

Cultural Considerations in Physical Activity



Cambridge Food and Fitness Policy Council

Cambridge, MA

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A partnership between

The Food and Fitness Policy Council and the Community Engagement Team

Introduction

The City of Cambridge is a leader in making physical activity available to children and adults throughout the City. From recreational programs to parks to walkable streets and building design, Cambridge is leading the nation. The most recent national WalkScore rates Cambridge the #1 walkable City in the country. The regional bikeshare program, Hubway, just recently surpassed 1.5 million rides, with the first year-round pilot program taking place in Cambridge. City parks and playgrounds are conveniently located throughout the city and regularly updated utilizing a robust community planning process. Economic Development works diligently to ensure that their growing menu of resources¹ for businesses includes options that promote fitness and health. The schools have a Wellness Policy that includes standards for physical education and physical activity. The Agenda for Children has been working with the Food and Fitness Policy Council to develop best practices guidelines for food and physical activity for all out of school time programs. And this is not even a comprehensive list of actions happening throughout the City – the City of Cambridge and partners are actively creating a healthier community.

Healthy communities are built through thoughtful community planning, and a clear dialogue between public health, city planners, management, non-profit organizations and residents is necessary to ensure that opportunities for physical activity and access to fresh food are available to all residents. Despite these available resources for physical activity and healthy foods in Cambridge, questions have arisen as to whether these opportunities are accessible to all residents and include sufficient culturally appropriate options. To help answer these questions, the Food and Fitness Policy Council (FFPC) partnered with the Community Engagement Team to reach families and residents who would not often come to community meetings. In the fall of 2012, two focus groups were completed on school food and access to food in neighborhoods. Three more focus groups were conducted in the fall of 2013 on culturally appropriate options in physical activity, funded by a CHNA 17 grant (Community Health Network Area 17). The physical activity focus group results are summarized in this report.

The recommendations based on this outreach show that Cambridge is on the right track, but there is still significant work to be done to create a system that is just and offers accessible and culturally relevant physical activity opportunities. It is the hope that this is the beginning of a dialog to further explore the accessibility of available resources

Focus Groups

Three focus groups on the topic of access to physical activity were held on September 24, 25 and 26, 2013. Two groups were created for immigrant families and the third was created for American-born blacks. The FFPC partnered with the Community Engagement Team, a program of the City of Cambridge, to assist in outreach and engagement. The Community Engagement Team Outreach Workers reached into their native populations to bring participants to the focus groups, including those from; Bangladesh, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Haiti, as well as American-born black residents. Childcare, interpretation services and dinner was provided.

1. <http://www.cambridgema.gov/CDD/econdev/smallbusiness.aspx>

The purpose of the focus groups was to gather more information about the physical activity opportunities that immigrant families and American-born black families find accessible (or not), what activities they enjoy and are familiar with, what forms of active transportation they currently use, if there is a need for the City to make current activities more culturally appropriate, and if there are ways to make it easier for families to participate in physical activity in Cambridge, such as skill-building workshops or changes in programs to make them more accessible (for example, gender separate swimming hours at public pools).

Throughout the three focus groups, many opinions were openly expressed about physical activity in the city. Participants were pleased to have the opportunity for the discussion and did not hesitate to explain what was needed to allow more access to physical activity. The summary below presents common themes that emerged.

Summary of Findings

1. Access to physical activity

Common themes emerged throughout the focus groups. Participants would like to engage in more types of activities but find that there are barriers. For example, cost and knowing what is available. Those new to this country found that here in the United States it was more difficult to make physical activity a part of daily life, because of differences in weather; city vs. countryside; and cultural and religious considerations. American-born blacks also expressed concerns about competing priorities, such as time to be active vs. other interests, and also mentioned motivation as a factor.

Common themes:

- **Integration of physical activity into daily activities.** In other countries, physical activity is usually more integrated into daily life and social contexts. For many people new to this country, their lives encompass less activity than they did before. Participants expressed concern that their children cannot safely play outside in the neighborhoods (and feel that neighbors do not always approve if they would), as well as lack of neighborhood gatherings to dance and play together. Many participants expressed difficulty being outside in cold or inclement weather, which is a drastic life change for many families. When added to the availability in the US of conveniences, such as washing machines, dish washers and cars, that reduce manual labor/exercise, daily activity can be greatly reduced as compared with their native countries.
- **Language and cultural barriers.** There are language barriers between community members, which sometimes lead to a lack of cultural understanding. This inhibits common solutions such as sharing resources, helping each other, or creating common neighborhood activities. For example, some parents expressed a willingness to take their children's classmates to activities, but didn't know how to offer. Another mother noted that she would like to let her children play outside with the other neighborhood youth, but was not able to have a conversation with other parents to agree on a neighborhood system for watching the kids at play.
- **American-born blacks expressed challenges with competing priorities, as well as cost and time.** Willingness/motivation, procrastination, and competing interests for time were expressed as barriers specifically in this focus group which was comprised of adults who had older children, if any.
- **Accessible communications.** Both the immigrant families and American-born blacks expressed a need to know more about what affordable physical activity is available. Popular modes of communication, like email and flyers oftentimes do not reach community members. Communications suggested includes outreach via the Community Engagement Team, and sending home flyers from school in backpacks with younger children. Other ideas were to hang flyers at neighborhood stores, in the appropriate language, and bring information to church groups for dissemination.
- **Education about the importance of physical activity.** Many participants were aware of the importance of physical activity, but not sure how to get started, and specifically asked for the support of the medical

community to educate children about health (exercise and food). The Outreach Workers thought the wider community they serve is not necessarily aware of the importance of physical activity to health (both physical and mental) and capacity to learn, for adults and children alike. The Community Engagement Team Outreach Workers expressed interest in educating the community about physical activity and health and providing resources.

- **The cost of activities.** Participants expressed the need for free or low costs to be able to participate in formal programming, including: program/class costs, gear (including bicycles), apparel, childcare, and transportation.
- **Time and/or childcare.** Like most busy working parents, participants are frequently stretched for time, and find it difficult to find childcare. This makes it difficult to participate themselves and to take children to activities. This was especially true for parents with children in different age groups. Oftentimes the same sport will take place at two different locations, scheduled by age, making it nearly impossible for one parent to get two children to practice.
- **The need to separate the genders in certain activities.** For some Muslims, lack of consistent separate access for women and girls can be a barrier, specifically for swimming and contact sports.

2. What people enjoy doing and are already engaged in

When asked, “*What kind of activities do you and your family do now?*”, participants talked about engaging in a variety of exercises and daily activities (both activities they do now, and what they enjoy doing as a family). For the most part, activities of daily living (such as laundry, walking up and down the stairs at home, and cleaning the house), simple exercises that can be done at home or in the park, and activities that families could do together at little or no cost were discussed at length. Activities commonly mentioned include: walking, running, doing simple anaerobic/aerobic exercises, going to the park, dancing, cleaning the house, taking the stairs, walking the dog, playing with children, going sledding, show shoeing, tennis, skating and biking.

3. Barriers and proposed solutions

When asked, “*What are the barriers to physical activity?*”, many participants also proposed solutions. Here are more details about the commonly expressed barriers and solutions that were proposed by the participants.

• Cost Barriers

Too expensive for many:

- Kids programs (summer/afterschool)
- Kids sports teams and required equipment
- Adult fee to join a gym
- Swimming pool fees (adults and kids)
- Sports participation and classes like tennis, yoga, Zumba, taekwondo, or others
- Purchase of clothing to comply with “dress code” for a sport or activity (adult and kids)
- Ability to afford transportation for kids and adults to get to activities – bus fare most often mentioned (discounted youth bus fare is not offered in the summer, for example)
- Purchase of a bicycle, helmet, etc (adults and kids)

Solutions

- Offer free or very low cost afterschool/summer programs for children
- Organize the redistribution of outgrown/unused sports equipment, bikes, and related apparel
- Universities and City offer programs free or at very low cost
- City hold informal sports events by country-of-origin and sport (cricket most often mentioned. It was requested the City arrange to play against other municipalities who also do this.)
- City subsidize or offer free/low cost bus fare or transportation

- Offer free activities in the neighborhood parks or centers for adults and kids to do together like dancing, Zumba, yoga

- **Time Barriers**

- Parents have competing priorities (work, other children) and often can't find the time

Solutions

- Childcare is needed to allow parents to: attend adult programs, take other children to activities, and attend children's activities

- **Gender Barriers**

- Mixing genders during physical activity was a barrier for some Muslim women and older girls. This was specifically mentioned in regard to swimming and contact sports. Swimming was most often mentioned, some Muslim women and teenage girls would like to have access to swimming facilities without men present. The need for girls to learn to swim in order to graduate from high school was also a concern, since the older girls cannot take swimming lessons in a mixed group. Although contact sports starting in middle school are mostly gender-separate (basket ball, volleyball, etc), this is not always the case in reality. Because of occasional discrepancies in the gender-separate practices - such as, some days they play together because not enough children are present after school - some parents will simply withdraw daughters from participating at all, or may only allow girls to participate on days when practice is separate.

Solutions

- Explore specific needs more with the community where this is a concern.
- Offer reliably separate sports for each gender (adults and older children).
- Allocate specific times in public pools for women and small children of both sexes and older girls (this is offered by some municipalities and universities). Offer swimming lessons for girls separately at the high school.

- **Cultural/language barriers between communities**

- Participants were unsure of how to reach out to neighbors/community members who speak another language with their ideas for common solutions, or how to know if their offer would be welcome or appropriate.

Solution

- Some parents expressed a willingness to take neighbors/friends of their child to sports or swimming with them, for example. They thought these types of solutions would need facilitation because of cultural and language barriers.

- **Lack of understanding about the importance of physical activity**

- Participants felt that both parents and children need a better understanding about the role of physical activity in good health, and how to get started. Parents expressed concern that more children, particularly adolescents, are becoming overweight, and said that children would listen to specific health information provided by a doctor (who would be respected as an authority) where they will not from a parent.

Solutions

- Engage the CET outreach workers to educate parents on why it is important for them and their kids to be physically active and how to access resources.

- Schools and hospitals/family doctors partner to give children information about physical activity, health and weight. Offer specific tips about food, play and activities.
- **Other Barriers Mentioned**
 - **Locker room etiquette:** There was concern that it is not appropriate for (same gender) children and adults (who are not family members) to change clothes openly in the same space (nudity).

Solution

 - Provide the option of private changing/showering areas in public locker rooms.
 - **Gardening:** A number of participants expressed that they would like to garden/grow food, but need space to do it and were unaware of how to acquire space to garden.

Solution

 - Improved communications about gardening resources. See discussion about communications in the following section.
 - **Willingness and motivation:** Most mentioned by the American born black focus group were subjects of motivation, procrastination, and competing interests (like watching sports) as primary barriers (along with cost).

Solution

 - The focus group did not propose a specific solution.

4. What else can the City do differently?

Aside from the barriers and proposed solutions already discussed, when asked, “*What kind of help do you need to be active?*”, here are suggestions brought up by participants for providing improved access to physical activity. Participants were also asked for any other general comments. Some of the needs identified may already be available, yet participants were not aware of that.

- **Facilitation of organized (informal) community-based activities**
 - Organized field trips such as go on hikes and apple picking
 - Connect people within neighborhoods so adults and kids can do activities together, such as informal games, sports, and dancing
- **Priorities for skills training and requests for facilitation**
 - Bicycle Safety
 - Swimming
 - Walking to school for kids – including crossing the road safely
 - Facilitation of neighborhood based activities (dancing, yoga, Zumba, sports)
 - Facilitation of collaboration between neighbors (kids playing outside, collaborative transportation to activities)
- **Communicate more directly with the community**
 - Communicate through the Community Engagement Team outreach workers
 - Communicate more through the Center for Families and the Community Engagement Team newsletters
 - Put information on CCTV

- In the schools, use “backpack express”: Schools send home flyers to parents in student backpacks
- CDD work with CET to better reach out to the community regarding Bicycle Safety Classes
- CDD host walking trainings with parents
- **What participants would like to know about**
 - Free and low cost opportunities for physical activity such as programs, sports, classes, pool access, etc, for adults and children
 - Free and low cost access to equipment, bikes, activity-related apparel, etc.
 - Opportunities for lower cost transportation; most often mentioned was bus fare
 - What will happen as a result of the focus groups
 - How to find information for adults on where/how to play sports

5. Current patterns in active transportation

Participants were also asked about how they use active transportation during the course of their day. The numbers of people who responded in the affirmative shows that active transportation may be an opportunity area for outreach and education.

Out of the 37 community members who participated (including the Outreach Workers), by a raise of hands, here are the total “yes” answers to the following questions:

Questions	Sept 24 focus group n=5	Sept 25 focus group n=20	Sept 26 focus group n=12	Total
Does your family have a car?	0	16	5	21
Does your family have two cars?	0	2	1	3
Do you walk to work or do errands (shop)?	2	8	5	15
Do you bike to work or do errands (shop)?	0	0	0	0
Do you take the T to work or shop?	4	5	0	9
Does your child walk to school?	1	4	5	10
Does your child bike to school?	0	1	0	1
Does your child take the T or school bus?	0	12	4	16

As follow-up to these responses, when asked why participants do not bike to work or do errands, they responded:

- It’s too far and dangerous
- Don’t know how
- Weather

When then asked, “would you like to learn to bike”, eight or more people said they would like to learn (but some said they could not afford a bike).

6. Recommendations

The Food and Fitness Policy Council will share this report with city departments, community organizations, partners, and colleagues, including: the Public Health Department staff working with Healthy Eating and Physical Activity programs/initiatives; Community Development staff working on active transportation, and City Departments, such as the Department of Human Service Programs, Recreation Division, and CPS staff working with physical activity, as well as Community Organizations as the Cambridge Community Center and the Title IX Girls Running Club, well as community partners and universities as opportunities arise.

Recommended actions are as follows:

- Organize a skill building workshop (TBD), with education for providers on culturally appropriate content, and outreach through the Community Engagement Team Outreach Workers.
- Facilitate neighborhood-based activities and help neighbors build relationships to collaborate on such actions as watching children and ride sharing. This could be done by City departments and community organizations collaborating with the Community Engagement Team.
- City programs and schools explore the need for gender separate activities.
- Further explore how to promote more use of active transportation, including safe bicycling and walking routes.
- Food and Fitness Policy Council use the report to educate on cultural considerations in physical activity and find ways to help build access for all residents.

The Food and Fitness Policy Council hopes the information in this report will be the beginning of more dialog between city departments and community organizations with Cambridge residents to engage the community in the creation of a neighborhood-based environment that fosters physical activity and good health for all.

Cambridge Food and Fitness Policy Council Members

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Members

- **Chris Auferio**, Director of Health and Physical Education, Cambridge Public Schools
- **Chris Basler**, Project Planner, Economic Development Division, Community Development Department
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- **Elaine DeRosa**, Executive Director, Cambridge Economic Opportunity Committee (CEOC)
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- **Paul Ryder**, Division Head, Department of Human Service Programs, Recreation Division

Regular Participant Designees

- **Astrid Harmer**, Nutritionist, Cambridge Health Alliance
- **Peter Ward**, Farmers' Market Manager, Central Square Market