

WellSpring

Reframing Physical Activity Programs for Aboriginal Communities

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As the general health of Canadians continues to decline, physical activity initiatives have become a national priority. Our modern-day, sedentary lifestyle is contributing to high rates of chronic disease, including obesity, type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease, which are occurring more frequently than ever before (Warburton et al., 2007). One segment of the Canadian population is affected by these diseases at drastically higher rates. Aboriginal people in Canada are 3–5 times more likely to develop type 2 diabetes (Canadian Diabetes Association), with both adults and children experiencing significantly higher incidence of obesity than non-Aboriginal Canadians (Katzmarzyk, 2008).



What's in This Article for You?

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With the Aboriginal population growing six times faster than the non-Aboriginal population, and with 48 per cent of this population younger than 24 years old (Statistics Canada, 2008), reversing this poor health trend is crucial. As active-living practitioners, you know that physical activity may effectively improve these health conditions (Warburton et al., 2007). Unfortunately, physical activity initiatives that target Aboriginal people in Canada remain relatively underdeveloped and under-delivered as non-Aboriginal health professionals lack the cultural awareness that could help these programs succeed.

Aboriginal Peoples in Canada have a range of distinct values, beliefs, attitudes and traditions. As well, they often face many barriers related to low socio-economic status. In order to succeed, physical activity programs aimed at Aboriginal persons or communities must be reframed to reflect their cultural and socio-economic realities.

A Holistic Approach to Wellness

Traditional Aboriginal teachings emphasize a holistic approach to personal wellness that pays equal attention to the health of the mind (mental), the body (physical), the heart (emotional) and the spirit (spiritual). Many Aboriginal cultures use the Sacred Circle or the Medicine Wheel to advocate this approach to health. As a result, many Aboriginal persons are much more likely to respond to health programs that respect this cultural teaching.

As a practitioner, you can work with Aboriginal community members to re-structure physical activity initiatives to include components that encourage the mental, emotional and spiritual health of participants, not just the physical. For example, Aboriginal persons may be more likely to participate in a Medicine Walk than a regular community walking program. On a Medicine Walk, an Elder teaches the traditional healing properties of herbs and plants. Participants benefit physically from walking, mentally from learning, emotionally from group activity, and spiritually by reconnecting to land and culture.

Rather than overemphasizing the physical health benefits of exercise, you can easily reframe the initiative, encouraging participants to see and feel the holistic health benefits of the program.

Traditionally, all aspects of life were integrated for Aboriginal people. Work, play, leisure and religion were interconnected. Life was based on the need for fitness in order to survive – fitness of the body, mind and spirit.

Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996

Family, Community, Land and Culture

A holistic approach to personal wellness means more than the healthy balance of mind, body, heart and spirit. It also considers a person's interconnectedness with the world around them—their connection to family and community, to land and to culture. Successful physical activity initiatives for Aboriginal persons should incorporate these components.

Family and Community

In the past, an Aboriginal community's survival depended on the cooperation of the entire community.

This philosophy of placing family and community needs before individual need remains intact today. In terms of physical activity programming, this means that Aboriginal persons may hesitate to attend programs that exclude their family members or friends. In Western culture, however, many physical activity programs focus on individual performance or achieving individual goals. This focus inadvertently excludes other cultural groups such as the Aboriginal community. As a practitioner in an Aboriginal community, you can address this situation by modifying programs, making them more inclusive for siblings, children, Elders and friends. This can be done by removing age restrictions or adapting activities so more members of a family or community can participate together. For example, some older Aboriginal women, either for religious or cultural reasons, only wear skirts, which might limit their involvement in certain activities. By modifying an activity so dresses can be worn, the women, their families and their friends will be more willing to participate.

The Land

Natural surroundings are energizing and culturally meaningful to Aboriginal people; they provide a way of connecting with Mother Earth. When feasible, you should offer programs outdoors in the most natural setting possible. The land itself should play an important role in physical activity programming. For example, berry picking, gardening, canoeing and fire-building are ideal activities for encouraging interaction with the land.

Culture

Aboriginal communities welcome and value programs that promote cultural and traditional teachings. You can incorporate culture into physical activity in many ways. For example, a sports program might provide the opportunity to learn more about Aboriginal activities such as lacrosse, archery or double-ball. As well, larger programs can be based on events like the Arctic Winter Games, the Dene Games, the Hand Games and the North American Indigenous Games. Dance is also culturally significant and involves men and women of all ages—from the youngest child to the Elders. Dance traditions differ from culture to culture, but some common dances include the Round Dance, the Métis Jig, the Hoop Dance and various types of powwow dances. You can even make non-traditional sports culturally relevant by teaching sport-related words and

commands in a traditional language. This will develop cultural pride and knowledge, and may even offer a competitive edge against teams that do not understand the language.

Speaking our own language makes us strong in spirit, minds and heart.

National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2005

When you offer physical activity initiatives in Aboriginal communities, you should include Elders in the planning and delivery. Their involvement will benefit your program in several ways. First of all, Aboriginal communities regard Elders and an Elder's wisdom with the utmost respect. So inviting Elders to advise on and attend an event can greatly boost a community's interest in participating. As well, Elders are the keepers of traditional knowledge; their guidance and involvement can greatly enrich the cultural aspect of a program. Finally, inviting Elders to offer an opening prayer and smudge demonstrates respect for traditional protocol. Before asking an Elder for assistance, you need to offer him or her a traditional gift. Commonly, this gift is tobacco, but it may also be ribbon or other sacred items. You can find out about the appropriate protocol for approaching Elders by talking to someone at the local Friendship Centre, Band office, or other Aboriginal organization.

For physical activity programs to succeed in Aboriginal communities, they need to promote participants' feelings of interconnectedness to their family, community, land and culture. Using a holistic health model will lead to greater participation, enjoyment and long-term commitment to a physically active lifestyle.

Establishing Sustainability and Building Capacity

When you offer physical activity programs in Aboriginal communities, you need to consider the community's capacity to deliver the program and whether or not the program is sustainable. Low socio-economic circumstances often hinder the success of and participation in physical activity initiatives. While each community is unique, some common issues are:

- lack of transportation to programs;
- lack of parental support, encouragement, and involvement;

- lack of money for registration, uniforms or equipment costs;
- limited staff, facilities and resources; and
- safety issues due to violent behaviour, drug abuse or prostitution in the community.

Before offering a physical activity program, engage the community fully, seeking insights and ideas for addressing capacity and sustainability concerns. Granting this control to the community fosters ownership, respect and appreciation for a program—contributing to its overall sustainability. As well, communities will be receptive to your efforts to enhance capacity for program delivery. Community capacity building initiatives may include:

- certifying physical activity leaders;
- educating the community about funding opportunities for programs (e.g., proposal writing, private donation requests, sponsorship, etc.);
- establishing good volunteerism; and
- creating partnerships with other organizations.

By integrating capacity building and sustainability into all physical activity initiatives, solutions to limited transportation, facilities, resources and funding may be realized, and the community will improve its overall ability to deliver ongoing programs.

Lasting Effects of Residential Schools

For some older adults and Elders in a community, Residential School experiences may have had lasting effects on their perceptions of and involvement in physical activity.

Due to the segregation of boys and girls at residential schools, some women still feel uncomfortable engaging in certain activities with men. As well, physical skill, exercise and sport may not have been highly valued or adequately developed in Residential School. In turn, former Residential School students may not value physical activity or feel competent enough to participate in physical activity programs. The children and grandchildren of these residential school survivors may be adversely affected through reduced parental support to participate in sports and recreation.

When offering physical activity programs that will appeal to older residents of an Aboriginal community, you should consult with and respond to the needs of potential participants. You will need to create an

accommodating, compassionate and welcoming environment. Some possible ways of creating this environment include:

- separating men and women during activities;
- choosing activities that require minimal physical skill;
- incorporating traditional activities such as praying and/or smudging before the program, fishing, berry picking, hunting, making dry-meat, and gathering herbs such as sweet grass, mint, rat root and sage; and
- encouraging family members to be involved as a way to heal strained family ties and to promote positive physical activity experiences among all generations.

Recommendations

In order for physical activity programs to succeed in Aboriginal communities, they need to be culturally relevant. This requires special consideration from practitioners. As you plan for programs in Aboriginal communities, keep in mind that the programs need to:

- consider the mental, emotional and spiritual needs of participants, not just the physical;
- enhance feelings of interconnectedness to family, community, land and culture;
- emphasize family and community over the individual;
- include the land itself as part of the programming;
- support traditional Aboriginal sports, dance, and language;
- involve Elders (e.g., cultural guidance, prayers, leading ceremonies);
- build capacity through community engagement strategies that develop ownership, volunteerism and community partnerships;
- educate community members on program delivery and management, thereby supporting greater program sustainability; and
- be alert to the needs of residential school survivors.

The idea brought forward perhaps most often was that health and welfare systems should reflect the interconnectedness of body, mind, emotions and spirit — and of person, family, community and all life — which is essential to good health from an Aboriginal point of view.

Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996

References are available on the website at www.centre4activeliving.ca/publications/wellspring.html

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Mission Statement of the Alberta Centre for Active Living

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

IF YOU HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS OR QUESTIONS, WE'D LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU.

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