

## **PUBLIC SPACES, FAMILY PLACES- ESSENTIAL TO CANADA'S CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

**The Federation of Canadian Municipalities, the National Children's Alliance and the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association agree that quality, safe and accessible recreation opportunities are of vital importance to Canada's children and youth.**

The Federal Government's September 2002 Speech from the Throne made an unprecedented statement about the importance of healthy living, physical activity and sport to Canada's health care system for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The National Children's Agenda is a commitment by Canada's governments that Canadian children should have a good start in life.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 31, states that children have the right to engage in play and recreational activities.

The new Canadian sport policy, recently endorsed by all 14 Federal-Provincial/Territorial governments, states that "Today, sport (and recreation) are widely accepted as a powerful contributor to personal and social development". Children and youth often face barriers to participating in recreation. The most common barrier is cost, with today's higher fees for programs, sport group membership and admission to recreation centers. Other barriers include transportation, language and culture.

**For the increasing number of Canadian children and youth living in poverty, the rate of participation in recreation and physical activity is much lower than for others.**

15% of Canadian boys and 11% of girls aged 18 and under say they never have access to after school programs, sporting and recreational activities. (Save the Children Canada, *A Canada Fit For Children*, July 2001).

Children and youth living in poverty face more hurdles to healthy development. Children and youth living in poverty deserve the same opportunity to develop to their full potential through safe, quality accessible recreation programs and services.

**A new social inclusion framework embraced by government and the voluntary sector includes the commitment that all children and youth deserve opportunities to become contributing members of Canadian society.**

More indoor and outdoor public recreation spaces and family places will help build healthier individuals, families and communities.

Physical inactivity is a serious public health burden. Canada's children and youth are not active enough for healthy growth and development, a key-contributing factor to increased childhood obesity.

Physical activity increases resistance to such diseases as heart disease, cancer, diabetes, osteoporosis, arthritis, obesity and mental health disorders. Some conservative estimates suggest that illness due to physical inactivity is costing the Canadian health care system \$2.1 billion annually in direct health care costs.

**Public parks and community centers are good for cities and communities**

Parks and centers revitalize urban cores and attract residents, helping to limit urban sprawl. Even small lots, when developed into a public space, can transform a neighborhood.

Opportunities for recreation and play for children help to ease the pressure on families and contribute to healthy relationships and the ability of adults to access training and other services.

**Therefore, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, National Children's Alliance and the Canadian Parks and Recreation propose the establishment of a Children's Infrastructure Program:**

- For development and maintenance of non-exclusive community play and recreation spaces and family-oriented community centers;
- To fund pilot programs for community engagement in recreation and development opportunities associated with the spaces and lever private, non-profit and philanthropic support;

- Placing priority on distressed neighborhoods and communities and revitalizing urban cores;
- With an initial investment of \$300 million over 3 years we can make a difference for lifetimes.

## Appendix A

### The Benefits

Quality leisure lifestyles and environments benefit all Canadians, personally, socially, environmentally, and economically.

While the benefits of participation in recreation and physical activity are much broader, children and youth often cite fun, learning new skills and being with friends as reasons for participation.

Participation in recreation and physical activity is a significant influence in reversing the ever-growing trend childhood obesity.

Youth participation in recreation leads to decreased participation in negative behaviors such as drinking, smoking and use of illicit drugs.

Participating in recreation activities not only improves health but also exposes children to positive role models and develops life long skills.

A 1998 Hamilton project (When the Bough Breaks) demonstrated that increasing access to subsidized recreation for children of single mothers on welfare does not cost society any money but rather leads to savings. 765 mothers on welfare and their 1,330 children and were randomly assigned to receive a range of services which included public health-in-home services, employment re-training, subsidized child-care and **subsidized recreation**. This full service package was compared to public health only, employment re-training only, subsidized child-care only, subsidized recreation only, or our self-directed care.

The effect of proactive subsidized recreation on disordered children was enormously positive. Children with hyperactive emotional disorders were able to maintain their social, vocational, physical, interpersonal and academic competence at the same levels as non-disordered children but, if they had to cope without the recreation program, their competence levels noticeably dropped. We were able to demonstrate, once again, that our study showed that the provision of proactive subsidized recreation does not cost society any more money, it will lead to savings.”<sup>1</sup>

Children who participate in recreation are building self-esteem, enhancing social skills and improving their school performance.

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<sup>1</sup> Gina Brown et al, 1998

A recent report, "Understanding Youth in Canada – 2002, summarized the benefits of recreation to youth as the following:

Children/youth participation in sport has present and future benefits beyond the obvious but important health benefits. These benefits include:

- better time management,
  - increased self-esteem, and the
  - opportunity to identify with respected coaches and supervisors.
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- Competence in the arts and sports is shown to be an important factor in protecting children against the occurrence of emotional and behavioural problems where children are at risk for these conditions.

Youth participation in organized recreational activity is linked to:

- more positive experiences with peers and friends
- higher self-esteem
- a greater likelihood of performing better in school
- increased future educational expectations
- better physical and mental health
- decreased participation in negative behaviours such as drinking, smoking and lower levels of television viewing
- there is also a strong correlation between youth staying in school and their participation in extracurricular activities.

"Recreation plays a role in building upon protective factors, assets, and resiliencies by fostering increased interactions with caring adults and friends, increased exposure to positive social values, reinforcement of positive norms of behavior within peer groups, and opportunities to engage in constructive and creative activities within safe settings.... The presence of a caring and supportive adult in a young person's life "seems to make all the difference" for youth." (Witt, 2000).

## Appendix B

### *Benefits of Recreation*

The Benefits Catalogue<sup>2</sup> outlines the positive role recreation can play in the development of individuals and communities. Benefits are summarized under four categories: personal benefits; social benefits; economic benefits; and environmental benefits. Many of these benefits are particularly relevant to children and youth living in poverty, and provide information to assist recreation practitioners working with other community partners.

Personal benefit statements include:

- Physical recreation and fitness contributes to a *full and meaningful life*.
- Regular physical activity is one of the very best methods of *health insurance* for individuals.
- Relaxation, rest and revitalization through the opportunity of leisure is *essential to stress management*.
- Meaningful leisure activity is an *essential source of self-esteem and positive self-image*.
- Leisure provides the opportunity to lead *balanced lives, achieve our full potential and gain life satisfaction*.
- *Children's play is essential to the development process*.
- Leisure opportunities for youth provide *positive lifestyle choices and alternatives to self-destructive behaviour*.
- Parks and open spaces bring beauty to an area while *giving people satisfaction and improving their quality of life*.

Social benefit statements include:

- Leisure provides leadership opportunities that *build strong communities*.
- Community recreation reduces alienation, loneliness and antisocial behaviours.
- Community recreation *promotes ethnic and cultural harmony*.
- Leisure provides opportunities for *community involvement and shared management and ownership of resources*.
- Integrated and accessible leisure services are critical to the quality of life of people with a disability and disadvantaged individuals.
- Leisure opportunities, facilities and the quality of local environment are the *foundations of community pride*.
- Leisure services enrich and complement protective services for *latch-key children* through after-school and other recreational services.

Economic benefit statements include:

- Pay now or pay later! Investment in recreation as a *preventive health service* makes sense.

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<sup>2</sup> The Benefits of Parks and Recreation: A Catalogue. Canadian Parks and Recreation Association (1997)

- A fit work force is a *productive work force*.
- Small investments in recreation yield *big economic returns*.
- Parks and recreation services motivate *business relocation and expansion* in your community.
- Meaningful leisure services *reduce the high cost of vandalism and criminal activity*.
- Recreation and parks services are often the *catalyst for tourism*, a growing sector in our economy.
- *Investments in environmental protection* through provision of parks and open spaces *pay for themselves*.

Environmental benefit statements include:

- Through the provision of parks, open spaces and protected environments, recreation can contribute to the *environmental health* of our communities. This is an essential, life-sustaining role.
- The public is often prepared to pay for *environmental protection and rehabilitation* in their communities and to support parks and recreation organizations that play a lead role in that protection.
- *Investing in the environment* through parks and the provision of open spaces in residential areas, leads to an increase in neighbourhood property values through accessibility to environmentally friendly green spaces and associated recreation opportunities.
- The trend toward natural environment based leisure activities is *insurance for a new and improved environmental future*.