

# Active After School Programs for Girls and Young Women

POLICY AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Canadian Association for the  
Advancement of Women  
and Sport and Physical Activity

Association canadienne pour  
l'avancement des femmes  
du sport et de l'activité physique

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# Scope

The Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) has developed this policy as part of their commitment to membership in the Canadian Active After School Partnership (CAASP).

The policy was developed based on consultations conducted through the spring of 2011 with practitioners and policy makers involved in delivering healthy living programs to girls and young women. A separate report describes the findings of the consultations.

CAAWS hopes that practitioners and decision-makers involved in delivering active after school programs will use this policy to guide their program design, with the aim of meeting the needs of girls and young women in the 3:00 to 6:00 p.m. time period.

The benefits of physical activity and healthy eating are well documented. However, girls and young women face different barriers and have unique needs in after school programming, compared to boys and young men. Without a specific approach designed to overcome their barriers and meet their needs, girls and young women will not participate.

This policy describes a vision and strategic directions for active after school programs for girls and young women.

## Context, Research

In 2010, Federal-Provincial/Territorial Ministers responsible for sport and recreation set a goal for 2015 to increase by seven percentage points the proportion of children who participate in 90 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity over and above activities of daily living. The after school time period was seen as an opportunity for policy and programming efforts to focus on the physical activity of children and youth.

Funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada, the Canadian Active After School Partnership (CAASP) was formed comprising nine national organizations:

- Active Healthy Kids Canada
- Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability
- Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada
- Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity
- Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute
- Canadian Parks and Recreation Association
- Green Communities Canada
- Physical and Health Education Canada
- YMCA Canada

The aim of the partnership is to:

- Influence policy development aimed at better use of facilities, inclusion and equitable access for all.
- Develop knowledge through social marketing/communication campaigns, better access to resources and support tools, and sharing of best/promising practices.
- Train and build capacity among program leaders.
- Develop and test projects that address barriers, use resources, and expand successes into new regions.

CAAWS is involved to lend their expertise and ensure the needs of girls and young women are fully addressed in CAASP activities.

## What the Research Tells Us

The CAAWS consultation process involved a review of research conducted in the last two years, including six meta-analyses of evaluations completed on after school programs focused on physical activity or a combination of physical activity, nutrition, homework and social skills building. Most programs focused on both boys and girls. Programs were delivered in school and community settings.

Findings include:

- Active after school programs have the potential to help children and youth to engage in regular, enjoyable physical activity, but transportation to and from the program can act as an access barrier.
- Programs that combined physical activity with homework or diet interventions were no more effective than programs focusing on one element; greater exposure to active after school programs is related to improved outcomes.
- Single-behaviour interventions may be most effective in the after school hours – targeting physical activity alone, rather than in combination with diet or as part of a weight gain prevention program, may be a more effective strategy. This is because fewer messages focused on a single issue are more suited to the cognitive capacity of children and adolescents.
- A lack of feelings of self-efficacy, lack of social support from friends, and lack of social support from families can act as barriers for girls, therefore parents, communities and schools should provide and enhance opportunities outside the school day for adolescents to be active. Reducing transportation barriers and enlisting social support, particularly from peers, appear to be key.
- The introduction of a specific physical activity program that focuses on inclusivity and enjoyment, and emphasizes the importance of staff competency, can result in an increase in physical activity levels by children and youth.

- Culturally infused programs have positive impacts for children and youth from Hispanic/Latino backgrounds, as is the inclusion of Spanish-speaking program facilitators as a critical component for positive outcomes. This may have application for other cultural communities, including Aboriginal communities.

## Why a Focus on After School?

After school programs are those offered in the 3:00 to 6:00 p.m. time period, after the end of the school day. Approximately 50% of total daily steps taken by children and youth occur in this time period.

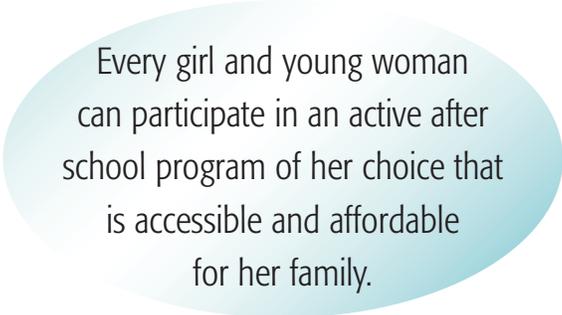
Although physical activity during the school day in the form of physical education or daily physical activity remains an important mechanism to increase physical activity levels of children and youth, after school programs have been identified as convenient locations in which to promote physical activity.

Many children and youth already participate in some form of after school programming, and it is likely that the families of others would be interested in after school programming if it were available. These programs offer a safe environment for children and youth to engage in activity and develop lifelong physical activity habits. However, quality after school programs must provide moderate and vigorous physical activity opportunities and support healthy eating.

The policy is aimed at influencing decision-makers in organizations and governments at the community, provincial/territorial and national levels.

## Vision

CAAWS proposes the following vision for a policy on active after school programs for girls and young women:



Every girl and young woman can participate in an active after school program of her choice that is accessible and affordable for her family.

# Strategies and Action Steps

The five strategic policy directions will guide active after school programs involving moderate to vigorous physical activity and healthy eating choices for girls and young women.

The five strategic directions are:

- **Effective program design (content and operations)** – actions taken to ensure that the content and operations of the program meet the needs and interests of girls and young women.
- **Supporting effective human resources policies and practices** – actions taken to ensure properly trained female staff and volunteers lead the programs.
- **Effective organizational supports** – the elements around the program that would contribute to its success, such as policies, evaluation, sustainable funding, and collaboration amongst the various levels and departments of government.
- **Establishing and maintaining partnerships** – actions that support the development of partnerships with organizations that reflect the diversity of program participants and the geographic community, by the organization delivering the active after school program.
- **Ensuring access** – actions taken to ensure that girls and young women can get to and from programs safely, that the programs are within their economic means, and are respectful and accommodating of differences.

Below, each of these strategic directions is elaborated upon and actions that can be taken by program providers and decision-makers to achieve these strategic directions are provided.

## #1 Effective Program Design (Content and Operations)

Quality programming is key to engaging girls and young women in after school programming. Effective program design will ensure the content and operations of the program meet the needs and interests of girls and young women.

### **ACTION STEPS**

To achieve effective program design, program providers and decision-makers should:

- Include components to build girls' and young women's sport and physical activity skills.
- Consult with and include the input of girls and young women in the design of the active after school program.
- Design programs that offer variety, flexibility and a choice of activities for girls and young women.

- Include components to build girls' and young women's self-esteem, self-confidence, and leadership skills.

Current best practice research suggests that to achieve the best outcomes programs should be:

- Focused on fun;
- Active – providing moderate and vigorous physical activity opportunities, and building girls' and young women's physical literacy and sport and physical activity-related skills;
- Sequenced – skills are broken down into smaller pieces for mastery to occur so that participants can experience success as they learn;
- Social – at least one program component is focused on developing personal/ social skills such as through fun and social time with friends; and
- Explicit – girls know what they are going to learn and what the program hopes to achieve.

## #2 Supporting Effective Human Resource Policies and Practices

Knowing and responding to the psycho-social needs of girls and young women is a critical component of ensuring that girls and young women will be attracted to a program. Ideally, program leaders are aware of and understand these needs, but knowledge implementation can be encouraged by human resource policies implemented by the organization offering the program. Supporting effective human resource policies and practices, including ensuring properly trained female staff and volunteers lead active after school programs for girls and young women, is the second strategic direction.

### **ACTION STEPS**

To support effective human resource policies and practices, program providers and decision-makers should:

- Provide training for **all** leaders, volunteers and decision-makers:
  - About the barriers faced by girls and young women and their healthy living needs, interest and experiences;
  - About characteristics of quality active after school programs for girls and young women; and
  - On how to deliver quality sport, physical activity and healthy eating experiences for girls and young women (e.g. sufficient moderate and vigorous physical activity, physical literacy and skill development, healthy eating education).
- Use female staff or volunteers as program leaders and role models for girls and young women. Wherever possible, engage leaders who are reflective of the program participants (e.g. disability, race, culture, faith, language, sexual orientation, gender expression, etc.).

## #3 Effective Organizational Supports

Effective organizational supports focus on the elements around the program that contribute to its success, such as policies, evaluation, sustainable funding, and collaboration amongst the various levels and departments of government.

### ACTION STEPS

To achieve effective organizational supports, program providers and decision-makers should:

- Establish policies that specifically identify girls and young women as a priority group to whom to offer programming.
- Educate and provide tools to all after school programs, including daycares, to ensure their programs involve moderate and vigorous physical activity and support healthy eating.
- Develop evaluation tools, based on national benchmarks, to enhance program delivery and meet the needs of funders and stakeholders.
- Increase collaboration **between** the federal and provincial/territorial government departments focused on sport, recreation and physical activity.
- Increase collaboration **amongst** government departments with an interest in active after school programs (e.g. departments/ministries responsible for sport, physical activity, health, education, infrastructure, justice, youth, families, women, etc.).

## #4 Establish and Maintain Partnerships

Organizations delivering active after school programs need to establish and maintain partnerships with other organizations in their community that reflect the diversity of their program participants and the geographic community. Organizations also need to develop partnerships with the families of the girls and young women in their programs.

### ACTION STEPS

To establish and maintain partnerships, program providers and decision-makers should:

- Establish partnerships with organizations that work with diverse communities that can support program delivery, contribute to expanding program activities and access to facilities, and promote the program to girls and young women.
- Foster and maintain relationships with parents and caregivers to support the involvement of girls and young women.

Partnerships can be established with the coach who is allocated facility (e.g. gymnasium, field) time at the end of the school day, with community service and faith organizations, with small businesses and corporations, with not-for-profits at the provincial/territorial and national levels, and with governments (municipal, provincial/territorial and federal).

Partnerships can be developed to share ideas and approaches, to negotiate more facility space and time for girls' and young women's programming, to obtain funding and other resources, to make connections to local media, to expand a program's reach, and to engage more participants from different communities.

Partnerships with parents and caregivers are particularly important when targeting girls and young women to increase support for their involvement.

Long-term, sustainable funding is required to support quality active after school programs and achieve outcomes related to the health of children and youth.

## #5 Ensuring Access

Transportation is a significant barrier to girls' and young women's participation in after school programming. Ensuring access so girls and young women can get to and from programs safely, that the programs are within their economic means, and are respectful and accommodating of differences, is the last strategic direction.

### **ACTION STEPS**

To ensure access, program providers and decision-makers should:

- Create and communicate an inclusive environment that welcomes all abilities, and doesn't discriminate based on sex, disability, race, culture, faith, socio-economic status, language, sexual orientation, gender expression, etc.
- Find ways to make the program accessible so girls and young women can get to and from the program safely (e.g. deliver programs at schools or at venues accessible by public transportation; provide bus tickets; organize a "walking school bus").
- Offer the program free of charge or at a low cost.
- Ensure the program is accessible to girls and young women with a disability.
- Develop facility allocation policies and practices that ensure equitable space and time allocation for use by girls and young women.
- Implement policies to influence funders when designing grant programs. For example, requiring the involvement of girls and young women in the proposal development, and/or requiring equitable funding for both girls' programs and boys' programs to ensure funding does not solely support boys' teams or co-ed programs that actually engage more boys than girls.

## **Implementation and Evaluation**

Program providers and decision-makers can review this policy and begin discussions within their communities about how to go about implementing the action steps.

CAAWS is available to support individuals, organizations and government agencies at the community, provincial/territorial and national levels in taking action. Practical tools and resources available through CAAWS' On the Move initiative will increase awareness about the needs, interests and experiences of girls and young women, and provide success stories and inspirational ideas.

CAASP will assist implementation by developing an online hub where program providers and decision-makers across the country can share information, learnings, successes and challenges about active after school programs.

Program design can be accomplished with principles in mind that reflect the strategic directions of this policy. It is important initially to describe the intended outcomes, and then identify program elements designed to achieve those outcomes.

## Evaluation

Evaluation is critical to ensure programs are achieving their intended outcomes. Different active after school programs will have different outcomes. Programs focused on physical activity should have outcomes related to increased moderate and vigorous physical activity, and enhanced physical literacy and sport and physical activity-related skills. Programs focused on healthy eating should have outcomes related to better understanding of diet, nutrition and ultimately, better eating habits.

Programs and associated evaluation approaches can be designed “from scratch,” or existing evaluation resources and tools that have already been tested, such as HIGH FIVE, can be used.

## Recommendation for Next Steps

The successful establishment and delivery of an active after school program for girls and young women will require a champion who understands the need for programs designed specifically with girls and young women and will pursue the resources to meet the need. Champions are dedicated, ardent, and passionate. If they are to be found, they need to identify successors, so that once a program has been started, it can continue.

## Conclusion

This policy on active after school programs for girls and young women has been developed with the assistance of more than 100 practitioners and decision-makers from across Canada with experience in programming for girls and young women.

Consultations conducted over the course of two months, including an in-person all day session, online survey and telephone consultation, led to the development of a vision and five strategic directions for a policy on active after school programs for girls and young women.

This policy was developed for community, provincial/territorial and national level organizations to use when considering design and delivery of active after school programming for girls and young women.

CAAWS believes that if the actions set out in this policy are implemented, then the vision – that every girl and young woman can participate in an active after school program of her choice that is accessible and affordable for her family – is attainable.