My passion for understanding leisure behaviour means that I devote most of my research activities and academic reading attention to investigating and evaluating reasons why people do what they do during their leisure time. A few months ago, I came across an article written by a social psychologists in our field (Seppo Iso-Ahola) that prompted me to think in a new way about the why we do what we do during our leisure time, or perhaps more accurately, why we do not do the things during our leisure time that might offer us the most satisfaction. Specifically, Iso-Ahola (2015) brought together research to discuss the role of the conscious and nonconscious mind in leisure behaviour.

Iso-Ahola (2015) set the stage for his discussion by wondering, quite simply, why some people spend 5 hours a day watching television – an activity research has found to leave people depleted and in the same or worse mood state than before they started watching (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) while others are more active or engaged in challenging activities – which research indicates provides people with the most enjoyment from (Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi, 2012) during their available leisure time. He offers two possible explanations for why people do what they do: “(1) people are rational thinkers who carefully deliberate over choices and finally opt for what they think is best for them; they are cognitive decision-makers in accord with “slow” thinking. (2) Alternatively, their behavioral engagement is driven by automatic processes prompted nonconsciously by situational cues” (p. 299).

Research suggests that we are “fast” thinkers most of the time and that our decisions or responses to situations are most often a result of intuitive, impulsive, automatic or nonconscious thinking (Kahneman, 2011) or “behavioural impulses” (Bargh & Morsella, 2008, p. 77). The behavioural impulses are derived from four sources: evolved motives and preferences, cultural norms and values, past experiences in similar situations, and what other people are doing in the same situation at a given time. Therefore, our impulses or fast thinking has roots in our everyday social lives and the stimulus cues in our environment.

The default system of fast thinking leads us toward choosing the easier or less straining leisure activities. This, then, can hinder us from choosing demanding behaviours like exercise especially when it is not part of our routine. But, the conscious, slow-thinking mind can still exert strong influence and...
even override the nonconscious mind (Baumeister, Masicampo, & Vohs, 2011). However, given the low rates of participation in physical activity and sport, there are clearly some challenges in activating the conscious, slow-thinking mind to engage in the more demanding leisure behaviour or exercise. I found the research related to self-control resources to be particularly insightful in understanding this further.

Self-Control Resources, The Conscious Mind, and Leisure Behaviours

Iso-Ahola (2015) explains that for many people work can be cognitively and/or physically straining or demanding. At work, we exert self-control throughout the day (e.g., focus on tasks, attend meetings we may not wish to; continue with a repetitive task that may bore or tire us; respond politely to rude customers). Work tasks that demand self-control can use up or deplete our limited self-control resources. This means we have few resources to resist the temptation of non-demanding activities when we get home and have opportunities for leisure. The depleted self-control resources plus the stimulus-cues such as television sets lead to the triggering of our nonconscious impulses that direct our behaviour – we sit and watch television. Other behaviours such as going for a walk or a fitness class or working on a challenging DIY project demand physical or cognitive effort and deliberate thinking. Simple behaviours (watching TV) become driven by the nonconscious mind. More complex behaviours (going to a fitness class), require the drive of the conscious mind.

Another perspective related to the notion of self-control is that leisure does not require us to self-regulate in the way that work and other demanding daily life tasks may. Therefore, once we have completed demanding tasks that required self-control, we feel justified in relaxing or rewarding ourselves (Inzlicht & Schmeichel, 2012). There is a motivational shift away from regulation and self-control toward gratification instead.

The question for me, then, became: Can more challenging leisure activities that could potentially be more satisfying and beneficial be regulated or routinized by situational cues (in the same way TV sets act as situational cues)?

Priming for Complex Leisure Behaviours

Research has suggested that conscious priming is needed to modify most complex behaviours, but that this is particularly the case with exercise behaviours (Iso-Ahola & Miller, 2016). Situational cues (like your pair of sneakers) can drive more demanding behaviour, but only after the behaviour has been repeated over a long period of time (Iso-Ahola, 2015). Nonconscious priming can occur after years of repeated performance, in part, because a habit has formed. Prior to something becoming a habit, the behaviour requires and benefits from conscious priming.

One strategy for conscious priming is having individuals self-affirm their core values and goals related to complex behaviours. This has been effective in countering self-regulatory exhaustion (ego depletion) and failures to engage in the demanding behaviour (Inzlicht & Schmeichel, 2012). For example, if one of your overarching goals is to be healthy and fit and you are highly committed to that goal, priming that goal (e.g., reminding yourself; writing about it) may shield you from conflicting goals (e.g., to relax) that may interfere with you engaging in your physical activity behaviour.

Responding to Self-Control Influences

The idea that we experience a depletion in self-control resources after a work day resonated with me. My work is mentally demanding. At the end of the day, I often sink into the couch and turn on the TV. I then begin engaging in the “should” game – “I should go for a walk,” and “I should read or knit or do anything but watch TV”. The “should-ing” is followed by the rationalizations to resolve the dissonance: “I deserve/need to relax”. And, as Iso-Ahola (2015) suggests, I frequently am successful in weaken any bit of motivation or commitment I had to more complex, demanding leisure behaviours.

I decided to experiment with the notion of depleted resources a little bit. What would happen if I made the decision to engage in physical activity before the work day started. Clearly, this is not a novel idea – many, many people do this. However, I wanted to implement this based on this new information I had that helped me understand why leaving exercising until the end of day resulted in my irregular involvement. As an adult, exercise has been neither a habit nor a simple behaviour. Therefore, engaging in physical activity takes conscious, deliberate thinking – something, according to Iso-Ahola (2015), I would theoretically have more resources for before I engaged in a full work day. Anecdotally, after a month of experimenting with this, I have found that I have the mental energy to convince myself to head to the treadmill first thing in the morning. Hardy scientific research, but I found it personally interesting how this one change was able to help me engage, more regularly, in a demanding leisure behaviour.

The research related to priming has suggested that writing your physical activity goals regularly or writing about what physical activity means in your life can help prime the behaviour (Inzlicht & Schmeichel, 2012). Therefore, it is possible that journaling about exercise could be effective – even writing a sentence or two each day about goals could activate awareness and conscious thinking. Something else to try if you need to activate your conscious, slow thinking mind.

Conclusion

It seems that the nonconscious mind can be help us to engage in demanding leisure activities such as physical activity…if that behaviour is a habit and part of our routine. Prior to it becoming a habit, it is a behaviour that requires us to activate our conscious mind. That may be easier to do prior to a long work...
day or it could be supported by setting goals and reminding oneself of the goals (e.g., to be physically active 4 times a week for 60 minutes) and how those goals relate to one’s core values (e.g., being healthy).

References


From Play Structures to iPads: What’s Happening to Children’s Play Spaces?

Children's Play. Physical Activity. Positive Youth Development. Technology

October 8, 2014

A couple of weeks ago, I saw a news story about a transformed play space at the Guildford Town Centre (a mall) in Surrey, British Columbia. The mall play space went from being a place where kids could run around, climb, and go down a slide, to a place where children can engage in interactive play with... iPads. Parents are not happy, and I don’t blame them. As someone concerned with youth physical activity levels as well as positive youth development, I share some of the same concerns parents do.
What Bothers Me Most About the iPad Play Area

Alas, despite parents expressing outrage about the Guildford Mall play space – arguing that the play area is not fun for their child, arguing that this doesn’t support the idea that parents are supposed to be helping their children to be more active, and arguing that the installed iPads offer nothing unique from an experience they could offer at home – the mall stands by its decision. Perhaps it is too much to expect that a commercial organization (concerned mainly with making money) might seek to offer something designed to engage children from infancy has changed the landscape of childhood has contributed to children spending less time exploring their worlds. Add to that, parents’ anxiety about stranger danger and injuries (Brockman, Jago, & Fox, 2011; Gill, 2007), which is in part a result of messages parents receive in the media and even from public health agencies (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2012a; 2012b) about safety during play, the current generation of children are not given the chance to take risks. Canadian researchers who recently completed a study on children’s play (Alexander, Frohlick, & Fusco, 2014) argue that risk taking is an integral part of children’s play preferences and supports their development; they explore limits; and they and learn to manage risks and deal with uncertainty – all of which are important for their development into adults who can function in a world that has risks.

References and Further Reading:


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**Prescribing Exercise: Only One Step in Supporting Physical Activity**

Leisure, Obesity, Physical Activity  July 23, 2014  Comments: 4

In May, I received an email announcing a new initiative by the New Brunswick Medical Society – prescription pads that can be used to prescribe exercise rather than medication. The press release included many voices supporting the initiative as a way “to help patients focus on increasing physical activity in their lives”. While I agree that having a physician prescribe a walking program or other forms of physical activity (depending on the physical capacities of the patient) can be an opportunity to help patients become more aware of the connection between being active and their health and/or addressing particular health problems they have, as a leisure educator I believe more support is needed. Inactivity is a complicated problem that cannot be resolved with a one, simple act (e.g., prescribing exercise).
Increasing Activity is Complicated

While there is research to support that being prescribed an exercise program improves physical activity levels, results are mixed (Morgan, 2001; Sørensen, Skovgaard, & Puggaard, & Puggaard, 2006) and it is unclear about the long term affects (e.g., adherence to an exercise routine). So while prescribing exercise it is a first step, I do not believe it is “the answer”. It doesn’t start and stop with a prescription.

Some individuals need more support than simply being told to walk or engage in another form of physical activity. In my experience working with families who were raising a child who was overweight, telling them to engage in more physical activity was not effective and quite honestly, would be quite insensitive to the various challenges that they faced in making a shift to a more active lifestyle. What I observed (Shannon, 2012) was that these families needed much more information, guidance, and support in getting started on and maintaining a more active lifestyle. Parents needed help to figure out what active pursuits they and their children were interested in. They needed help in identifying the available resources in the community that could support more active lifestyles (e.g., low cost or no cost programs). They needed to know when the free swims and skates were in their communities or where to look for this information (some families I worked with did not even realize that there were free opportunities for their family). Some families needed to be made aware of subsidized recreation and sport opportunities. Families needed to know what equipment they needed and where they could get it (and in some cases, where they could get it cheaply). Some needed help with time management in order to find ways to make time for physical activity for their family.

Specifically related to the children, a number of them in the families I worked with were bullied in recreation and sport programs or when playing/biking in their neighbourhoods (Shannon, 2014). Some of them did not have the skill set to keep up with their friends and this affected their enjoyment when playing recreational sports or play on the playground. Some lacked self confidence to join in with friends even when they were interested in active play. There were many reasons why the “be more active” message on its own, regardless of who it was from (e.g., doctor, friends, teacher), was not going to contribute to developing a long term habit of physical activity.

One Size Fits All… Rarely

I struggle with the “one size fits all” approach that appears to come with this prescription idea. Perhaps physicians have the skills set and time to ascertain patients’ attitudes about physical activity, the barriers they experience (e.g., lack of money, perceived or real lack of time, lack of motivations, lack of self-


What might be helpful is a website address (url) on the prescription pad which directs patients to more information about leisure and physical activity. For example, information could be provided that would help patients to: assess their interests and choose an activity that is fun and enjoyable; ascertain whether various needs an individual has could be satisfied along with the physician's directive to be active (e.g., need to socialize; need to release stress); develop their awareness of the resources in the community that would support physical activity (e.g., trails, walking tracks, links to schedules for swimming and skating; list of neighbourhoods that are flat where people could walk if their neighbourhood is hilly); develop knowledge of how to choose proper shoes for walking (since this is a specific activity on the prescription pad); understand common barriers to physical activity and strategies for overcoming them; and offer tips on fitting physical activity into busy schedules.

**Conclusion**

My point here is two-fold. First, we should not oversimplify complicated problems. Far too often, I see blog posts or magazine articles titled, “100 Easy Ways To Get Active” or “Ten Simple Ways to Increase Your Physical Activity”. For many, getting more active is neither easy nor simple and these statements marginalize those for whom it is a struggle. It doesn’t support them. Second, more attention needs to be given to educating people for leisure so they have the knowledge and skills they need to make choices during their leisure time that not only support meaningful leisure experiences, but also their physical and mental health. If more effort went into educating individuals about leisure – how long might one choose to adhere to it? How might they choose an activity that is satisfying or enjoyable? How might they choose an activity that is meaningful or instrumental? How might they experience enjoyment? How might they choose an activity that is leisurely and satisfying? 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Leisure’s Role in Happiness: 6 Leisure Tips on International Day of Happiness

Benefits of Leisure, Leisure, Leisure Satisfaction  March 20, 2014  1 Comment

Leisure is a life domain that plays a significant role in an individual’s overall happiness. Therefore, it only seems appropriate that on International Day of Happiness (#happinessday) to present some of the research on the relationship between leisure and happiness. Most simply, happiness is defined as feeling good, enjoying life and wanting the feeling to be maintained (Layard, 2005). In the last decade, there has been a proliferation of research related to happiness (e.g., positive psychology movement). The popularity of books such as *The Happiness Project* and *Happier at Home* along with the introduction of the magazine *Live Happy* demonstrate a growth in a desire to explore concepts related to happiness and/or find, increase, or maintain individual happiness.

1. **Choose your leisure activities carefully.** The type of activity you participate in matters – different leisure activities have differing impacts on happiness. Wang and Wong (2011a) found six activities – shopping, reading books, attending cultural events, getting together with relatives, listening to music, and attending sporting events – were associated with higher levels of happiness. They also found that more time spent on the internet decreased the probability of an individual feeling “very happy” and increased the likelihood that an individual feeling “not at all happy”. Other research has found that participation in social activities is associated positively with happiness (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003) while watching TV generally relates negatively to overall happiness (Bruni & Stanca, 2008). Stebbins (2014) singles out serious leisure (those fulfilling activities in which one has persevered, developed specialized knowledge and skill, enjoyed a leisure career, and experienced special benefits such as a sense of belonging) as offering opportunities for more enduring or long-term happiness than “casual” forms of leisure for which are primarily pursued for the short-term pleasure they bring.

2. **Focus on quality leisure not quantity.** Since so many feel time pressed in today’s busy world, this next research finding may be promising. While you might like to have more time to engage in leisure, at least one study has found that the quantity of leisure is not as important as other aspects of leisure such as the satisfaction one derives from leisure activities and the meaning of leisure time (e.g., time with family; time to connect with others). Individuals who feel that their leisure activities facilitate the opportunity to be themselves – to be authentic – and help them to strengthen relationships with others tend to report greater happiness (Wang & Wong, 2011b). Therefore, focusing the ensuring one has quality leisure experiences may be more important to one’s happiness than trying to secure more leisure time.
3. **Take vacation time and anticipate the vacation.** In a recent study, happy people reported taking more holiday trips in a one-year time frame. Holiday trips boost happiness – at least in the short term (Nawijn & Veenhoven, 2011). While on vacation, people are happier in then they are in their everyday lives and the greatest increase in happiness tends to be during the trip. However, two weeks after returning, that happiness boost disappears suggesting the effect on happiness is relatively short-term. Also important is the idea of anticipation. Those who more strongly anticipated their holiday/vacation (e.g., thought about it, researched, planned, prepared) had higher levels of happiness than those who anticipated to a lesser degree (Hagger, 2009).

4. **Leave work out of your leisure.** When you are having leisure time – taking the dog for a walk, enjoying dinner with a friend, watching a movie – avoid thinking about work. Research suggests that individuals who frequently think about work in their free time tend to be less happy than others (Wang & Wong, 2011b).

5. **Money can buy happiness.** It does seem, however, that happiness depends on what you are spending money on (DeLeire & Kalil, 2010). Researchers have found that consuming leisure or material goods that facilitate leisure (e.g., movie tickets, gym memberships, trips and vacations, sports events and performing arts, materials related to hobbies, athletic equipment) is positively related to happiness. Consuming other material goods such as cars, appliances, computers, clothing, and televisions is unrelated to happiness. The researchers believed that one of the reasons leisure consumption increased happiness was through the relational component of leisure. Engaging in some of the leisure experiences identified above affords opportunities to reduce isolation and offers opportunities for social connection through social networks.

6. **Maintain your participation in leisure-time physical activity (LTPA).** Your levels of LTPA can have an influence on your mood status. A recent study by Wang et al. (2012) found that a change in activity status from being inactive to being active could protect against unhappiness over time. And, a change from being active to inactive increased the odds of becoming unhappy 2 years later. The lesson from this study – get active, stay active, and build some protection against unhappiness.

These various pieces of research suggest that focusing on the leisure domain of one’s life may be a fine place to start if you are looking for ways to increase or maintain your happiness. Time for swap out television and internet time for physical activity, hobbies, and social leisure. Spending some time and money on vacation and leisure experiences like concerts or the movies might also be the way to go. And the good news is the happiness is only one of the many positive outcomes associated with taking time to participate in leisure!

Happy International Day of Happiness.

References:


Share this:
3 Leisure-Related Behaviors That May Contribute to Rising Rates of Adult Obesity in Canada

Leisure, Obesity, Physical Activity, Time  March 6, 2014  Comments: 3

Earlier in the week, the latest obesity rates for those 18 and over in Canada made the news with the release of a study in the Canadian Medical Association Journal. Obesity is on the rise with rates having tripled since 1985 (from 6% to 18% in 26 years and an expectation these rates will be 21% by 2019).

Having worked with families with an obese child, I've had the opportunity to witness first hand the struggles families (both parents and children) face in living healthy lives in today’s society. I have had a chance to discuss with families what their individual leisure time looks like (for parents) and what their family leisure involves. From that research, across the 60+ families I worked with over a 5 year period, I learned about the variety of factors that influenced the leisure lives of these families. However, three leisure-related behaviors were common across the families – lack of time, preference for sedentary pursuits, and eating out as leisure. As I’ve done more research into Canadian statistics related to a couple of these factors, it is clear that it wasn’t just the families that I worked with who engage in these behaviors that may be contributing to rising rates of adult obesity.

While there is a genetic component to obesity, the calories we consume and the calories we burn (through physical activity, for example) play a significant role in the obesity problem. We consume too many calories and don’t burn enough of the calories we consume. Research makes the case that individuals need to control sugar and fat intake, eat more healthy food, exercise more, etc. I wanted to take a deeper look at how our leisure-related behaviors that were common among the families I spoke with might be influencing calorie consumption and energy expenditure.

1. We Use “Lack of Time” as the Reason for Not Being Active. This was a common reason why parents told me they had trouble incorporating more activity into their family’s daily life. I’ve discussed the idea of time use and priorities in other blog posts, but it is worth repeating. The way we prioritize aspects of our lives and what we make room for influences our leisure behavior. Really, it is not “lack of time” that contributes to my inactivity or poor food choices, it is not setting activity or healthy eating as a priority (and organizing and living my life as if it is a priority). Or, I’m not active because I’m not motivated, or because I may not have energy left after a difficult day. Citing “lack of time” as a reason for not doing something allows us to surrender responsibility for our time and our decisions related to how we use it. It also stops us from really getting at what might be the core reasons we are not doing certain things that we know are beneficial (e.g., don’t enjoy activity; would rather socialize at lunch than go for a walk).

It is not an easy task to reorganize priorities, especially when you are part of a family where your personal priorities may be in conflict with the priorities of others. A first step may involve getting family members to develop attitudes toward active living that will support it being a priority. Another step might be to keep a time diary to better understand what time you and your family members do have and where that time it is going. Once you know how your time is spent, you can determine whether it reflects your priorities and start to make adjustments.

2. Sedentary Leisure Pursuits Dominated Leisure Time. Many of the families I worked with enjoyed sedentary pursuits (e.g., reading, watching tv, playing video games, play cards) – either alone or as a family. While there are many options available to Canadians for engaging in active recreation, there has also been a trend in people choosing and finding some level of satisfaction in pursuits that are sedentary. Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest) provide opportunities for connecting with others; maintaining knowledge of current events; and searching for information related
There are many studies that have linked television watching to obesity, and men and women who are frequent television viewers are more likely to be inactive in their leisure time. Depending on the statistics you locate, the average Canadian adult, when indicating how time at home is spent, watches between 20 and 30 hours of television a week. Television viewing is often hypothesized as an activity that replaces engagement in physical activity and it is understandable that if 20 to 30 hours a week are spent watching television, this choice is likely being made over choices to engage in active leisure.

Almost 60% of Canadians age 12 or older can be classified as social media networkers (approximately 13 Million Canadians) and a recent report, 2012 Canada Digital Future in Focus, indicated the average Canadian is spending about 45 hours a month browsing the Internet. Statistics compiled by the Television Bureau of Canada in 2012 found the average 18- to 49-year-old spent 23 hours per week online. Those in the age range of 18 to 24 watched less television (a mere 14 hours per week), but were online 31 hours per week.

This means that the “average” Canadian is either watching television or is on the Internet for between 6.8 days (163 hours) and 7.5 days (180 hours) per month. Some of this time could involve activity (e.g., watching television while on the treadmill at the gym or at home), but there is no specific data on how much of this time might be active. Also, it is possible that some individuals are online while watching television which would lessen the amount of total time spent on these activities combined. People may also be engaging in activities online that were previously done offline (e.g., reading the newspaper) meaning more time on the Internet but less time reading. In this scenario, we could argue that there has been a shift in time spent in one sedentary activity to another. While the increased television and Internet time is likely sedentary activity, more research is needed to understand exactly how much more sedentary Canadians are than they have been in the past. However, even if all the Internet and television time was occurring at the same time, that would be between 20 and 30 hours of sedentary leisure per week. Cutting back on 7 hours a week would allow for 60 minutes of active leisure each day of the week.

3. Eating Out Has Become a Common, Social Leisure Behavior. Many of the families I interviewed talked about eating out as a family activity. While it obviously fulfilled the need to eat, parents often saw it as an opportunity to spend time together. As Canadians feel more time pressed (e.g., long hours working, longer commute times because of urban sprawl), eating out or getting take out is often a solution for getting fed without needing to take the time to cook a meal or pack a lunch. Beyond the functional role that eating out plays (e.g., nourishing our bodies when we feel there is no time to cook), there is a social component to eating out that, similar to the families I worked with, appeals to many Canadians. For example, a 2010 Ipsos Reid and the Canadian Restaurant Food Association study found 35% of Canadians prefer the restaurant, pub, or bar as their number one place to socialize with friends and family. Another 12% of people prefer socializing at the movies (and how many of us pass up the movie snacks). For Canadians who are 55 years of age and older, 42.3% chose eating out at a restaurant as the number one social activity.

Eating out as part of their social activity in and of itself might not be harmful if it weren’t for the frequency. One study found 60% of Canadians eat in restaurants once a week and an average Atlantic Canadian or Ontarian eats out twice a week. Eating out more frequently is associated with obesity, higher body fatness, or higher BMI (e.g., Chung, Popkin, Domino, & Stearns, 2007; Kruger, Blanck, & Gillespie, 2008). So, it just may be that the ways in which individuals are connecting socially or prefer to engage socially are also contributing to a greater consumption of calories.

It may be worth considering how personal and family leisure behaviors contribute to our individual health and not just as it concerns body weight and obesity.

- What leisure can you prioritize that will improve your health and well-being?
- Can you substitute some of your sedentary behaviors for more active pursuits? Can you find 30 minutes a day to be more active? Can you give up 30 minutes of something you are already doing for a more active pursuit?
- Are there other ways to connect socially that don’t involve eating high calorie foods or being sedentary (e.g., Facebook),
- If you do eat out in restaurants or pubs as part of your social leisure, are there ways you can eat more healthy?

Food for thought.

References:

Supporting Leisure Literacy: Thinking Beyond Traditional Female Sports

Leisure Literacy  February 17, 2014  Leave a comment

Stereotypes about male and female sport participation are everywhere. Last evening I was catching up on my Twitter feed. I feel like I follow a lot of great people and organizations that get me thinking about a variety of topics. I saw this photo that Active for Life had tweeted – “Figure skater in training”.

Active for Life is “the place where parents go to learn about how to make a difference in the health and happiness of their children”. Their website provides great resources related to physical activity and the organization clearly cares about physical literacy.

When I saw this photo though, I thought about leisure literacy and what images communicate to parents about the role and potential of various leisure activities in their children’s lives. Some may argue that this is a harmless or primarily beneficial message – one that helps link the arts (e.g., ballet) with sport or demonstrates that physical literacy skills are transferable across various physical activities. These are important messages to communicate to parents and I am happy that we have an organization in Canada that is doing this work.

My concern with this photo, however, is its potential to perpetuate gender stereotypes related to physical activity.

First, ballet is already perceived as a primarily female pursuit. I watched a news story a few weeks ago about ballet catching on with boys. Those males who choose ballet have to deal with a variety of negative attitudes and perceptions about their activity choice. These attitudes and perceptions exist, in part, because of the messages that get communicated about boys’ place in society and that “place” is more often shown as a sports field or court as opposed to a dance studio or stage. The lack of balance among the images of ballerinos (male ballet dancers) and ballerinas that circulate further reinforce the notion that ballet is for girls.

Next, the text in the photo links a stereotypically female activity (ballet) with a stereotypical female sport (figure skating). Yet, girls have so many more options. Learning ballet can develop physical literacy skills that could benefit girls’ participation in a variety of sports. For example, ballet is used as part of hockey training. Ballet can help with balance and posture, spatial awareness and body control, and
flexibility. I also couldn’t help but think of other sports that ballet training might support—ski jumping (e.g., aerials), gymnastics, downhill skiing, and snowboarding. Part of facilitating the development of leisure literacy is helping others to understand the breadth of leisure opportunities and to break down barriers to participation (including barriers related to attitudes and gender stereotypes). So, while the image of the girl in the tutu and its accompanying text may communicate an important message about physical literacy, it may not help develop one’s leisure awareness or literacy.

I did my part (at least I hope I did) to communicate that there might be other opportunities that ballet could provide. I wasn’t trying to be rude or critical of the Active for Life message. Rather, I was hoping to add to the possibilities and suggest that developing physical skills through a traditional female pursuit can help girls/women to excel in a variety of sports including those that aren’t traditionally viewed as “female” sports.

Ballet can be valuable as an activity to enhance sport performance regardless of whether you're a male or female athlete. It would be great to see a boy in the photo with the text “hockey player in training”. Such images could help broaden perceptions of who participates in ballet and why.

Finally, I want to clarify that I’m not suggesting that participating in ballet does not have value in and of itself. It is a physically demanding activity that can develop a number of muscle groups. It is an activity that allows for personal and creative expression. It can foster self-confidence and self-discipline. And, it can provide opportunities to meet new people, develop friendships, and have fun—whether you are a boy or a girl. An added bonus is the potential ballet has for training those who may want to co-participate in ballet and one or more sports or move on from ballet and focus on a sport pursuit.
A new “Ted Talk” appeared in my podcast list recently and I finally got a chance yesterday to give it a listen. It was a TED MED talk given by the Mayor of Oklahoma City, Mick Cornett, titled – “This City is Going on a Diet”. I think his talk and the approach he took to thinking about city, neighborhood, and community planning as a way to improve the quality of life of his citizens and move his city from one of the “fattest” to the “fittest” is worthy of sharing and thinking about further.

What we see most often in the news, in magazines, on tv shows such as “The Biggest Loser” is a person-centered or individualistic approach to preventing and managing (or combating) obesity. There are suggestions on how to avoid gaining 10 lbs over the holidays, how to begin an exercise routine, or how to maintain an exercise routine when motivation is absent. We see examples of people cutting this or that out of their diet (e.g., wheat, dairy) and working out several hours a day under the watchful eye of a personal trainer or coach (e.g., Biggest Loser). What is much less prevalent in the media are examples of policies or mandates – be they federal, provincial/state, or municipal – that support individuals in becoming more fit. Enter Mayor Cornett. One of Mayor Cornett’s main points in his talk was that although individuals needed to begin having conversations about obesity and health and making an individual effort to be active, “health-related infrastructure” needed to be added to the city. He explained that the quality of life in his city was great… if you were a car. Under his leadership, the city made it a priority to develop infrastructure that supported greater activity of its citizens and added parks, bicycle trails, senior health and wellness centers, water sports venues, and miles of sidewalks. Efforts were also made to create a more pedestrian-friendly city by connecting, for example, libraries to neighborhoods. Five years later… Oklahoma City was no longer on the “fattest cities” list, but rather among the top 22 “fittest cities”.

I’ve noticed that if you search for real estate in Canada through Realtor.ca, listings have a “walk score”. I live in a neighborhood that is 6 kms from where I work and 7 kms from the downtown core. The walk score is a only 20 and houses on my street get labelled under the walk score as “car dependent”. I agree. We are not particular close to amenities (one of the criteria). However, there are also gaps in connectors that could make it possible for me (or others) to walk or bike to work or downtown. Currently, there is a 3 km section of main road (with a speed limit of 70 km/hour) without any sidewalks. That same section of road has no bike lane and is not curbed, nor does it have a decent shoulder to the road where a biker could safely ride. This makes walking or biking fairly unsafe and disconnects my neighborhood from the city in a way that takes walking or biking to walk off the table as an option.

One of the advantages of my neighborhood, however, is that its design includes green space/park in the middle with paths that connect various streets to one another and to the park. No matter where you live in the neighborhood, you can get to the park easily and safely (on sidewalks or paths) within five minutes. There is a baseball field, playground, wading pool and lots of plain ol’ open space. This is an example of neighborhood planning and design that, in theory, helps support both adults’ and children’s active leisure. For example, I have seen parents walk with their kids to the playground and then continue on their own walk within the neighborhood while their children play on the playground equipment or throw a Frisbee around. In my own walks through the park, I have seen children there one own their own playing – arriving on bikes or by foot. Certainly, it isn’t every child in the neighborhood, but some do take advantage of the close proximity of the park and the ease with which they can reach it.

There needs to be ongoing recognition of the role that planning of cities and neighborhoods have in helping citizens to live healthy lifestyles and make healthy choices. There are environmental factors that contribute to inactivity and therefore growing obesity rates. Sidewalks are important to support citizens in walking their neighborhoods. Play structures in neighborhoods can encourage and motivate children’s outdoor and active play. Considering ways to connect neighborhoods to amenities with trails and sidewalks or bike paths also can help create options for walking or biking as opposed to traveling by car. This infrastructure, on its own, will not create a culture of walking or a culture of activity. There will likely remain a need to educate the public about the importance/benefits of taking time to be active and encourage the use of the infrastructure available to increase activity levels. However, without the infrastructure, the task of incorporating physical activity into daily life may simply be too difficult or overwhelming for some. It is important to remember that not everyone can get transportation by bus or car to places to walk (e.g., parks or trails) or play or swim or skateboard. Not everyone can afford that transportation or the cost of gym or club memberships. For those without their own transportation or those with lower incomes, the provision of “health-related infrastructure” within the community may be critical to supporting more active lifestyles.
Physical activity is defined as any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure and is a fundamental means of improving people's physical and mental health. It reduces the risks of many noncommunicable diseases and benefits society by increasing social interaction and community engagement. Physical activity should not be mistaken with exercise. Exercise is a subcategory of physical activity that is planned, structured, repetitive, and purposeful in the sense that the improvement or maintenance of one or more components of physical fitness is the objective. Physical activity can improve your health. People who are physically active tend to live longer and have lower risk for heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, depression, and some cancers. Physical activity can also help with weight control, and may improve academic achievement in students. Walking is an easy way to start and maintain a Read More >.