrieved 2 November 2017, from <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/about-the-bc-government/accessibility>
- [20] Active, Healthy Newfoundland and Labrador. (2007). Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development. Retrieved 4 December 2017, from [http://www.cssd.gov.nl.ca/recreation/pdf/active\\_healthyNL.pdf](http://www.cssd.gov.nl.ca/recreation/pdf/active_healthyNL.pdf)
- [21] Services - Yellowknife Association for Community Living. (2017). Yellowknife Association for Community Living. Retrieved 5 December 2017, from <http://ykaccl.ca/services/>
- [22] Active Living for Canadians with a Disability. (2017). Active Living Alliance. Retrieved 5 December 2017, from <https://ala.ca/content/prov-%20terr/nunavut/nunavuthomepage.asp?langid=1>
- [23] Living with Disability.....Living with Dignity Needs Assessment of Persons with Disabilities in the NWT - Findings Report Final Report. (2017). University of Calgary. Retrieved 4 December 2017, from <http://pubs.aina.ucalgary.ca/health/66610.pdf>
- [24] Recreation New Brunswick. (2017). [Recreationnb.ca](http://recreationnb.ca). Retrieved 5 December 2017, from <https://www.recreationnb.ca/>
- [25] Everyone plays. Access to recreation for low income families in Ontario. (2017). [Prontario.org](http://prontario.org). Retrieved 5 December 2017, from [http://www.prontario.org/index.php/ci\\_id/3722.htm](http://www.prontario.org/index.php/ci_id/3722.htm)
- [26] Be a champion. Highlights for decision makers. (2017). [Prontario.org](http://prontario.org). Retrieved 5 December 2017, from [http://www.prontario.org/index.php/ci\\_id/3818.htm](http://www.prontario.org/index.php/ci_id/3818.htm)
- [27] Recreation and Leisure. (2017). New Brunswick Association For Community Living. Retrieved 5 December 2017, from <http://nbacl.nb.ca/supports/recreation-and-leisure/>
- [28] PEI Disability Support Program (2017). Prince Edward Island. Retrieved 5 December 2017, from [http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/DSP\\_MAR2010-2.pdf](http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/DSP_MAR2010-2.pdf)