



*In Her*  
**VOICE**

**An exploration of  
young women's sport and  
physical activity experiences**

**FOCUS GROUP REPORT  
AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

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# I: Introduction

## ■ BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

*In Her Voice* was a project conducted by the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS). The project involved focus group conversations with adolescent girls, ages 13 to 17, regarding their perspectives about physical activity and sport. A total of 46 participants from six sites across Canada participated in the focus groups.

The purpose of *In Her Voice* was to hear from young women about their physical activity and sport experiences. CAAWS was interested in discovering what young women think about physical activity and sport, what activities they enjoy, and what factors encourage or discourage their participation. CAAWS also wanted to gain insight from adolescent girls regarding methods to increase their participation in physical activity. The information gathered provides program providers and decision-makers in the sport and active living, health, education, and social service sectors with a better understanding of how to create positive, inclusive physical activity and sport programs for girls and young women.

## ■ WHY ADOLESCENT GIRLS?

Adolescent girls represent a unique population. It is well known that physical activity levels start to decline in adolescence, and young women tend to be particularly vulnerable. The 2002/2003 Canadian Community Health Survey found that 33% of girls ages 12-19 were inactive, compared to 23% of boys (CFLRI, 2003). The same survey also found the percentage of inactive girls increases with age, from 27% of girls ages 12-14 considered inactive, to 38% of girls ages 15-19 considered inactive. It is crucial to encourage adolescent girls to engage in physical activity during this time. Being active in teenage years has been shown to positively influence physical activity participation as an adult (Tammelin, et al., 2003). The adverse effects of inactivity on the health and well-being of Canadians has been well documented (Health Canada, 2007). Encouraging adolescent girls to be physical active can improve their current

and future health, and therefore may enhance quality of life and reduce health care costs as they enter their adult years.

Adolescents differ from children in that they begin to take on more responsibility. They begin to seek out independence, but are still reliant on the adults in their life. Time starts to become a factor in leisure time physical activity participation as school and homework loads become heavier and more important. Friends become increasingly important during adolescence, and the activities young women choose often depend on friend support. These factors have been shown to influence physical activity levels in previous studies (Sirard, Pfeiffer, & Pate, 2006). Sport, physical activity and physical education programs developed for this age group need to be responsive to adolescent girls' perspectives on physical activity to be successful.

## ■ ABOUT CAAWS

The Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) is a national non-profit organization dedicated to increasing opportunities for girls and women to participate and lead in sport and physical activity since 1981. CAAWS works in close cooperation with government and non-government organizations on projects and initiatives that advocate for positive change to achieve gender equity. CAAWS offers a number of services, programs and resources to a variety of individuals and organizations, including government, sport and physical activity organizations, teachers, coaches, health professionals and recreation practitioners.

Launched in 1994, CAAWS' national *On the Move* initiative was designed to increase opportunities for inactive girls and young women to participate in sport and physical activity. *On the Move* increases awareness about the unique needs, interests and experiences of girls and young women. *In Her Voice* provided CAAWS with an opportunity to confirm and/or revise key *On the Move* messages based on the experiences of girls and young women today. Results from the focus groups reconfirmed the importance of providing girls and young women with fun, female-only opportunities where they can try new experiences and build their skills in a fun and inclusive environment. The *In Her Voice* Focus Group Report and Recommendations will enhance the *On the Move* initiative, lending the voices of young women to CAAWS' efforts to increase opportunities for girls and young women to participate in sport and physical activity.

For more information about CAAWS visit [www.caaws.ca](http://www.caaws.ca).

## II: Methods

### ■ FOCUS GROUPS

The goal of the *In Her Voice* project was to gain insight into adolescent girls' experiences with physical activity and sport. Qualitative methods were selected as they allow for a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives. Through conversation, the facilitator can probe for clarification and deeper meanings, and participants can build upon each others' responses. Focus groups were selected as the main data collection method due to time constraints, travel costs, and scheduling, as they allowed the facilitator to gather information from a large number of participants in a short amount of time. Surveys were used to collect participant information quickly, such as demographics.

The *In Her Voice* focus groups involved a facilitator who encouraged group discussion relating to the purpose of the project. The facilitator was a female graduate student who had experience working with the specific population of interest, and was familiar with qualitative research. The facilitator received training and practiced leading focus groups prior to commencing data collection. Discussion progressed naturally at a comfortable pace, and the facilitator encouraged shy participants to respond. One challenge confronted during the focus groups was dominating participants who tried to control the conversation. This was minimized by giving others opportunities to respond before moving on to the next question. Another challenge to focus groups is personal bias. To ensure the facilitator avoided providing cues about appropriate responses, these biases were openly discussed with the participants and kept in check during the discussion.

### ■ QUESTION FORMULATION

With the purpose of the project in mind, an interview guide was developed to define the structure of the focus groups and the questions to be asked. The *In Her Voice* Advisory Committee met via conference call to develop the questions. Final focus group and survey questions were finalized by the project manager and facilitator. Questions were developed in advance, but followed a

semi-structured format to remain flexible to access the participants' perspectives and understandings. Probes were used to follow up what was already said for deeper responses and examples, or for clarification. Questions were open-ended and in familiar language for the participants. Leading and yes/no questions were avoided to ensure good discussion. Questions were practiced to determine confusing questions or wording and to identify questions that yielded irrelevant data. See Appendix A and B for the focus group model and the participant survey.

## ■ RECRUITMENT AND SAMPLE

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. Eight focus groups were delivered in six sites across Canada: Toronto and Nepean in Ontario, Brandon Manitoba, Lethbridge Alberta, and Yellowknife and D'Nilo in the Northwest Territories. Interested communities were invited to reply to a Call for Interest distributed through the networks of CAAWS and its partners. The sites were selected for geographic distribution and community type (ie. urban and rural) to engage diverse participants.

Site coordinators were responsible for recruitment, handing out permission forms, and providing a setting for conducting the focus groups. Participants were selected by the site coordinators based on what information each girl could provide. Participants were required to be between ages 13-17, making parental permission necessary. The optimal size for the focus group was six to eight girls. However due to recruiting difficulties, the focus group sizes ranged from three to eight. The settings for the focus groups included classrooms and meeting rooms in community and recreation centers, which were familiar to the participants and free from distractions. Each focus group took approximately two hours to complete.

Initially the facilitator had wanted to conduct two separate focus groups at each site, one for active girls and one for less active girls. Questions were similar for the most part, but each group had a few questions specific to their characteristics. However, recruiting less active girls was more difficult than anticipated. In the future, connections with other types of groups and activity programs in which less active girls are more likely to participate is recommended. All the focus groups had a combination of self-selected active and less active girls, with the exception of the Nepean Group 1 and Lethbridge Group 1 which were composed of all active participants. Nepean Group 2 and Lethbridge Group 2, along with the other four groups had a mixture of both active and less active participants. Another challenge to recruiting was that the focus groups occurred primarily during the summer months when many girls were away on holidays or involved in other activities.

The *In Her Voice* focus group participants were from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities. Adolescent girls from large urban centers as well as smaller rural



communities were represented. The majority of the girls had participated in school sport, as well as various community recreation programs. The focus groups included girls of varying activity levels, including some who were very involved in sport, some who were involved in more lifestyle based activities, and some who were currently inactive. See Appendix C for detailed participant characteristics.

## ■ PROCEDURE

The focus groups began with an introduction to the *In Her Voice* project. The participants were asked to complete a survey and to write down their names and addresses so they could each receive a gift and copy of the report upon completion. The discussion began with a few ice breaker questions and then the focus group questions; the focus group questions and discussion was tape recorded. Participants were asked about their perspectives on physical activity, sport, and healthy living. They were asked about what they liked/disliked about physical activity, and any school or recreation programs in which they've participated. Participants were also questioned about what factors made it easy/hard to engage in physical activity. The facilitator also sought the young women's input on what they would like to see in a physical activity program and how best to advertise to their age group. The focus groups ended with a wrap up activity where the participants could create their ideal physical activity program. See Appendix A and B for the focus group model and participant survey. The facilitator was responsible for aiding in question development, conducting and transcribing the focus groups, coding and analysing data, and writing the final report. This was done to ensure consistency.

## ■ DATA ANALYSIS

Each focus group (N=8) was tape recorded and transcribed into password protected word processing files. Transcripts were read and re-read several times to determine possible categories and an organizing framework. The files were imported into NVivo® qualitative computer software. This software allowed for easy organization of data. Each unit of data from the content of the focus groups was coded into themes. These themes are discussed in the Findings section. Quotes from the participants are used to better describe and enhance the findings. Survey data was used to help identify the more active girls from the less active girls. The survey data was also compiled to determine participant characteristics (see Appendix C).

## ■ LIMITATIONS

There are limitations to using focus groups for data collection. One limitation is the small sample size which restricts the generalization of the results to a larger population (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Although an effort was made to coordinate focus groups across the country, it was not possible to include all geographic areas. Certain ethnicities were also missed. Further, recruiting less active adolescent girls proved more difficult than expected — most participants were involved in some type of sport program. The young women willing to participate in a focus group may not represent the larger population. Responses may also be dependent on other participants' responses. The small sample size (N=46) and the qualitative research design does not generalize to the whole population, but it does provide us with insight into how some young women feel about physical activity and sport.

## III: Findings

### ■ ABOUT THE FINDINGS

This report provides a summary of the key findings from the adolescent girls participating in the *In Her Voice* project. Findings are organized based on the following categories: adolescent girls' perspectives on physical activity, their current activity levels, factors that encourage their activity level, factors that discourage their physical activity participation, and how to improve adolescent girls' physical activity participation levels. Each category is separated further into themes. Recommendations for practitioners based on the findings are included in the final section.

### ■ ADOLESCENT GIRLS' PERSPECTIVES ON PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

#### *Defining physical activity*

The first goal of *In Her Voice* was to find out what adolescent girls knew about physical activity. They were asked to define physical activity, sport, and healthy living, and how those three terms were related. They were also asked why they thought physical activity was important.

The participants associated *physical activity* with sweating, moving their body, increasing their heart rate, and individual activities such as working out at a gym and running. *Sport* was commonly linked with group activities, such as teams, particularly team activities involving a ball. Competition, rules, and strategy were also associated with sport. A difference emerged between the active girls and the less active girls' responses. The less active girls commonly associated negative terms to physical activity. One comment that stood out from a less active girl was that physical activity involved “. . . people spending countless hours in the gym, trying to get themselves in shape” (Nepean, Group 2). Less active girls also tended to negatively associate physical activity with competition, calling it stressful, aggressive, and bad; whereas the active girls who associated competition with sport viewed it in a positive way, such as when you are using competition in sport, you are “striving to get better” (Lethbridge, Group 1).

When asked to define *healthy living*, every group mentioned healthy eating first. The participants related healthy living to “eating the right kind of food” (Toronto), such as vegetables, and limiting bad food, such as fast food. Participants also discussed how being active and “avoiding anything bad like drugs and alcohol” (Brandon) all contributed to living a healthy life. Most groups believed that eating well was more important to a healthy life than exercise, although they agreed that some activity is necessary. “You could live a healthy life without being super physically active” (Brandon). When asked how to achieve a healthy life, main responses included eating healthy, being active, and having a good frame of mind.

### ***Why is it important for adolescent girls to be active?***

When asked to discuss the importance of physical activity, three main themes emerged. The participants determined that physical activity was important for good physical health, mental health, and appearance.

Having good physical health throughout life was an important outcome of physical activity. According to participants, being active can keep their heart and lungs in shape and reduce their risk of disease. Four out of eight groups mentioned that physical activity helps people to live longer.

Another benefit of having an active lifestyle was good mental health.

*“It just makes you feel better.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

*“You’re stressed if you don’t exercise.”*

(LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 2)

Many groups mentioned how physical activity “makes you feel happy, it releases chemicals” (Toronto) or endorphins, and this helped you to feel good about yourself. Although the participants did not know exactly what endorphins were or why physical activity made them feel better, the participants agreed that a main reason physical activity is important is because it makes people feel good about themselves.

Adolescent girls also tied the importance of physical activity to their appearance. Many participants commented on how physical activity helps you to look good and lose weight. This was a common answer among active and less active girls alike.

*“You want to be thin, you don’t want to be big and stuff.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

*“So if you exercise you won’t be overweight or obese.”*

(TORONTO)

*“You don’t want to get obese.”*

(YELLOWKNIFE)

Appearance was also a reason some girls felt physical activity was not that important. These participants felt physical activity was more important for overweight girls than thinner girls. An inactive girl mentioned that “I don’t want to lose weight, so I don’t need physical activity. I hate running and I get tired easily” (Nepean, Group 2). Although losing weight was an important issue for many of the participants, the majority from both active and less active groups realized that being in good shape was more important than just being thin.

*“I think being active doesn’t mean only changing your outer appearance. It’s for your inside, like getting your heart muscles strong and like being able to go longer, like your respiratory [system] and stuff.”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

*“It’s not just what you look like on the outside. Let’s say you are skinny, you might not be healthy.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

## ■ ACTIVITY LEVELS OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS

### *How active are adolescent girls now?*

*In Her Voice* was also interested in adolescent girls’ perceptions of their current level of participation in sport and physical activity. When asked to compare their current activity levels to when they were younger, responses varied. The majority of participants viewed themselves as less active now, while some participants viewed themselves as currently more active than in childhood. Responses did not differ depending on whether girls selected themselves as active or less active.

The majority of participants, regardless of whether they were active or less active, felt they were less active now than they were as children. Many girls felt their physical activity level seemed to have peaked around middle school, and significantly dropped once they reached high school. Girls that were not yet in high school already predicted that their activity levels would drop once they started grade nine. The participants identified several main reasons for their decreasing physical activity levels. Lifestyle changes, such as technology and a growing desire to fit in, as well as time management issues and a lack of opportunities to be active in school, caused their activity levels to decrease.

Technology contributed to lower levels of activity as participants got older. Participants used to “walk everywhere and bike to my friends’ everyday” “and now we drive” (Brandon). Rather than bicycling or walking for transportation, one participant expressed that “now it’s called cars” (Nepean, Group 1). Participants also mentioned how they now have cell phones and instant messenger to talk to their friends, rather than talking to them in person.

*“We didn’t call people, we used to just bike over to their house.”*

(YELLOWKNIFE)

Participants also felt they were more active as kids because they could play games.

*“I used to play red rover everyday . . . play tag and stuff.” (BRANDON)*

*“I used to run around when I was a kid and go crazy.” (D’NILO)*

Games were fun and participants didn’t “care what other people thought” (Yellowknife). However, this changed as fitting in became more important as the participants got older. One less active participant described how she “was super sporty until grade six. In middle school, like grade seven, you have to be cool” (Nepean, Group 2). Participants in the active groups felt the same.

*“We used to be so active at recess. Until, like, grade seven or eight. Then you’re too cool to run.”*

*“In grade seven and eight there were little kids giving their all at soccer, and we just . . . chilled.”*

*“Everyone just stands around now.”*  
(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

Time management was also a big issue for adolescent girls. The participants had to juggle their school and work schedules and still find time for physical activity or free time to be with their friends. Not having the time to be active will be further discussed in the barriers to physical activity section of this report, as it was frequently mentioned as a main reason the participants were often inactive.

Another reason participants were currently less active related to decreased opportunities to participate at school. One participant mentioned how “high school makes a big promotion of obesity and then doesn’t offer gym all the way through high school” (Toronto). Many high schools only require one semester of physical education to graduate. Increasing pressure for academic credits and higher marks for university and college entrance causes many young women to opt out of physical education as soon as it becomes an elective.

*“With high school I have become so inactive. When I was younger I was in so many leagues. And now because I don’t do gym, I can’t even breathe when I go up a flight of stairs because I’m so inactive compared to before.”*

(TORONTO)

While turning to high school sport seemed like a logical place for girls to engage in physical activity, many participants mentioned they were still too young to make the high school team. This meant they weren’t participating in any after school physical activity.

*“The sports in high school are for all four grades,  
but nobody in grade nine makes the team. Sometimes  
there’s a junior team, but you really have to  
go out of your way to be better than everyone on it.”*

(TORONTO)

Focus group participants who were more active now identified a number of factors that influenced their participation. Some girls expressed they were “too fat” to participate when they were younger.

*“I’m more active now. I used to be a fat kid . . .  
Like, I didn’t really start exercising until grade seven, because  
I was really big in elementary school. Then I started losing  
weight and got into a sequence.”* (BRANDON)

*“‘Oh, look at the fat Chinese girl’, and stuff,  
so I didn’t really join any sports. Even though I tried  
out for all the sports I didn’t make any of them until  
like grade seven and then everyone was like  
‘Oh my gosh you’re so skinny now’ and I’m like,  
‘No I just grew.’”* (TORONTO)

For others, opportunities to participate in team sport were limited during elementary school.

*“I didn’t play sports as much when I was younger.  
You have to be in grade six to play sports.”* (D’NILO)

Health conditions such as asthma also prevented some girls from participating in sport when they were younger. As their conditions improved, so did their level of physical activity.

*“I had asthma when I was younger,  
so it was hard to play in sports.”* (D’NILO)

*“I really like sports because when I was young I had really  
bad asthma, and they were like ‘join sports anyways’ . . . then my  
breathing started to improve and then my lungs expanded  
and now the asthma is gone practically.”*

(TORONTO)

Finally, some participants felt they took sport more seriously as adolescents and had greater knowledge and skills which helped them be more active now. Girls that were still heavily involved in sport felt that “I’m more active now than I ever have been” (Lethbridge, Group 2), particularly during the school year sport season.

A few participants who self-selected as inactive had not seen any changes in their activity levels because they were inactive when they were younger and were currently inactive as teenagers.

*“In recess all I would do was sit in the library  
and read and read.” (TORONTO)*

*“I was never sporty at all.”  
(NEPEAN, GROUP 2)*

### ***How active will adolescent girls be in the future?***

When asked to predict their future physical activity levels after high school, participants generally fell into two response categories. Some participants felt their activity levels would decrease because they would have even less time and have less money for activities.

*“We won’t have a lot of time to go to the gym . . .  
I’m worried about the ‘freshman 15’\* [in university].”  
(BRANDON)*

*“People going to university, their focus is usually on their work  
because they’re working on the rest of their career.”  
(LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 1)*

However, most girls felt that even if they no longer had team sport, they would continue to be active. When discussing their future physical activity level, some girls in Yellowknife mentioned “if you go to a gym it’ll probably stay the same . . . but if you’re into team sports, it’ll probably go down.” This type of sentiment was reflected in other groups as well.

*“I think if you’re motivated and you’re used to doing  
physical activity, then it won’t be too hard to continue.”  
(LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 1)*

Some participants discussed how universities have gyms that they can use as well as “classes like yoga and Pilates” (Nepean, Group 1). Finding a friend or joining a group in university that is active was another way some girls felt they would remain active.

*“Even if there’s someone that you know that’s in your  
classes with you, and they like the same activities, you can go  
for a run with them or do something as easy as Pilates  
some nights.” (NEPEAN, GROUP 1)*

Some girls felt their physical activity levels would actually increase over time because they now had more skill and knowledge about being active.

*“We’ll play more because we know we can do it better.”  
(D’NILO)*

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\* Freshman 15 refers to weight gain that some students experience during their first year of university or college.



## ■ FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE ADOLESCENT GIRLS TO BE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE

According to the participants, family, friends and other important adults (e.g. teachers, coaches) can be positive and negative influences with respect to physical activity.

### *Family*

A lot of time was spent discussing family influence on the focus group participants' physical activity levels and beliefs. Family members can be a positive or a negative influence. To be a good role model and positively influence their daughter's participation, parents and other family members need to be active themselves.

Participants spoke most about the influence of their parents.

*“My mom really pushed me to start running, because I was really heavy, and she'd say ‘oh, come for a run with me’ . . . At first I hated running, but she pushed me, and then after I saw the results, that's when I started saying I've got to get out and exercise.”*

(BRANDON)

*“This spring when I don't have sports to play, my mom and I signed up for the gym.”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

*“My mom isn't really active, but my dad is always going to the gym, he has the biggest muscles, and he kind of influences me because when I turn 16 I really want a gym membership. He just kind of influences me to become active.”* (TORONTO)

Beyond structured activities, parents also modeled the integration of physical activity into everyday activities. Small amounts of activity can add up to make a difference in their daughters' health.

*“My parents are pretty active with me sometimes. We'll take my dog for a walk.”*

(LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 1)

*“My mom is a good role model. She always has to walk everywhere, not taking the bus, taking the stairs. I'm like ‘there's the escalator’ . . .”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

It is important for parents to actively support and encourage their daughters in physical activity. The participants expressed that having parents who care and who are proud of them increases their motivation to be active.

*“My parents supported me . . . said I was doing a good job and that I should keep at it.”*

(BRANDON)

*“I think if they come to your games and watch you,  
you’re going to play well and do better.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

Parents can also help support their daughters by registering them for programs, paying team/program fees and providing transportation to and from activities. Supporting their daughters by purchasing equipment and active clothing was also important.

*“They just signed me up for everything . . .  
they ask you and you kind of have no choice.”*

(LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 1)

*“I’d say, ‘I want to do this’, but then I’d start and was like,  
‘I don’t want to do this anymore’, but my mom was like,  
‘well I just paid for it now you have to go.’”*

(YELLOWKNIFE)

*“My mom will buy me stuff to get me active. It’s like with  
my scooter. My parents were like ‘oh, if it’s going to get you  
active we’ll get you a scooter.’”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

Other family members can also support adolescent girls’ participation in sport and physical activity. Siblings can influence their sisters’ physical activity levels by being positive role models, regardless if they are older or younger.

*“When I see my sisters go and do something like  
their sports it kind of pushes me to keep up with them  
and work as hard as they do.”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

*“My older cousins all went to college for basketball,  
and they made me believe I could do it too.”*

(YELLOWKNIFE)

*“My brother and I have a little competition going on.”*

(LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 2)

Even the family dog can influence young women to be active because dogs need to be walked!

*“My dog is very active, she’s energetic, so I have to take her to  
the park, I can’t just stand there and watch her run,  
I have to throw the ball and run with her.”*

(TORONTO)

However, family members can also negatively influence their daughters’ physical activity. Parents need to be careful not to push too hard. One participant commented “being forced to play sport might mean you don’t like it as much as when you get to choose to play sport” (Nepean, Group 1).

Some participants expressed that sometimes parents can be unsupportive, which can affect their motivation. It was apparent that adolescent girls are largely influenced by how their parents live — if their parents are inactive, it is more likely they will be inactive.

*“My mom was really skinny when she was my age and she never worked out or anything, and now she has the best body ever. So maybe that’s what will happen to me.”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

*“Sometimes their parents aren’t active so they’re not active either. They haven’t been exposed to sports, so they’re not into it.”*  
(LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 1)

Some parents also prevent their daughters from being active by not permitting them to play sports. This may be due to stereotypes about the appropriateness of sport for girls and young women, cultural or religious beliefs, or even that school should take priority over physical activity.

*“My aunt thinks I’m wasting my time with basketball.”*  
(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

*“There are some girls whose parents don’t let them try out.”*  
(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

*“(My mom) grew up in my country, Afghanistan, and back then there was no physical activity, and your parents’ history affects you. My mom doesn’t make me do anything now because she knows I don’t like it.”*  
(NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

*“I know this one girl whose parents don’t let her do anything because they think she should be focusing on school. School comes first.”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

It was apparent from the participants’ discussion of physical activity influences that family members, particularly parents, played an important role, and that their influence could be positive or negative. How girls and young women are raised can indicate how active they will be in the future.

### ***Friends***

Friends were mentioned frequently as another significant influence on the participants’ physical activity levels. It soon became evident that friends, similar to parents, could be a positive or a negative influence. During leisure time many girls agreed that they decided how to spend their free time as a group. For instance, one participant mentioned her friends “don’t want to go swimming, so I just don’t go” (D’Nilo).

*“If your friends don’t want to be active, and you want to spend time with them, then the time that you would be active you wouldn’t be [spending time] with them.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

*“I have a lot of inactive friends and I want to go out running. It’s hard to find people who want to go out with me. They’re like ‘no, I don’t really want to.’ So you’re just kinda like, ok. It’s either I go alone or I just don’t go.”* (TORONTO)

But friends can also positively influence daily physical activity. They can convince each other to walk rather than take the bus or drive. It was apparent that the participants felt friends helped make physical activity more enjoyable.

*“We come here everyday, and I’m, like, ‘let’s take the street car’, even though we are only four stops away, but [my friend] is like ‘no, let’s walk.’”*

*“Before I used to bus home, even though it’s a walkable distance, like 20 minutes, and my friend’s just like, no, please walk with me. So I walk with her now.”* (TORONTO)

*“My friends, we never used to be active, but now we try and make things more active. Like Starbucks, we walk to Starbucks instead of waiting for a bus, it’s like 20 minutes, it’s a good walk. If you make things fun then they’ll be more active.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

*“I find if you go with a friend it makes it more fun.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

Friends can also encourage each other to participate in structured activity, such as joining a sport team or taking a class. Even just having a friend to do physical activity with can make it easier to participate.

*“You need to have friends who are really active, because they’ll ask you to come along.”* (BRANDON)

*“Friends, they play with me.”*

(D’NILO)

*“I wouldn’t even want to go to the gym if I didn’t have someone to go with.”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

Throughout the focus groups, friends emerged as perhaps the most important factor in the young women’s participation in sport and physical activity. Friends will be further discussed as a reason focus group participants enjoy being active, later in this report.

### ***Other important adults***

Other important adults can influence young women to become or remain active. Coaches and teachers were often mentioned as positive influences on the participants' physical activity.

*"My coach influenced me. The [junior basketball] coach asked me to come out even though I'd never played basketball before because I wasn't good at it. He said, 'well you'll keep in shape for volleyball,' now I like it more than volleyball".*

*"I've had the same coach for years. He's like 'oh, are you going to come out again? It was really fun last year.'"*

(BRANDON)

Teachers were discussed as positive and negative influences. It was apparent that if the participants' liked their physical education teacher, they tended to like physical education class.

*"The gym teacher we have, he's very active and he'll join in. It pushes you to have fun."*

(BRANDON)

However, if the teacher was pushy or controlling, it had the opposite effect and led to negative feelings towards physical activity.

*"When I was younger, no one bossed me around, so that's why I did physical activity. But now my gym teacher always tells me what to do, [she] is too pushy, I didn't like that." (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)*

## ■ WHAT DO ADOLESCENT GIRLS LIKE ABOUT PHYSICAL ACTIVITY?

Adolescent girls have identified several reasons they like physical activity and sport. These reasons influence why they choose to participate. The three main reasons that emerged from the focus groups were: feeling good, looking good, and having fun. A few other reasons emerged but were not common for both active and less active girls. These reasons will be discussed at the end of this section.

### ***Feeling good***

One of the most common reasons the adolescent girls participated in physical activity is that it made them feel good about themselves. It increased their self-confidence, they felt healthy and energized, and it allowed them take their mind off the stresses of school and work. This was common among active and less active girls.

*"It makes you feel good."*

(LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 1)

*“It brings the best out in you.”*

(D’NILO)

One less active girl compared physical activity as an alternative to eating junk food.

*“I find if you eat a bar of chocolate it makes you feel good, but I’ve recently started going to the gym, and it makes me feel good for a longer period of time.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

Participants seemed to notice a difference in how they felt when they did not exercise.

*“I feel like when I don’t do something physical that day I feel like something is missing.”*

*“I find that when I sit around the house and do nothing from the time you get home to the time you go to sleep you just don’t feel good about yourself. But if you go out and do something you feel really good about what you just did.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

The participants also described how physical activity can be good for mental health. They discussed how physical activity helped them fall asleep fast and could be a stress reliever. When asked why they participated in physical activity, many indicated that it “gets rid of aggression” or is “relaxing” (Brandon) and “it takes your mind off school” (Nepean, Group 2). Their activities helped them “get away from busy schedules, though it is sometimes what makes things a little hectic” (Lethbridge, Group 2).

*“I like the mentality of reminding yourself that you just did something healthy and good.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

It was evident that physical activity allowed young women to feel better about themselves, and this often tied into looking better as well.

### ***Looking good***

A significant motivator for young women to be active is that it helped them look good and lose weight. This was common across active and less active groups, however less active girls seemed to focus on weight more than the active girls. When asked what they like about physical activity, a common response was “I like losing weight. I like to see the scale and oh, I lost two pounds” (Brandon).

Although it is good that appearance works as a motivator to keep young women active, it could also cause an unhealthy obsession with weight.

*“I have a friend who got active because, she’s a small girl,  
but she started seeing all these ads about being obese  
and started worrying about it.”*

(YELLOWKNIFE)

Participants also discussed that they liked looking good even while doing physical activity. Sweating was seen as positive when working out at a gym or in an aerobics style class, indicating to the young women and those around them that they were working hard.

*“I like sweating at the gym. When you’re having  
a good work out, you know that you look good.  
Sweat at a gym is good.”* (BRANDON)

*“We went to a spinning class and did that for an hour,  
and I thought I looked really pretty, like a flushed  
look that looks really natural.”* (TORONTO)

*“With working out, when I’m sweating, I’m like ‘whoa,  
I really did something now’ and then I go home and I’m like  
‘ooh, I look kind of good!’”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

However, while these participants were motivated by their efforts and spoke about increased self-confidence after their work-out, this experience was not shared by all. Sweating and having others see you participating were identified as inhibitors to participation by some girls, and will be discussed later in this report.

### ***Fun and social***

When participants were questioned why they are currently involved in physical activity, the most common response was “it’s fun.” It was agreed that physical activity is definitely better when it’s fun. One less active girl revealed that if something was fun and didn’t feel like exercise she would do it.

*“That’s why I started dancing. I absolutely hate sports,  
I like jumping around and having fun. You’re just thinking about the  
specific movements in your head and not in your body.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

A main reason adolescent girls enjoyed physical activity was because it gave them a chance to be with their friends in a social environment. It was important for adolescent girls to be with their friends, so it was helpful to do the same activities. This was the same for team sport and individual activities.

*“I love gym class, it’s so fun, you’re with friends.”*

(BRANDON)

*“You get like a good workout from being able to have  
fun and see your friends.”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

*“I love going to the gym. I go with a friend and we just have fun working out together. We make jokes, like ‘ha ha, I can do this and you can’t.’” (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)*

Belonging to a group or a club helped make physical activity more fun as well. Most of the active participants discussed how being part of a team is a fun way to be active, but even just joining a gym can be a positive influence.

*“I like going to the gym because I like to feel a part of something. When I have a treadmill at home, I’m like ‘ugh, I can do it anytime.’ But when I go pay to do whatever, I’m there, and it feels exclusive.”*  
(NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

*“The car ride home is so fun. I’m in a car pool and we can, like, kill ourselves laughing.”*  
(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

Participating in physical activity was also fun because it is a good way to meet new people and build social skills. This was a common reason focus group participants kept participating on their sport teams.

*“I meet a lot of people through it that share the same interests, its good social.”*  
(LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 2)

*“Especially with team sports, you’re going to meet a lot of new people, you’re going to meet kids you don’t get along with and kids you do get along with really well, you get used to people surrounding you and stuff like that. You get to know people you wouldn’t necessarily meet.”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

*“If you join something, you’ll make friends.”*  
(BRANDON)

Girls who were less active agreed that meeting people is a good motivator. One less active girl who has started to work out at a gym found that “when I go to the gym, there are more people, then I talk to them on the phone or MSN and it inspires me to go again” (Nepean, Group 2). Something similar was mentioned by a participant more involved with competitive sport.

*“I went to the Summer Games, it was a lot of fun and I made a lot of new friends, and we actually won. We got to stay for the whole weekend and do a camp. So it made me want to play again this year.”*  
(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

Participating in physical activity programs can also allow adolescent girls an opportunity to travel. Active girls mentioned that travelling was an important reason they were active. Some less active girls expressed that they wish they could have the same opportunity.



*“I like to travel and go places with my sports club.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

*“I wish I would have played soccer when I was younger to get a chance to travel.”*

(YELLOWKNIFE)

Social factors were a main factor in why adolescent girls, both active and less active, participated in physical activity. When asked why, the participants agreed it was just more fun.

### **Other**

Other factors identified by the young women as reasons they participated in physical activity highlighted some differences between active and less active girls.

A main difference between the active girls and less active girls was how they felt about competition. The self-identified active or “sporty” girls viewed competition as something that made physical activity fun. Competition meant “you all have something to work for together” (Lethbridge, Group 1).

*“I like competition. We have too many players on my basketball team, like 14, so it’s not as much playing time.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

It appeared that enjoyment of competition was related to the social aspect because many participants who viewed competition positively mentioned something about their team or friends. However many girls disliked competition because it was too stressful.

*“If we play soccer, just my friends and I, not in an actual league, I have so much fun.”*

(BRANDON)

*“Some sports are too competitive. I do some sports like for fun, but some people are better and try to compete with you, then it’s not as fun.”*

(TORONTO)

Competition can be a reason some girls engage in physical activity, but for others, competition can discourage their participation.

Another difference between groups was that active girls realized that participating in physical activity and sport allowed them to learn new skills and provided them with opportunities such as college scholarships. Less active girls did not mention these factors as reasons they’re active.

*“Learning a new skill, trying something new.”*

(LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 1)

## ■ WHAT FACILITATES ADOLESCENT GIRLS' PARTICIPATION IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY?

Participants were asked for their opinions regarding what factors make it easy to be active. Three common facilitators to physical activity were identified across each group: enjoying the activity, feeling successful and skilled, and easy access to physical activity.

### ***Enjoyment***

Each group identified that enjoying physical activity can make it easier to participate on a regular basis. If the activity is fun, young women will participate willingly.

*“Playing a sport that you love to play,  
it makes it fun.”* (D'NILO)

*“If the activity you're involved in, and you like it,  
it makes it easier.”* (LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 2)

*“If you find something you enjoy it's easy to do it.  
If you hate running, you're not going to want to do it everyday,  
but if you like soccer you run there.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

Many of the less active girls discussed how it is easier to participate in physical activity when you enjoy it because then it does not feel like work, but more of a fun thing to do.

*“If it's something you enjoy. When you're not doing it  
for the purpose of being active.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

*“I think it's easier if you're not having to think about it,  
if you sort of have fun and are not thinking 'oh, I have to do this to lose  
so many pounds.' I'm just doing it because I like it.”*

(TORONTO)

Adolescent girls identified that being involved with a team or a group helps them to be active. It made it more fun and holds them accountable because they have to show up for the activity or risk letting down their teammates or friends. Active girls described how their sport teams help them to be active.

*“Being part of a sports team, other people are doing  
it so it's not just on your own.”*

(LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 1)

*“If you're connected to a team or group, then you have to be there”*

(LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 2).

*“Team sports. You think of being on a team, you get to be with all of your friends and have fun.”*

(YELLOWKNIFE)

“Being with people who are into it too” (Toronto) can be a good motivator and make it easier to be active. The participants identified that it was important to them to have friends in the activity or at least the opportunity to meet new friends. “Your friends try and get you into it, so then you know someone there” (Yellowknife). Being with a group or team can make it easier to be active because it helps to make the activity more enjoyable.

Beyond participating with friends, focus group participants identified a number of other factors that help make physical activity more enjoyable. With less social, individual activities, such as running or going to the gym, playing music or reading magazines can enhance their experience.

*“Music, it makes it go by quickly.”*

*“Especially dance music.”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

*“When I go on the treadmill it helps if you’re reading, something to just get your mind off it. I’m like ‘no he didn’t’.”*

*“Like magazines, you’re concentrating on that, you’re not thinking, ‘keep going, keep going,’ your mind is like ‘ooh, that dress is cute.’”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

Having something nice to wear while being active also facilitated their participation and made the participants feel good about themselves.

*“What you wear while you do it. Because if you wear something you bought that is sports related you’ll like it and want to put it on. You’re like ‘I’m going to look good.’”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

Enjoyment was the most common facilitator to physical activity, and a crucial way to make physical activity more fun is for adolescent girls to be part of a group or have their friends with them.

### ***Success***

Also related to participants’ enjoyment of physical activity was feeling successful or accomplished in the activity they liked. If adolescent girls feel they are good or skilled in an activity, this facilitates their participation. Whether it is making a team, being praised, making a good play, or winning a game, feeling success motivated these young women to be active.

*“It’s easier when you’re congratulated when you do something right. If you don’t have that, you don’t have the drive.”*  
*“For me a positive thing is scoring a basket and hearing your coach yell your name. And just cheering you on.”* (BRANDON)

Being praised and encouraged can happen while playing on a team or participating in physical education class.

*“My gym teacher encourages me so much, and a positive thing is that she hasn’t given up on me. It’s helped me a lot, because my gym mark is 80% or something, and last year I failed gym. I also find that people in your class encouraging you really motivates me.”*  
(NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

For those girls not involved in team sport, setting goals for themselves helped them feel successful and facilitated their participation. Many participants from the Nepean Group 2 commented on how goals can motivate them.

*“Like, if I make future goals, I want to be this weight at this time, or be able to do this at this time, it helps me.”*  
*“My goals, like with the beep test, I want to do better each time. So with me its not weight, I just want to do better.”*  
*“Setting small rewards for yourself. You’re like ‘if I get this I’ll go and buy that CD I didn’t buy before because I was saving money’.”*

Feeling good about their performance or level of participation in physical activity can be a facilitator for adolescent girls to remain active.

### ***Easy access***

Another facilitator to physical activity participation, not related to enjoyment, was easy access to programs and places to be active. Having places and programs near home or school can make it easier for adolescent girls to be active.

*“If everything is readily available. If you want to play volleyball and it’s near your house. Even tennis, if there’s courts near your house. Or rollerblades, it’s easy to throw them on. For some people there’s nothing available to them or they don’t have the money.”* (BRANDON)

*“When they’re available, easy to get into, if you can’t find a sport near you it would be harder to get involved.”*  
(TORONTO)

*“I think if the sport like is more available, it’s easier to get involved with and you’ll be more willing to go to it. If you have to take like eight buses to get there, you aren’t going to go everyday.”*  
(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

The easier it is for young women to access a place or program they like, the more likely they will be active, particularly if it is inexpensive and they have the proper equipment.

One place that can provide all of this is the school. Schools can provide many opportunities for young women to be active through physical education class and extracurricular sport and physical activity programs. For young women in communities that experience winter for many months of the year, having a place that offers indoor physical activity, like a school, was important to support participation.

*“The school really helps me to be active with a lot of stuff. I play sports and have gym. There’s a lot of sports here, usually you can find something to do all year.”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

*“Our school has a workout area, all students have access. You pay like \$25 for the year and you can use it everyday after school. It’s just easier that way because then you can workout in the winter.”*  
(YELLOWKNIFE)

Physical Education class can also make it easier for young women to achieve daily physical activity. Mandatory physical education ensures all adolescent girls are at least participating in some physical activity. Some mentioned that “forcing [us] to be in gym” makes it easier to be active (Brandon).

While not all schools have mandatory physical education, some do offer alternative activity classes. Two participants from Nepean discussed how physical education is mandatory “only in grade nine. But we have dance and personal fitness and outdoor ed. also for grades 10, 11, and 12.”

*“I had my grade 11 gym credit last year, so this year I can do outdoor ed. instead.”*  
(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

Having different options for young women in high school to be active is important to support their physical activity participation.

## ■ REASONS ADOLESCENT GIRLS STAY AWAY FROM PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Several reasons why adolescent girls did not participate in physical activity emerged from the *In Her Voice* focus groups. Main factors included: feeling unskilled, feeling self-conscious, and a lack of interest.

### ***Feeling unskilled and unsuccessful***

A main concern for participants was feeling unskilled — adolescent girls did not want to try a new activity or participate in activities in which they feel unskilled or were afraid of being unsuccessful. “Not knowing how to play the sport” was a main reason some girls in the D’Nilo focus group stayed away from physical

activity. Adolescent girls frequently became discouraged if they did not feel successful in an activity or they did not see improvements right away. When asked why they thought girls were inactive, participants in the Lethbridge Group 2 mentioned that “if you’re not good at it right away” you would likely not continue to participate.

*“In dance class I was in the class with people who had a lot of experience, so the teacher would go fast and I couldn’t get the move and didn’t know what I was doing for the entire class, so I’d just sit back and watch because I couldn’t get it. That kind of ruined things.” (TORONTO)*

Feeling unskilled was even more discouraging when there was pressure to do well. Competition was a main reason some girls shied away from sport and physical activity.

*“It’s a lot about competition. Like I don’t play volleyball because I’m really bad at it.”*

*“Competition, for sports, it stresses me out because I’ve never been good at anything.” (BRANDON)*

This became even more of an issue as participants got older and competition became more intense.

*“If it’s fun I’ll play something I’m not good at, but if it’s serious then I don’t want to bring down the team.”*  
(BRANDON)

*“When you get older sports get more competitive, so if you don’t make the team, it’s like you’ll never go back, because they’re like, well I’m not good enough anyways”*  
*“I know a lot of people like that, especially in high school.”*  
(LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 2)

The participants felt there was a point when they were too old to learn a new skill, because there was no chance of making a team. Less active participants agreed and had similar reasons for not participating, particularly as they got older.

*“When I was young I was busy just being a kid, but when I wanted to do sports I felt like I was too old to start. Everyone was already good. I was always scared that I’d get made fun of because I’d never played before.” (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)*

For some young women, participating in individual activities removed the pressure of doing well for a team.

*"I don't like when you do something wrong on a team, it affects everyone else, but if you're just working out by yourself and instead of going for 30 minutes you only do 20, it only affects you."*

*"I don't like the pressure. I like doing my own thing and having fun with it." (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)*

Team sport and group activities were often especially disliked because of the public nature of the activities. When adolescent girls participated and did not make a team or succeed at a certain skill, it was often more detrimental because it happened in front of their peers. Being singled out or made fun of was a common feeling for less active girls in physical education class.

*"I find with school when you're trying out for teams, you know people are going to be cut. If you don't make it, people are like 'ha, you didn't make it.'" (NEPEAN, GROUP 1)*

*"It's like 'why didn't you do this? You suck!'"*

*"That can turn people off a sport." (TORONTO)*

*"I was always the kid that was picked on . . . Whenever I was in gym class they'd give me dirty looks or if I made mistakes they'd roll their eyes, and started to completely shun me. I knew I was bad but I was forced to take the class anyway."*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

*"I hate when they have captains in gym class. I always got picked last." (YELLOWKNIFE)*

Perhaps unaware of the experiences of their less active peers, some active girls believed that less active girls are "embarrassed to try, people are watching [them]."

*"They pretend it's not cool because they don't want to embarrass themselves by trying."*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

Feelings of being unsuccessful emerged when some participants failed to reach a goal they set. This was common with weight loss goals, which are often unrealistic. Not seeing immediate results can discourage adolescent girls from pursuing fitness activities, particularly if they have unrealistically high expectations.

*"I think with the celebrity thing and the media, sometimes I do look at magazines and think, ok maybe I could do a few crunches before I go to bed, that wouldn't hurt, then I don't see any results after a day, so I'm like never mind."*

*"I think what holds me back is not seeing immediate results. Like last summer, I would run everyday. At first I would see changes, but then it slows down." (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)*

Educating adolescent girls about goal setting and encouraging them to monitor the impact of participation on their physical and mental health will support the development of realistic expectations and life-long participation.

### *Feeling self-conscious*

The public nature of sport teams and physical education classes made a lot of less active participants feel self-conscious about their abilities and the way they looked in front of their classmates or teammates. The less active girls particularly had a lot to say about feeling self-conscious, particularly when sweating in gym class and having to participate in front of boys. This was a common reason why some did not want to participate in physical activity.

Sweating in physical education class made some participants, active and less active, feel self-conscious when they had to attend a class immediately after.

*“I don’t care at practices because everyone else is just as gross.  
But in gym class it’s different. You don’t want to go to class all sweaty.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

*“If the girly girls are sweating, they’re like ‘oh my gosh,  
I’m getting all sweaty I gotta stop.’ So they go lay down in the shade.”*

(TORONTO)

*“I don’t like getting sweaty and knowing I have another class  
to go to. For some kids gym is their life, but I guess for us,  
we have different interests.”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

Participants’ negative comments about sweating and the practicalities of readying themselves for their next class contrasted with more positive comments made about feeling good while sweating when working out at a gym or with their team.

For adolescent girls who did not participate on sport teams, individual exercise seemed like an easy alternative. Yet even exercising on their own can be intimidating because they felt people would judge them if they were seen being active.

*“Some people feel more secure watching TV.”*

*“It’s a big risk to go for a run . . .”*

*“. . . Because people look at you.”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

This could be why having friends to participate with was such an important factor for young women.

*“I wanted to start jogging around my neighbourhood.  
I had everything ready to do it, but I was like, oh I don’t want to  
bump into someone I know, because they’d be like ‘ya, you really  
need to exercise’ and they’d judge me or something.”*

*“Jogging around and seeing a guy you like is the worst, because  
your hair is all messed up.”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)



It became apparent from the discussions that adolescent girls can feel self-conscious participating in physical activity around their peers, but even more so around boys.

*“I like going to the women-only gym, the one I like is far away, the closer one is co-ed, and I’m like ‘mom, I don’t want to go’ and then as soon as I got in I wanted to look cute, so like I have my blue tights on, like ‘hey.’ I see these guys and it’s really intimidating.”*

*“That’s what I like too, when I go to the sports plex, its co-ed. When I see a guy I go to the other room.”*

*“I wear make up. I feel like that holds me back. Because I wake up looking gross, I have to shower, straighten my hair, do my makeup, go to they gym and then come home and do it all over again to go out.*

*It’s just a hassle.”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

It was evident that negative experiences, especially when girls felt self-conscious about their bodies, could turn adolescent girls off sport and physical activity.

*“I remember I tried out for soccer, and I had to get shorts, all the girls were looking at me because all of their shorts were baggy and mine were skin tight. It was a bigger size, but I have a booty! And after they started laughing at me so I went back in the change room and went home.”*

*“Girls can be really mean, so can guys.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

*“Well, the whole body image thing, being a dancer. There’s a lot of smaller dancers than me and you’re as good as them, but you don’t look like them . . . It takes a while to process that you’re never going to look like that, even though you are in good shape.”*

(LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 2)

*“The swimming thing, like having to wear a bathing suit, was not good.”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

Feeling self-conscious or unsuccessful could cause some adolescent girls to view physical activity in such a negative light that they no longer have interest in participating.

### ***Losing interest***

Focus group participants reported the transition from middle school to high school as a time when adolescent girls begin to lose interest in sport and physical activity.

*“Well I don’t know, it’s a loss of drive or something when they get to high school, with their friends, it just doesn’t matter as much anymore.”*

(LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 1)

Some active girls viewed the less active girls as having different interests.

*“They get into unhealthy things, drugs, drinking . . .”*

*“. . . they’re more into makeup and hair.”*

(LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 1)

*“They hate being in gym and would rather be somewhere else.  
Some people just don’t want to play sports and they’d rather hang  
out with their friends, or be on Facebook for hours on end.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

Less active girls saw that they may have different interests and skills from the active girls.

*“Other people are really into their sports. Some people are just active,  
and they don’t have to focus as much on their homework because  
their grades are good.”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

Spending time socializing was important to young women, and if their friends weren’t active, chances are they wouldn’t do anything active together.

*“Also people who have social stuff, it’s either I can go for  
a run or hang out with my friends.”* (TORONTO)

*“I have friends who are really dedicated to their sport, then I have  
others who spend their whole day on the internet and stuff.”*

*“When you think about it, everybody is texting now  
and playing video games.”*

*“There are so many alternatives to running around.”*

(YELLOWKNIFE)

Losing interest in physical activity can happen when the activities adolescent girls are involved with are boring and no longer enjoyable.

*“If you do too much it might seem like a chore,  
you have to be in the mood I guess.”*

(LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 1)

*“I hate running laps. It’s so repetitive. It’s fine  
running through the neighbourhood.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

When participants felt they were being forced to do something, this also contributed to them losing interest.

*“I don’t like some activities, like forced jogging.  
I remember in elementary school they made us jog for 20 minutes  
straight and I really didn’t like that.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

Feeling unskilled, self-conscious, and losing interest in physical activity were identified as reasons some adolescent girls are less active. The *In Her Voice* focus group participants also determined factors that lead to girls' disinterest, and barriers that caused them to feel unskilled and self-conscious.

## ■ WHAT DISCOURAGES ADOLESCENT GIRLS FROM PARTICIPATING IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY?

With similar themes to the reasons adolescent girls shied away from physical activity, the participants also identified several barriers to their participation in physical activity. Barriers included not learning the necessary skills, lack of time, time of year, and limited access to activity.

### *Not knowing how*

Many girls identified not knowing how to play as one of their most frequent barriers to physical activity. This is not surprising considering feeling unskilled was a main reason adolescent girls disliked physical activity. They felt they needed to learn the skills at a young age in order to keep up with the rest of their cohort. It was frequently mentioned by the participants that adolescent girls need to be taught skills and exposed to a variety of sports and physical activities while they are still young. If they waited too long then they became self-conscious because they felt less skilled and behind other girls their age.

*"A lot of people haven't been shown into sports, so you don't know what it is all about. You might not enjoy it as much compared to someone who's been brought up in it and they like it already."*

*"Sometimes your parents put you in sports when you're little, or they motivate you in junior high, and then some kids don't have that push. If they want to join in grade 11, there's really no chance of making a team, so it's kind of like 'why try?'"*

*"Even when you're in grade 8 or 9, it's already too late to get into sports." (LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 2)*

*"I wish they had more beginner things, like if you join, I'm really bad at soccer but all my friends are good, so I can't really join now. They all started at a younger age"*

*"Most of my girlfriends I know who are really active have been in it since they were really young." (YELLOWKNIFE)*

It is evident that the participants viewed not starting at a young age as a barrier to their current participation. With few opportunities to build their basic skills or participate on team, less active girls resigned themselves to sitting on the sidelines.

### *Lack of time*

Lack of time was also discussed as a factor that made it difficult for participants to be active. Each group viewed physical activity as something that takes up time. As adolescent girls entered high school, they were under more pressure to earn good grades. There was more homework and many girls had part time jobs.

*“I think it’s hard to find a balance between doing too much and having time with your friends and all the other stuff.”*

*“I think when you’re younger, being part of a school sports team is just something that you do, but in high school everybody has work or school, and it just gets too much.”* (LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 1)

*“I used to be so active and was on so many teams. But because of high school, I wasn’t ready for all the extracurricular stuff and homework and stuff. It just kind of hit me hard, I don’t have any time to be active.”* (TORONTO)

*“It depends on your priorities. If you’re really focused on school work it’s really hard to find a balance. You have to choose when to go or not to go.”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

*“Definitely time also makes [physical activity] hard, because again in high school we get a lot of work. Trying to balance it out, I have like soccer at 6 o’clock but I also have this big test to study for. And if I don’t go to soccer my coach will be mad, but if I don’t study for my test I’ll fail. So it’s hard to manage it all.”* (TORONTO)

Coordinating multiple sports and activities was also challenging for adolescent girls. Participants who were interested in a lot of sports found it difficult to find time to play more than one sport in high school.

*“All the sports I want to join (in high school) are on the same day at the same time.”* (TORONTO)

*“Now we have the group of spring sports, we can only choose one, the group of winter sports, we can only choose one . . .”*  
(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

It is evident that young women are under a lot of pressure from all sides of their life, and often physical activity is the first thing to go. The stress from school and navigating adolescence can make young women tired. Participants discussed how it was often easier to do nothing.

*“It’s hard, too. Some days I’ll have a tired day and if I already took my rest day, it’s so hard because I’ll just want to open a bag of cheesies and watch TV. It takes a lot of will power to go to the gym sometimes.”*

(BRANDON)

Active girls sometimes viewed less active girls as lazy. It seemed the active girls believed less active girls used lack of time as an excuse because if the active girls could find time to exercise, so could the less active girls.

*“I find that some people say that sports take up too much time, but I find you usually have enough time, like a game will be at 5pm or something. You have enough time to go home and do whatever you need to do. Practices are also often in the mornings.”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

*“It’s always the technology that’s taking over people’s lives. The iPods in the ears, the Facebook on the computer, the MSN [instant messaging]. They just get lazy. Don’t get me wrong, I do it too, there are shows I need to watch and emails I need to check. But you can do it all and they just refuse to believe it.”*  
(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

Additional research is needed to further explore the impact of differing levels of support from family and friends and personal skills (e.g. time management) on participation. Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect all adolescent girls to “do it all.”

### ***Time of year***

Adolescent girls’ participation in sport and physical activities varied by the time of year, with winter and transitional times between sport seasons seen as key times of physical inactivity.

Many participants reported the weather during winter as a barrier to their physical activity participation.

*“In winter I can’t really do anything. I’m going into grade 10 next year and I chose not to take gym, so then it’ll be tough because I won’t know what to do.”* (TORONTO)

*“I hate going outside when its -30C and snowing. I get really lazy.”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

*“[It’s] harder in winter, because you can’t run in the snow.”* (D’NILO)

There were also times throughout the school year when participants became less active, such as when their activity or sport finished. Depending on the options available, support from family and friends, and accessibility (as described below), the end of a sport season may signal the end of an adolescent girls’ participation until the following year.

### ***Lack of access***

Just as access can facilitate physical activity participation, a lack of access with respect to transportation, cost and/or equipment can discourage participation. Not having a ride to an activity program or the money to join can be a barrier.

*“Some people don’t have access to some things. I used to have to walk to school which took an hour. If I joined an afterschool program I’d have to stay here [at the school] or walk an hour and then come back. I don’t get rides, I walk everywhere.”* (BRANDON)

This can especially be discouraging in smaller, rural areas that don’t have public transit. Participants from northern areas, D’Nilo and Yellowknife, felt access was more of a barrier than in larger urban centers. “Not having equipment” or money to do things was a barrier for the girls in D’Nilo.

*“We’re so far up north, we’re isolated so we don’t get as much.”*

*“Money. Everything is so expensive around here.”*

(YELLOWKNIFE)

### **Other**

There were a few significant barriers for some girls that were less common but equally important. Being injured or ill often resulted in some participants taking time off from physical activity. They mentioned it was hard for them to get back into it. A person’s religious or cultural background can also be a barrier to physical activity participation, particularly when girls are not allowed to participate or be seen by boys.

*“Our school is very multicultural, so some girls can’t wear things around the guys, you have to be mindful of that.”*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

## ■ CREATING SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS

It was apparent from the *In Her Voice* focus groups that adolescent girls want to be heard, and have valuable opinions and suggestions for how to improve programs to encourage girls to be active. The needs of less active and inactive adolescent girls are not being met by traditional programming. New models need to be used to engage this important target group.

### ***How should programs be changed? What can program leaders do?***

Focus group participants recommended a number of ways programming could be enhanced for adolescent girls. Offering fun activities adolescent girls enjoy, along with providing the necessary space and equipment, may be the best way to encourage participation. Access to programs can be improved by holding the programs close to home, to the schools, or at least close to a bus route. Participants also mentioned that they would like to join a program with girls of a similar age. When asked about gender, responses varied — some participants wanted a female-only program while some prefer a co-ed environment. Having an option would be helpful to reach as many girls as possible.

Participants suggested that programs should expose girls to a variety of activities, and provide additional incentives. Programs need to appeal to those girls with different interests. Engaging girls in planning the program and selecting the activities would enhance its appeal. Many participants suggested that recreational physical activity programs should teach participants skills to be active in a non-competitive environment. This could involve learning a new activity, such as yoga or Pilates, or learning basic skills to become better at the sports they like. Embracing technology through the use of the Wii or Dance Dance Revolution was identified as a fun alternative that can introduce girls to new activities.

*“You have to find what the person likes. For example the Wii for people who like to game. Maybe if they like golf they’ll actually try it in real life.”*

*“Some classes do Dance Dance Revolution. I think if we had options like that kids would do that. We could set it up. It’s just really hard to target what people want. If we had really fun activities.”*

(BRANDON)

### ***The ideal program leader***

Participants also discussed what they like in a leader, and recommended a number of characteristics to appeal to this target audience. In a professional sense, leaders should be organized, qualified, knowledgeable, and experienced. The leaders should be able to teach adolescent girls the skills to be successful in a program. A good leader should also have certain personal qualities, such as being mature, respectful, helpful, positive, and understanding. Leaders who can motivate young women should be friendly and energetic. It was mentioned several times that good leaders should be strict enough to control the group while still being nice and supportive. Many of the participants said that they would be more comfortable with a female leader, while for others gender did not matter as long as the person had the other qualities.

A leader with these qualities can make the environment more welcoming for adolescent girls. If the program’s environment is supportive and non-competitive, where young women can be social and meet people their own age, and learn a variety of activities with little commitment in terms of time and money, adolescent girls are likely to participate. An added bonus would be if there is good music playing and some “hype” around joining this program to “make it cool” (Toronto).

### ***What can schools do?***

For most focus group participants, sport and physical activity participation happened at school, through physical education class and team sport. Participants identified several things schools can do to increase physical activity participation among adolescent girls.

Several suggestions were made to improve high school physical education. Schools could incorporate a greater variety of activities into physical education and use student input to design a program around activities they like. Providing students with opportunities to try new sports and learn new skills may motivate girls to participate. “If they’re exposed to it in PE class, if they’re exposed to things that aren’t competitive sports, like kick-boxing or yoga, they might want to do it. If they’ve never tried it they might not want to try it because they might not know what it’ll be like” (Lethbridge, Group 1).

Schools could improve physical education by making classes mandatory and longer in daily minutes. Mandatory daily physical activity could be helpful for those girls too busy to exercise after school. If this is not feasible, creating an alternative to physical education may be useful. School credit could be provided for working out during leisure time for those students who cannot fit physical education into their high school schedule.

*“Make an option for females. It’s during school, not on your own time, you can be healthy, you can work out, you can learn about healthy living, and get credits for it.” (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)*

Participants recommended that groups in physical education should be smaller so every student can play. Group activities were also mentioned as more motivating than exercising on your own. Teacher support for individual goal-setting and improvement would increase physical activity levels as well as self-confidence.

*“Instead of being like ‘you have to do this, or you have to run 5 laps’, it should be like ‘go, start with one lap, and see how far you get.’” (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)*

Teachers can encourage girls to be active by teaching them how to live a healthy lifestyle. Letting students know it is ok to make mistakes and that results won’t be seen in a day is valuable information. Also, teaching students how to manage their time to fit in daily physical activity may help them realise that they do have time to be active.

*“I see so many people, you go to the gym on like January 2nd, and people are like ‘I’m going to be fit by next week’, but then they quit because it’s not working. But if you do it in a group, you all do it together, and there’s fit people there, you can see it doesn’t happen in a week and it’s probably more motivating. And then you can see what it takes to get to where they are, and I’m going to stick with it until I get to where they are.” (LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 2)*

Schools should celebrate the accomplishments of all students, valuing all activities equally. For instance, instead of only congratulating school sport teams, congratulate students who succeed in a dance competition or who are involved with a large number of recreational programs. Acknowledging the diversity of students making healthy choices could be encouraging.



*“A lot of girls who try out and get cut from a team don’t want to try out again because that sucked. And so like if you put in recreation programs where you could learn without any pressure or try outs. Just to learn and not have that pressure. They’ll get better and enjoy it more and then maybe try out again.”* (NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

*“If there were beginner teams, like if there was a beginner football or soccer team I would totally sign up.”*

*“But don’t call it the D team!”*

(YELLOWKNIFE)

Other ways schools could improve leisure time physical activity would be to open a school gym or workout area in the morning, at lunch, and after school. It was also suggested that longer lunch hours would allow more time for intramural sports.

### ***What can parents do?***

As discussed, parents can play an important role in encouraging more young women to remain or become physically active. Participants agreed that parents are very influential, and that if parents were active, chances are that their daughters were active too. Parents can encourage their daughters’ physical activity participation by signing them up and paying for activities, providing transportation support, and being active themselves. Getting involved and participating in physical activity as a family would expose their daughters to different types of activity.

*“Encourage them and stuff, and tell them about different sports going on and ways they can increase their physical activity and stuff, but I think it has a lot to do with [a girl’s] personality and how they were brought up.”* (LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 1)

*“I think it’s also about people around them. If one person has lazy parents, lazy siblings, they’ll probably end up lazy.”* (TORONTO)

The above changes in recreation and school programs were suggested by a sample of girls who would be participating in these types of programs. Quality programs were important to the *In Her Voice* participants because they realized that physical activity is important to their health and that being active in a fun program helped to keep them busy and out of trouble.

### ***Targeting adolescent girls through advertisements***

In addition to changing the content and environment of physical activity programs for adolescent girls, new programs need to be marketed in a way that attract their attention. A common way physical activity has been promoted is through advertising. The *In Her Voice* participants commented on what type of advertising they felt worked and what type did not.

Physical activity advertisements that appealed to this population worked best if the ads were humorous, if the activity shown in the ad looked fun, and if the ad had positive role models. Realistic models, such as regular girls and true life stories, would be beneficial to this population. While using celebrities initially attracted the participants to an ad, most of them agreed that having celebrities with unrealistic bodies doing activity turned the participants off physical activity because these ads led to unrealistic expectations. The girls commented on how they liked ads that showed all sides of life, such as making physical activity part of your life and not just focusing on superficial reasons like losing weight.

The *In Her Voice* participants were asked to examine a few magazine advertisements as a warm up activity during the focus groups (see Appendix A). They were asked to discuss what ads they found motivating and effective, and what ads did the opposite. Participants' comments on the magazine ads included:

*"I like this one because it shows how you can work out and have fun and do other stuff."*

(LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 1)

*"It's good because she's doing her exercises here and she looks good in a dress, so it encourages you because it shows that if you do sports and stuff you can still have a social life, and look good because you did exercise."* (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

*"I think this one is good because it gives teens ideas to be active on their own."*

(LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 1)

*"Some people like to do [exercise] because they like it, but they should have more realistic models in the ads."*

(NEPEAN, GROUP 1)

*"I like the ad there, the pink one, because it shows every type of person."* (NEPEAN, GROUP 2)

*"I like this one because it makes me feel that if I wanted to do that it would be for a good reason and it won't be because I want to lose weight, because that's what my parents always tell me to exercise for."* (TORONTO)

Advertising that did not appeal to adolescent girls involved the opposite of what they found positive. If the ad made exercise look boring or that it takes too much time and effort, the participants were turned off. The ads were also discouraging if there was too much reading or complicated equipment. Ads that provided unrealistic expectations were also ineffective, particularly if the models were too skinny and did not look like people adolescent girls would know.

*“Sometimes it shows girls that are in really good shape and it makes you think you need to be like that.” (LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 1)*

*“I don’t like this one because it has a whole bunch of skinny celebrities and gives a bad image of women. Saying these are the best looking girls, it gives a bad body image. Also it’s someone stick thin doing these activities, so they wouldn’t need to be doing them.”*

(TORONTO)

*“Everything that gets displayed in this ad, there’s not enough time in the day to go to a party, and go to the gym, and ride in a race, and all of that.” (LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 1)*

It was apparent that physical activity advertisements targeting young women should show physical activity in a fun, positive, and realistic way. According to participants, any advertisement needed to be eye catching and have pictures. Articles in magazines may also be a positive way to encourage physical activity and help them understand the benefits of participation. Other methods of reaching this population include advertising through flyers, TV, video games, and social networking sites such as Facebook. Adolescent girls are interested in new technology and have said they spend a lot of time watching TV and using the computer. Television can be used to show more young women being active and to promote physical activity in general.

*“I know lots of girls who want to play guy sports, like hockey or football, but most of what you see on TV is, you never see girls’ hockey teams.” (YELLOWKNIFE)*

Word of mouth, one-on-one advertising and personal invitations are perhaps the best ways to engage adolescent girls. Word of mouth would be an effective way to reach this population, particularly when considering the importance of their friends’ opinion.

*“If you advertise it to a high school, you and your friends can discuss it and they all go and they can bring their other friends, and then people will know about it.” (LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 2)*

Speaking directly to adolescent girls and getting their friends involved is another effective strategy to promote physical activity programs. Having girls their age deliver the message may work better than promotion by adults.

*“I actually think that if teens were giving out the message more than adults, then other kids would want to do it.”*  
*“Sometimes adults or people that aren’t involved in the activity try and explain it, they don’t know what they’re talking about, you’re like, ok, and just get bored.” (LETHBRIDGE, GROUP 1)*

## ■ PRESENTING THEIR VIEWS

The final *In Her Voice* focus group question asked participants how they felt their views would be best expressed to the people in charge of physical activity programming. Several unique ideas were developed. Some participants felt that program leaders should answer similar questions like the participants answered during the *In Her Voice* focus groups, and then answers should be compared to see where there were differences. It was evident participants enjoyed discussing their experiences with physical activity and wanted people to hear them. It was often mentioned that the participants of the programs and the leaders should meet and discuss how to make the best programs possible. Participants felt that nobody would want to read a whole report, so maybe making a collage or magazine article with colourful pictures would gather more attention. The participants also discussed how the government should put more funding into physical activity programs. Overall it was important to the participants of the focus groups to be heard and have people willing to make changes in order to increase physical activity levels for young women.

## IV: Recommendations for Practitioners

The recommendations below are based on the findings of this report, capturing the needs, interests and experiences of the *In Her Voice* focus group participants. The key to attracting adolescent girls is to focus on fun, being with friends, and feeling success. These factors, in combination with positive ways to communicate the importance of physical activity, may encourage more young women to adopt a healthy active lifestyle.

### ■ TIPS ON CREATING A PROGRAM: MAKE IT FUN!

#### ***Key component 1: Make it social***

Participants discussed how physical activity was fun when they participated with their friends or could meet new friends.

##### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Encourage young women to bring their friends to the program. Integrate opportunities for participants to socialize and meet one another.
- Allow participants ample opportunities to work in groups and socialize during activities, or before and after the activity.
- Creating a team or club environment can be an effective way to motivate participants to attend week after week, because they are accountable to their friends and teammates.

#### ***Key component 2: Appeal to their interests***

Participants revealed ways that can make it easier to participate in physical activity, such as tailoring the program to their interests, and incorporating games and music they like.

##### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Music can make participating in physical activity more fun. Give participants opportunities to bring in their own music, or have a sheet where girls can write down their choice of music/songs (this way the leader can screen songs to ensure lyrics are appropriate).

- A CD made especially for the program based on the girls' input could increase enjoyment and make the participants feel some ownership over the program. Provide the CD to participants at the end of the program as an incentive to keep them active.

### ***Key component 3: Offer a variety of activities***

Participants discussed how physical activity was enjoyable when they liked the activity. Offering a variety of activities will ensure each participant can do something they enjoy.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Offer a variety of activities based on input from participants. Asking what they like to do, and incorporating a variety of different activities, should ensure each participant finds something they like.
- Be prepared to offer suggestions to participants, as some participants may be unfamiliar with the active living opportunities available in the community. New activities “level the playing field”, which may be comforting for some participants.
- Some girls may find a new activity in which they want to continue participating into adulthood — be sure to provide information about opportunities to participate in the community after the program ends.

### ***Key component 4: Create a low pressure environment***

Participants discussed pressure to perform and competition with mixed feelings. Those who liked competition were usually more skilled at an activity and thought competition was fun. Girls who were new to a physical activity or had a lower skill level disliked competition and viewed it as a primary barrier to their participation. Having to perform a skill under pressure turned some participants away from the activity.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Familiarize yourself with the participants attending the program — some will love competition and some may not.
- Where group size allows, provide two or more activities or groups with different levels of competition so participants can choose how they want to participate. Modify games and occasionally increase the competition to build participants' experiences in a safe and supportive environment.
- Enforce a zero tolerance policy for put-downs and name calling. Encourage participants to try something new and let them know it is ok to make mistakes.

### ***Key component 5: Provide opportunities for success***

Feeling successful can facilitate physical activity participation. Participants discussed that they tend to enjoy and participate more often in activities they are good at, and stay away from activities that they are not good at, even if they want to participate and learn.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Begin by teaching participants the skills to succeed in physical activity and/or specific sports. Some adolescent girls have never been taught basic sport skills and rules. Taking time to build their skills will allow participants to feel more confident and perhaps continue participating in a new activity after the initial program is finished.
- Praise and encourage participants, providing constructive criticism delivered in a positive manner when needed.
- Teach and encourage participants to set realistic and achievable goals.

### ***Key component 6: Small changes make a big difference***

Participants revealed they were less active now than when they were younger, due to changes in lifestyle, such as driving more and walking less, as well as technology such as watching TV and using the computer. It is important to support adolescent girls in making healthy choices that support healthy living.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- In addition to teaching participants physical activity skills, adolescent girls should also learn how to be active on their own and to manage their time to fit physical activity into their busy schedules.
- Practitioners should educate and encourage adolescent girls to be active in small ways, as this can make a difference in their overall health. Walking to the store, taking the stairs, or talking to a friend while walking together rather than just talking on the phone, are small changes that can make a big difference. Letting adolescent girls know that they can be active despite everything else they have to do can reduce this barrier.

### ***Key component 7: Have positive and experienced leaders***

The *In Her Voice* focus groups revealed several important qualities for program leaders. This will help make the program welcoming for adolescent girls.

#### RECOMMENDATION:

- Leaders should be qualified and personable. If participants feel comfortable and supported by the leader, where they can learn new skills in a non-judgmental environment, it will likely be a more positive physical activity experience.

### ***Key component 8: Make it easy to get involved***

A physical activity program that is easy to get to and inexpensive was revealed to be a facilitator to physical activity participation. It is especially important to have an indoor recreational facility where adolescent girls can be active during winter months.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- When selecting a location for the program, choose a convenient place for the targeted participants near a school or in a specific neighbourhood, or a location accessible by public transit. If public transportation is not an option, arrange car pools to ensure participants can get to the program.
- Provide high quality equipment — adolescent girls will be turned off by inappropriately sized, dirty or broken equipment.
- Make the program affordable. If necessary, involving participants in fundraising can make them more accountable and allow them input into how money is spent.

## ■ TIPS ON COMMUNICATION AND PROMOTION TO GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

### ***Key component 1: Direct communication***

Participants identified the best ways to reach adolescent girls — meeting them on their level.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Word of mouth was identified as the best way to advertise a program. Through word of mouth friends can all hear about it and join together.
- If developing an advertising campaign, go where the intended participants are. This includes advertisements using technology, such as online ads, through social networking sites, or on TV during their favourite programs. Magazines can also be a great place to target adolescent girls.
- Having an adolescent girl or a young woman introduce new participants to the program may be effective because they see that if this person enjoys the program, chances are they will also like it.

### ***Key component 2: Focus on feeling good***

Participants discussed how physical activity made them feel happy and better about themselves. Physical activity messages should be focused on feeling better, healthier, and more relaxed, which may be more motivating than focusing on physical appearance.



RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Encourage participants to track how they feel when they are active or inactive. Chances are they will realize that physical activity makes them feel better and this will motivate them to keep participating. However, for adolescent girls to feel good about being active, the program needs to be a positive experience.
- Avoid discussing weight loss with participants unless they ask. This topic can make many girls uncomfortable. Participants should be encouraged to make other goals for themselves, perhaps related to improving skills or endurance, rather than losing weight.

***Key component 3: Use real role models***

Having positive role models for adolescent girls was identified as motivating by the participants. Role models should be realistic and valued for other qualities than their appearance.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Whether in advertising a program or physical activity in general, positive role models should be used. This could be done by having young women who have succeeded in sport or physical activity participation, who are the participants' age or slightly older, as role models or spokeswomen for the program.
- If celebrities are used, they should be celebrated for their achievements in living a healthy life or positive work, rather than for how they look or who they date.

***Key component 4: Get parents involved***

Parental influence came up often during the focus groups. Parents need to be positive active role models for their daughters, as children are influenced by parental behaviour, healthy or unhealthy.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Parents need to support their daughters in physical activity participation. This can be done by purchasing equipment, providing transportation to programs, encouraging them to sign up for a program or class or be more active during daily living, and by cheering them on if they do participate. While it is best to start this while children are young, it is not too late to positively influence adolescents.
- It is important that parents encourage their daughters to be active for better health, not to lose weight. Focusing on weight loss could have the opposite effect and push young women away from physical activity.
- The best way parents can positively influence their daughters to be active is to be active themselves. Leading by example, like taking the stairs or going to the gym, can be effective.

- Participating in physical activity together, whether going for a walk in the evening or taking a class together, can be a great bonding experience.

### ***Key component 5: Recognize all types of activities***

Participants complained that schools place too much emphasis on school sports, neglecting other types of athletes who should also be recognized. This may also occur at the community level.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Schools and communities should celebrate accomplishment in all types of sport and physical activity, not just traditional team sport. Celebrate accomplishments through community or school newspapers/newsletters, during school announcements, or in yearbooks. Even a personal recognition from a leader or teacher can make an adolescent girl feel valued and successful.

### ***Key component 6: Be culturally sensitive***

It is important for practitioners to be sensitive to different religions and cultures. Some cultures view adolescent girls' participation in physical activity in different ways and this must be considered when planning a program.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Take the time to discuss physical activity with the participant and her parents/guardians. Through open communication, solutions that appeal to everyone can be reached. Do everything possible to address the barriers to participation and create opportunities for girls and young women to be active.

## V: References

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# VI: Appendix A

## FOCUS GROUP MODEL

### ***In Her Voice Focus Group Model***

Time: (3 hrs. Max)	Activity:
5 minutes	Introductions and consent form collection
10 minutes	Survey
5 minutes	Drinks and snacks

### **30 MINUTES: *Ice Breaker***

- Draw or write down three things that you like to do in your spare time. If you drew yourself doing something active, write down three reasons why you choose to do this activity in your spare time. If you did not draw anything active, write down three reasons why you prefer to participate in these activities over something more active. (Share a few with the group)
- Examine the following magazine advertisements. Do you think the ads are effective at encouraging young people to be active? What would you change about them?

### **1 HOUR: *General Focus Group Questions***

- What does physical activity mean to you? What does sport mean? What does healthy living mean? What is the difference between these terms?
- Why is it important or not important to be active?
- What makes it easy to be active? What makes it hard to be active?
- What do you like about physical activity/sport/active living?
- What don't you like about physical activity/sport/active living?
- Was there a time when you were more active than now? What physical activities did you like to do then? What would it take to get back?
- How active are you compared to your friends? Do you have friends that were active and now they are not? Do you have friends who were inactive and are now active? Why? What happened?
- Who or what decides which activities you do in your spare time? What about when you were younger?

- How do your parents and siblings influence your physical activity?
- Do you think you influence others to be active?
- Why do you think some girls are active and some are not?
- Describe positive or negative experiences you've had with physical activity, and how those experiences made you feel about yourself . . . (Probe — how do you feel when you aren't good at something?)
- How can we encourage more girls and young women to lead healthy, active lives?
- How do you think we should present your views to physical activity practitioners/organizers/policy makers?
- Conclusion — anything else you'd like to comment on?

***Active girls:***

- What has kept you involved in physical activity/sport?
- What do you like about the physical activity programs you've participated in?
- What type of changes would you make to physical activity/sport programs? Why would you make those specific changes?
- What will happen to your physical activity level when your organized programs are finished?

***Inactive girls:***

- What types of changes would you make to physical activity/sport programs to encourage greater participation among girls who currently dislike physical activity? Why would you make those changes?
- Do you know people who are more active than you? How do they influence your participation?

**5 MINUTES: *Break***

**30 MINUTES: *Build Your Own Program Activity: If you were in charge of creating a new recreation program . . .***

- What types of activities would you want to do? Would the activities be structured or unstructured?
- Who would lead the program? What qualities would you like that person to have?
- Where would you want to do the activities?
- When would it be delivered? For how long?
- Who would be involved? (age, gender)
- What would you wear?
- What would make people want to come out and participate?
- How would you get to the program? Is it safe? Would your parents be supportive?

- How much would it cost? Who would pay for it?
- What might cause people to stop coming to the program?
- If I was watching, how would I know you were having fun?
- Do you think this program would help more girls and young women/you to be healthy? Why or why not?

**30 MINUTES: *Wrap up activity***

- Create a slogan, comment, or motivational quote promoting healthy, active living to girls and young women. Slogans will be integrated into bookmarks or bags being published by CAAWS.

**5 MINUTES: *Concluding remarks***

# VI: Appendix B

## FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT SURVEY

Thank you for participating in the Focus Group. This questionnaire is designed to collect specific information about the activities and programs in which YOU participate. If you have any questions, please ask the facilitator.

### *About You . . .*

- Age: \_\_\_\_\_
- Grade (the one you just finished): \_\_\_\_\_
- Ethnic/Cultural Background: \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you have a job (e.g. babysitting, retail, etc.)?  YES  NO  
How many hours/week?: \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you volunteer in the community?  YES  NO  
How many hours/week?: \_\_\_\_\_

### *About Your Regular Activities . . .*

- In the past year, have you been involved in any structured programs in or out of school, including sport and physical activity and other interest areas (e.g. art, language, religion)?

ACTIVITY	THROUGH SCHOOL OR COMMUNITY?	NUMBER OF MEETINGS/ GAMES/PRACTICES PER WEEK	SEASON
e.g. Curling	Community	1 practice, 1 game per week	Winter
e.g. Leadership Council	School	2 lunch hours per week, plus special events	All Year

- What unstructured activities do you participate in regularly?

ACTIVITY	HOW MUCH TIME DO YOU SPEND ON THESE ACTIVITIES/WEEK?	SEASON
e.g. Walking to and from school	20 minutes each way, 2 days/week	Fall, Spring
e.g. Computer games	1 hour per day 7 days per week	All Year

***About Your Physical Activity and Sport Participation . . .***

- Would you describe yourself as physically active?  YES  NO
- Are you MORE or LESS active than your friends?  MORE  LESS
- How much do you like participating in sport and physical activity?

Dislike a lot      Dislike      It's OK      Like      Like a lot  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5

- How much do you know about how to live a healthy life and the importance of healthy living?

Very Little      A little      Some      A lot      Really a lot  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5

- Who or what encourages or makes it easy for YOU to lead an active, healthy life? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

- Who or what discourages or makes it hard for YOU to lead an active, healthy life? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

- What's one physical activity or sport activity that you'd like to try?  
 \_\_\_\_\_

*Thanks for your time! Please fold the completed questionnaire and give it the Facilitator!*



## VI: Appendix C

### FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

#### ***Brandon Focus Group Participants (5)***

Average age: 17

Self-identified ethnic/cultural backgrounds: Canadian, French Canadian, Cree

No. of participants with part time jobs: 5 (100%)

No. of hours worked per week — median (min, max): 7 (5-20)

No. of participants who volunteer: 5 (100%)

No. of participants who participate in structured activity programs: 5 (100%)

No. of participants who describe themselves as physically active: 4 (80%)

No. of participants who like participating in sport and physical activity: 5 (100%)

No. of participants who know how to live a healthy life and the importance of healthy living: 4 (80%)

#### ***D'Nilo Focus Group Participants (5)***

Average age: 14

Self-identified ethnic/cultural backgrounds: Chipewan, Dog Rib, Slavey

No. of participants with part time jobs: 3 (60%)

No. of hours worked per week — median (min, max): 5 (2-8)

No. of participants who volunteer: 1 (20%)

No. of participants who participate in structured activity programs: 4 (80%)

No. of participants who describe themselves as physically active: 4 (80%)

No. of participants who like participating in sport and physical activity: 2 (40%)

No. of participants who know how to live a healthy life and the importance of healthy living: 2 (40%)

#### ***Lethbridge Group 1 Focus Group Participants (5)***

Average age: 15

Self-identified ethnic/cultural backgrounds: Canadian

No. of participants with part time jobs: 3 (60%)

No. of hours worked per week — median (min, max): 3 (2-3)

No. of participants who volunteer: 0 (0%)

No. of participants who participate in structured activity programs: 5 (100%)  
No. of participants who describe themselves as physically active: 5 (100%)  
No. of participants who like participating in sport and physical activity: 5 (100%)  
No. of participants who know how to live a healthy life and the importance of healthy living: 5 (100%)

***Lethbridge Group 2 Focus Group Participants (3)***

Average age: 16  
Self-identified ethnic/cultural backgrounds: Canadian, caucasian  
No. of participants with part time jobs: 3 (100%)  
No. of hours worked per week — median (min, max): 10 (9-20)  
No. of participants who volunteer: 1 (33%)  
No. of participants who participate in structured activity programs: 3 (100%)  
No. of participants who describe themselves as physically active: 2 (67%)  
No. of participants who like participating in sport and physical activity: 2 (67%)  
No. of participants who know how to live a healthy life and the importance of healthy living: 3 (100%)

***Nepean Group 1 Focus Group Participants (7)***

Average age: 15  
Self-identified ethnic/cultural backgrounds: Canadian, Lebanese Canadian, Somali/Kenyan Canadian  
No. of participants with part time jobs: 4 (57%)  
No. of hours worked per week — median (min, max): 16 (2-20)  
No. of participants who volunteer: 2 (29%)  
No. of participants who participate in structured activity programs: 7 (100%)  
No. of participants who describe themselves as physically active: 7 (100%)  
No. of participants who like participating in sport and physical activity: 7 (100%)  
No. of participants who know how to live a healthy life and the importance of healthy living: 5 (71%)

***Nepean Group 2 Focus Group Participants (6)***

Average age: 16  
Self-identified ethnic/cultural backgrounds: Canadian, Christian, Jamaican, Caucasian, Afghani  
No. of participants with part time jobs: 4 (67%)  
No. of hours worked per week — median (min, max): 8 (7-20)  
No. of participants who volunteer: 5 (83%)  
No. of participants who participate in structured activity programs: 3 (50%)  
No. of participants who describe themselves as physically active: 4 (67%)  
No. of participants who like participating in sport and physical activity: 3 (50%)  
No. of participants who know how to live a healthy life and the importance of healthy living: 4 (67%)

### ***Toronto Focus Group Participants (8)***

Average age: 14

Self-identified ethnic/cultural backgrounds: Canadian, Dominican, Italian, Arminian, Romanian, Filipino, Irish, Scottish, Chinese, African, Muslim

No. of participants with part time jobs: 6 (75%)

No. of hours worked per week — median (min, max): 4 (1-10)

No. of participants who volunteer: 5 (63%)

No. of participants who participate in structured activity programs: 8 (100%)

No. of participants who describe themselves as physically active: 5 (63%)

No. of participants who like participating in sport and physical activity: 5 (63%)

No. of participants who know how to live a healthy life and the importance of healthy living: 5 (63%)

### ***Yellowknife Focus Group Participants (5)***

Average age: 15

Self-identified ethnic/cultural backgrounds: Caucasian, Dene First Nation, Mauritian, Filipino, Indian (India)

No. of participants with part time jobs: 5 (63%)

No. of hours worked per week — median (min, max): 28 (10-41)

No. of participants who volunteer: 4 (80%)

No. of participants who participate in structured activity programs: 5 (63%)

No. of participants who describe themselves as physically active: 7 (88%)

No. of participants who like participating in sport and physical activity: 5 (63%)

No. of participants who know how to live a healthy life and the importance of healthy living: 5 (63%)

