Newcomer Mothers:
Sharing Their Thoughts About Physical Activity

About the Project
This project collected information from 4 focus groups of Newcomer mothers from Toronto (2) and Vancouver (2). A total of 56 Newcomer mothers participated. Focus groups were conducted to help CAAWS better understand barriers and potential solutions related to Newcomer mothers and physical activity. Partners involved in the coordination of the focus groups included: Davenport-Perth Neighbourhood and Community Health Centre and Flemingdon Neighbourhood Services in Toronto and Collingwood Neighbourhood House in Vancouver.
For more information on the Project please contact CAAWS at: caaws@caaws.ca. www.caaws.ca

About CAAWS
The Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) supports the active engagement of women and girls as participants and leaders in sport and physical activity. CAAWS is a national non-profit organization that since 1981 has worked in close cooperation with government and non-government organizations on activities and initiatives that advocate for positive change for girls and women in sport and physical activity. CAAWS provides a number of services, programs and resources to a variety of clients, including sport and physical activity organizations, teachers, coaches, health professionals and recreation leaders.
Newcomer Mothers: Sharing Their Thoughts About Physical Activity

Who are Newcomer Mothers?
We are new to Canada, new to Canadian culture and excited to become actively engaged in our communities. We bring with us our traditions, our beliefs and our experiences. With family far away, we are often very much alone and lack support networks. We want to be active and healthy but find the transitions we are going through challenging.

Many of us are at home caring for our families, some are learning English through ESL programs while others are working or in school full or part-time. Some of us have supportive partners that help with the children and house but many of us are solely responsible for these tasks. This leaves very little time for ourselves.

As mothers we are actively engaged in our children’s lives. It is through their involvement in school, sport and the community that we often meet others and find out about programs and services. Our children and families are our world but having our own lives, interests, friends and activities is important too.

We want to be good role models for our children, friends and family and know it is important to set a good example by being active and leading a healthy lifestyle.

Let’s work together to overcome barriers and create solutions that will encourage mothers to be physically active and their families to be physically active!

How do we feel about being active?
As children many of us were very active and enjoyed a variety of different activities. As we had children, this often changed with the focus being more on the family. We ensure our children are active and enrolled in different activities. As we had children, this often changed with the focus being more on the family. We ensure our children are active and enrolled in different activities. As we had children, this often changed with the focus being more on the family. We ensure our children are active and enrolled in different activities. As we had children, this often changed with the focus being more on the family. We ensure our children are active and enrolled in different activities.

What holds us back?
When being physically active competes with many other responsibilities, the barriers can seem almost insurmountable.

Some of these barriers are our own internal feelings, the secrets that we let hold us back. We may have a poor body image and not want to be seen exercising or trying to get into ‘better’ shape. Our lack of skill and familiarity with different activities can intimidate us. We feel guilty for leaving family or household responsibilities to take time for ourselves. We have often put everyone else’s needs ahead of our own, and we find it hard to put ourselves first. We are in transition, adapting and carrying the weight of the family’s adjustment to Canada on our shoulders creating many different physical, emotional and life changes that are exciting but often leave us completely exhausted.

Some of the barriers that hold us back are external. Canadian weather, the snow, cold and early darkness of winter and the heat of summer, is very new to many of us so adapting to weather can be a major challenge. Transportation can be a problem as most of us are not driving so we need to use public transit that can be confusing and very time consuming. Sometimes the effort to get somewhere, taking multiple buses with several children is just not worth the effort.

Cost is another huge barrier with the expenses of classes, gym memberships, workout clothing and equipment being one factor when you also need to take into consideration transportation and child-care, making ‘free’ programs not ‘free’ for us. Finally the availability of free or affordable child-care is a huge issue. Newcomer mothers often lack family support and we do not feel comfortable approaching new friends and neighbours for help so having this in place is very important.

When looking at physical activity programs, subsidized Newcomer programs are often limited, particularly in low income/high immigrant areas. The welcome programs offered in many cities are good but there can be long waiting lists for programs and as a result you are often assigned to go somewhere that is not convenient as the spots within your postal code are already full. Additionally almost all of the programs offered are for children with very little offered for us as mothers.

In most cases we just sit and watch our children. It would be nice to be doing something at the same time or have more options for us.

Sometimes we are not aware of how to get started or familiar with the different organizations that offer programs. Gymnasiums or community centres may not have been in our home countries so seeking them out for information is not something we would do. We look for information in places like libraries, at our children’s schools, as part of our ESL programs and in grocery stores. These are all places we frequent and are familiar with.

As Newcomers to Canada language is often a barrier as is cultural understanding to help us integrate fully. When working with us it is important to have instructors that can speak our language and understand the cultural changes we have for participation.

How can you help us?
Helping Newcomer mothers become more physically active is the collective responsibility of a wide variety of partners. You can all help us by working together to explore creative solutions to develop and adapt programming and support specifically with us in mind.

We want to be active with other women
• Provides cultural barriers.
• Provides an opportunity to meet other Newcomer mothers, helping build networks for support and friendship.
• Make us feel more comfortable.

We need solutions for childcare
• Provide access to childcare at the facility at little or no cost.
• Provide childcare options at different times of the day – many of us work.
• Offer programs for mothers at the same time as programs for children – if we are both being active then there is no need for childcare.
• Offer programs that include children so we can bring them with us and be active together.

We need activities that are close by and low cost
• Parks, community centres, places of worship and walking paths are in every neighbourhood – partner with them to offer a variety of indoor and outdoor activities.
• Do not limit the number of subsidized Newcomer program spots at certain facilities – be flexible so that Newcomer mothers can choose locations that are convenient.
• Offer discounts and subsidies for the entire family – there are many low cost options for children but very few for mothers.

We need to know what is available in our communities
• Offer welcome walking and/or bus tours for Newcomer mothers to show them what is available in their communities such as parks, community centres, pools, libraries, etc.
• Incorporate physical activity into ESL programming and as part of that make Newcomer mothers aware of programs, subsidies, application forms, etc.

We are willing to help
• Ask Newcomer mothers what they want and engage them in your planning.
• Train interested Newcomer mothers to be instructors for organized programming (dance, yoga, etc.) but also train them on how to coordinate walking groups, games in the park, etc.
• Encourage Newcomer mothers to bring family, friends or neighbours to increase attendance and community involvement.
• Ask us questions about our culture, language or beliefs to help staff and agency leaders understand what needs to be adapted or changed to engage more Newcomers.

We need your help to be successful
• Teach us ways to build activity into our day.
• Show us skills to do activities so we can feel confident and competent.
• Help us understand how to involve and engage our families in activity.
• Create welcoming, culturally appropriate environments.
• Help us find buddies to be active with and motivate us to keep going.

Marketing Tips to Reach Newcomer Mothers
• Offer materials in multiple languages and communicate what languages your instructors and program staff speak to make Newcomer mothers feel comfortable knowing someone will be able to communicate with them.
• Engage Newcomer mothers as champions to spread the word about your activities and programs – hearing about programs from friends and neighbours is the most common way Newcomer mothers learn about what is offered.
• Advertise opportunities in places where Newcomer mothers frequent – neighbourhood centres, ESL programs, places of worship, libraries, grocery stores, early years centres, schools, health clinics or where children go for activities.
• Consider all times of day for programming. After school is a good time if you offer activities mothers can do at the same time as their children or together.
• Offer programs catered to Newcomer mothers specifically so they know they will be participating with other Newcomer women.
• Send invitations home with children inviting mothers to attend. A personal invitation is very powerful and will be well received.
• Explain clearly what to expect (levels, type of activity, etc.), what to wear and what to bring.
• Create an email list and email Newcomer mothers once a month about opportunities.
• Market how participating in physical activity programs will help Newcomer mothers learn and speak more English.
Newcomer Mothers: Sharing Their Thoughts About Physical Activity

Who are Newcomer Mothers?
We are new to Canada, new to Canadian culture and excited to become actively engaged in our communities. We bring with us our traditions, our beliefs and our experiences. With family far away, we are often very much alone and lack support networks. We want to be active and healthy but find the transitions we are going through challenging.

Many of us at home caring for our families, some are learning English through ESL programs while others are working or in school full or part-time. Some of us have supportive partners that help with the children and house but many of us are solely responsible for these tasks. This leaves very little time for ourselves.

As mothers we are actively engaged in our children’s lives. It is through their involvement in school, sport and the community that we often meet others and find out about programs and services. Our children and families are our world but having our own interests, lives, friends and activities is important too.

We want to be good role models for our children, friends and family and know it is important to set a good example by being active and leading a healthy lifestyle.

Let’s work together to overcome barriers and create solutions that will encourage more Newcomer mothers and their families to be physically active!

How do we feel about being active?
As children many of us were very active and enjoyed a variety of different activities. As we had children, this often changed with the focus becoming on the family. We ensure our children are active and enrolled in different activities but we do not always look for activities for ourselves.

We understand that Canadian born mothers see similar challenges faced by us but do not always look for activities for themselves. In most cases we just sit and watch our children. It would be nice to be doing something at the same time or have options for us. We often don’t know what is available in our communities or how to engage and encourage our families.

We need your help to be successful
• Teach us ways to build activity into our day.
• Show us skills to do activities so we can feel confident and competent.
• Help us understand how to involve and engage our families in activity.
• Create welcoming, culturally appropriate environments.
• Help us find buddies to be active with and motivate us to keep going.

Marketing Tips to Reach Newcomer Mothers
• Offer materials in multiple languages and communicate what languages your instructors and program staff speak to make Newcomer mothers feel comfortable knowing someone will be able to communicate with them.
• Engage Newcomer mothers as champions to spread the word about your activities and programs – hearing about programs from friends and neighbours is the most common way Newcomer mothers learn about what is offered.
• Advertise opportunities in places where Newcomer mothers frequent – neighbourhood centres, ESL programs, places of worship, libraries, grocery stores, early years centres, schools, health clinics or where children go for activities.
• Consider all times of day for programming. After school is a good time if you offer activities mothers can do at the same time as programs for children – if we are both being active then there is no need for childcare.
• Offer programs catered to Newcomer mothers specifically with us in mind.
• Remove cultural barriers.
• Help staff and administrators understand what needs to be adapted or changed to engage more Newcomer mothers.

As Newcomers to Canada language is often a barrier as is cultural understanding to help us integrate fully. When working with us it is important to have instructors that can speak our language and understand the cultural challenges we have for participation.

How can you help us?
Helping Newcomer mothers become more physically active is the collective responsibility of a wide variety of partners. You can all help us by working together to explore creative solutions to develop and adapt programming and support services specifically with us in mind.

We want to be active with other women
• Provides cultural barriers.
• Removes cultural barriers.

We need solutions for childcare
• Provide access to childcare at the facility at little or no cost.
• Provide childcare options at different times of the day – many of us work.
• Offer programs for mothers at the same time as programs for children – if we are both being active then there is no need for childcare.
• Offer programs that include children so we can bring them with us and be active together.

We need activities that are close by and low cost
• Parks, community centres, places of worship and walking paths are in every neighbourhood – partner with them to offer a variety of indoor and outdoor activities.
• Do not limit the number of subsidized Newcomer program spots at certain facilities – be flexible so that Newcomer mothers can choose locations that are convenient.
• Offer discounts and subsidies for the entire family – there are many low cost options for children but very few for mothers.

We need to know what is available in our communities
• Offer welcome walking and/or bus tours for Newcomer mothers to show them what is available in their communities such as parks, community centres, pools, libraries, etc.
• Incorporate physical activity into ESL programming and as part of that make Newcomer mothers aware of programs, subsidies, application forms, etc.

We are willing to help
• Ask Newcomer mothers what they want and engage them in your planning.
• Train interested Newcomer mothers to be instructors for organized programming (dance, yoga, etc.) but also train them on how to coordinate walking groups, games in the park, etc.
• Encourage Newcomer mothers to bring family, friends or neighbours to increase attendance and community involvement.
• Ask us questions about our culture, language or help to staff and administrators understand what needs to be adapted or changed to engage more Newcomer mothers.

What holds us back?
When being physically active competes with many other responsibilities, the barriers can seem almost insurmountable.

Some of these barriers are our own internal feelings, the secrets that we let hold us back. We may have a poor body image and not want to be seen exercising that is not in ‘better’ shape. Our lack of skill and familiarity with different activities can intimidate us. We feel guilty for leaving family or household responsibilities to take time for ourselves. We have often put everyone else’s needs ahead of our own, and we find it hard to put ourselves first. We are in transition, adapting and carrying the weight of the family’s adjustment to Canada on our shoulders creating many different physical, emotional and life changes that are exciting but often leave us completely exhausted.

Some of the barriers that hold us back are external. Canadian weather, the snow, cold and early darkness of winter and the heat of summer, is very new to many of us so adapting to weather can be a major challenge. Transportation can be a problem as most of us are not driving so we need to use public transit that can be confusing and very time consuming. Sometimes the effort to get somewhere, taking multiple buses with several children is just not worth the effort. Cost is another huge barrier with the expense of classes, gym memberships, workout clothing and equipment being only one factor when you also need to take into consideration transportation and child-care, making ‘free’ programs not free for us. Finally the availability of free or affordable childcare is a huge issue. Newcomer mothers often lack family support and we do not feel comfortable approaching new friends and neighbours for help so having this in place is very important.

When looking at physical activity programs, subsidized Newcomer programs are often limited, particularly in low income/high immigrant areas. The welcome programs offered in many cities are good but there can be long waiting lists for programs and as a result you are often assigned to go somewhere, taking multiple buses with several children is just not worth the effort. Additionally almost all of the programs offered are for children with very little offered for us as mothers.

In most cases we just sit and watch our children. It would be nice to be doing something at the same time or have more options for us.

Sometimes we are not aware of how to get started or familiar with the different organizations that offer programs. Gyms, schools or community centres may not have been in our home countries so seeking them out for information is not something we would do. We look for information in places like libraries, at our children’s schools, as part of our ESL programs and in grocery stores. These are all place we frequent and are familiar with.
About the Project

This project collected information from 4 focus groups of Newcomer mothers from Toronto (2) and Vancouver (2). A total of 56 Newcomer mothers participated. Focus groups were conducted to help CAAWS better understand barriers and potential solutions related to Newcomer mothers and physical activity.

Partners involved in the coordination of the focus groups included: Davenport-Perth Neighbourhood and Community Health Centre and Flemingdon Neighbourhood Services in Toronto and Collingwood Neighbourhood House in Vancouver.

For more information on the Project please contact CAAWS at: caaws@caaws.ca. www.caaws.ca

The Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) supports the active engagement of women and girls as participants and leaders in sport and physical activity. CAAWS is a national non-profit organization that since 1981 has worked in close cooperation with government and non-government organizations on activities and initiatives that advocate for positive change for girls and women in sport and physical activity. CAAWS provides a number of services, programs and resources to a variety of clients, including sport and physical activity organizations, teachers, coaches, health professionals and recreation leaders.