

Role Played by Parks and Recreation

Increasingly in recent years, both professionals and citizens have become more aware of the various roles that parks and recreation services can play in the overall health and well-being of individuals, community, and society.

Here are a few studies that support these important roles essential to health:

Access to Active and Green Spaces

Importance of Accessible Physical Activity Spaces

Support for being physically active goes beyond just informing people of such a need. People must also be afforded opportunities for safe, accessible, and welcoming places to pursue such physical activity.

- People who had the best access to a variety of natural and built facilities were 43% more likely to get 30 minutes of physical activity most days of the week as recommended by the Surgeon General, than those people who had poor access to such facilities.
- Older adults living near safe walking and biking paths, parks, and recreation centers are more likely to get adequate physical activity.
- The pedometer readings for older women who lived within walking distances of trails, parks, and stores were significantly higher than for women who did not and the more venues close by, the higher the pedometer readings.
- People with safe places to walk within 10 minutes of their residences were more likely to meet the recommended activity levels than were people without such access by a percentage of 43% to 27%.
- Women living in rural areas were more likely to be active if they indicated they lived nearby attractive scenery

Source: www.activelivingresearch.org

- Proximity, accessibility, attractive scenery, good lighting, toilets, drinking water and well-designed and well-maintained paths seem to predict physical activity in parks. (American Journal of Public Health, 2003.)

- A group of studies reviewed in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine showed that the “creation of or enhanced access to places for physical activity combined with informational outreach” produced a 48.4% increase in frequency of physical activity (Trust for Public Land).
- A study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control (2002) provided strong evidence that suggested when people have access to parks, there is a 25.6% increase in the percentage of exercising on three or more days per week (Trust for Public Land).
- Citizens who had better access to parks, visited parks frequently, and engaged in physically-active park behaviors also made fewer visits to their doctor for reasons other than a regular check-up (Godbey, Roy, Payne, and Orsega-Smith, 1998).

Recreation Programs

Hidden Potential within Intentional Programming

Recreation programs can incorporate healthy information and activities within existing opportunities, making significant inroads towards healthier behavior.

- Children, adolescents, and adults reported adopting healthier behaviors – such as choosing heart-healthy food more often – after participating in Hearts N’ Parks programs that incorporate heart-healthy behaviors into regular activities offered by park and recreation departments. (*NIH News*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)
- CDC survey of 4,000 high school students indicated that a low level of activity (fewer than two days of light exercise and no days of hard exercise in the past 14 days) were **associated with various risk behaviors:** tobacco and pot use, lower fruit and vegetable consumption, greater TV watching, failure to wear a seat belt, lower perception of academic performance (American Public Health Association).
- Adults participating in Hearts N’ Parks Programs, primarily at public senior centers, significantly improved their knowledge of overweight/obesity risks, physical activity, causes of high blood pressure, and ways to control cholesterol levels. Post-test scores also suggested healthier attitudes towards heart-healthy eating and physical activity (*NIH News*, National Institutes of Health, Department of Health and Human Services).

Park Visits

Visits to parks provide an array of health benefits including the following:

- Two thirds of older adults who visit parks report moderate or high levels of physical activity
- Active park users have a lower body mass index
- Stress relief was one of the most common benefits older adults attributed to park visits
- Citizens who had better access to parks, visited parks frequently, and engaged in physically-active park behaviors also made fewer visits to their doctor for reasons other than a regular check-up (Godbey, Roy, Payne, and Orsega-Smith, 1998).
- The longer length of time people spend in parks, the better the health benefit as evidenced by park visitors who visited a park for one hour or more showed significantly lower systolic blood pressure than those who stayed for shorter time periods (Orsega-Smith, Payne, Godbey, 2003).

Contact with Nature

The Natural World Improves Health

Research exists that provides evidence for the many ways in which contact with the natural environment improves both physical and psychological health and well-being.

- Health studies have shown that contact with nature such as plants, animals, pleasing landscapes and wilderness areas offer a wide range of health benefits including lower blood pressure and reduced cholesterol levels (*American Journal of Preventive Medicine*).
- Savanna-like settings are associated with self-reports of peacefulness, tranquility, or relaxation as well as decreased fear and anger, enhanced mental alertness, attention, and cognitive performance as demonstrated through proofreading tasks and psychological testing (*American Journal of Preventive Medicine*).
- A 10% increase in nearby greenspace was found to decrease a person's health complaints in an amount equivalent to a five year reduction in the person's age (Trust for Public Land).

Youth

Role of Recreation in the Non-Supervised Hours

Due to a variety of reasons, today's youth are more likely to spend a significant number of hours without adult supervision, often confined to the house.

- Youth enrolled in a study supported by the Centers for Disease Control in organized park and recreation settings reported that they spent most of the non-organized time watching television; watching TV was mentioned twice as often as playing outside (*Parks and Recreation*).
- CDC survey of 4,000 high school students indicated that a low level of activity (fewer than two days of light exercise and no days of hard exercise in the past 14 days) were **associated with various risk behaviors:** tobacco and pot use, lower fruit and vegetable consumption, greater TV watching, failure to wear a seat belt, lower perception of academic performance (American Public Health Association).
- Top Reasons Kids Say “No” to Drugs (ages 9 – 17): Sports, 30%; Hobbies, 16%; Family and Friends, 14%; Arts, 12%, and Music, 11% (White House Office of National Drug Control).
- Over half of teens surveyed (54%) said they wouldn't watch do so much screen time if they had other things to do. The same number indicated they wished there were more community or neighborhood based programs and two-thirds said they'd participate, if they were available (Penn, Schoen & Bertrand).

Older Adults

Myriad of Contributions for Older Adults

The ways in which physical activity and recreation can enhance the life skills of older adults contributes not only to quality of life, but the ability to continue independent living.

- Active Options, a program of the Foothills Park and Recreation District designed to provide high quality fitness experiences for older adults in their own community, was part of a study to determine potential health benefits accrued to participants in this program. Continuing participants in the program gained

significant health benefits including: two less visits to a doctor for treatment of a health problem; one less nights stay in a hospital; better perceived health; and increases self-efficacy, the belief that one can complete specific tasks. Over time, Active Options participants had some significant physical improvements as well including: decreased heart rate and blood pressure; improved back flexibility; and increased muscular strength.

Source: [Orsega-Smith](#), [Payne](#), [Katzenmeyer](#), and [Godbey](#). *Parks and Recreation*, October 2000

- A study cited in the *New England Journal of Medicine* suggests that mentally challenging activities may reduce the risk of dementia in older adults. The study conducted at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York asked adults how often they participated in leisure activities such as playing cards or chess, reading, doing crossword puzzles, dancing, etc. The most active people had a 63% lower risk of dementia than those who were less active. People who played the hardest received the greatest benefit as evidenced by the adults who did crossword puzzles four times a week having a 47% lower risk of dementia than those who did a crossword puzzle once a week. Reading reduced the risk of dementia for study participants by 35%; playing a musical instrument by 69%; and frequent dancing by 76% (*USA Today*).
- A recent study from the University of Pittsburg found that the more physical activity one gets, the longer a person will be able to live independently. This study followed older women ages 50 and 65 for 17 years. Those women who were sedentary over the study period were 1 and ½ times more likely to have difficulty with daily activities such as shopping and household chores in comparison to the more active women in the study. Even physical activity that is started later in life can contribute to this independence.
- A national study on aging and creativity and its potential benefit for people 65 years of age and older is currently underway in San Francisco, New York, and Washington, DC. The intent of the research is to determine if participation in arts and creative programming would result in fewer health declines among the elderly. Early results exceeded expectations as participants in the arts/creative programming reported falling less often, feeling less depressed and lonely, requiring fewer medications, and becoming more active than the comparison group (*USA Today*).
- Adults participating in Hearts N' Parks Programs primarily at public senior centers significantly improved their knowledge of overweight/obesity risks, physical activity, causes of high blood pressure, and ways to control cholesterol levels. Post-test scores also suggested healthier attitudes towards heart-healthy eating and physical activity (*NIH News*, National Institutes of Health, Department of Health and Human Services).

Physical Activity

- 55.2% of people using trails reported an increase in walking since they started using trails; this study also found that walking trails may be beneficial as promoting physical activity among women and people in lower socio-economic groups (Active Living by Design).
- The odds of engaging in recommended levels of physical activity among high school and middle schools increased while the odds of being overweight declined with the increased number of physical activity facilities per block (Journal of Pediatrics, 2006).
- A group of studies reviewed in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine showed that the “creation of or enhanced access to places for physical activity combined with informational outreach” produced a 48.4% increase in frequency of physical activity (Trust for Public Land).
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