

HEALTHY MINDS IN ACTIVE BODIES

Promoting Mental Health Amongst Girls and Young Women

Fostering positive mental health in children is an important aspect to leading quality of life. More than 800,000 children between the ages of four and 17 years of age experience a mental health condition, and most never receive formal treatment. Early prevention and intervention efforts can ensure parents/caregivers can seek and obtain the help their child needs.

Physical activity offers important opportunities to positively influence an individual's mental health, in addition to providing a range of other benefits. This includes: enhanced mood, increased confidence and resiliency, decreased stress, improved body image, and improved working memory/concentration. According to *Canada's Physical Activity Guidelines*, parents should ensure that their children are engaging in a minimum of 60 minutes of physical activity each day (CSEP, 2012).

Increased challenges for girls and young women

Girls and young women typically face additional issues or challenges that can negatively affect their mental health. Consider these facts:

- In 2010, more than one third of Canadian girls in grade six reported experiencing high levels of emotional problems. By grade 10 this number was nearly one in two.
- Girls and young women consistently report higher levels of depression, feelings of loneliness, sadness, helplessness and difficulty sleeping.
- At each grade level, girls have been found to be more likely to wish they were someone else. By grade 10, 39% of girls believe that they are fat, a significant overrepresentation of girls who are actually overweight or obese.
- Young women (44.0%) are also more likely to report feeling constantly stressed, compared to young men (28.7%) (CAMH, 2005).
- Only 4% of girls (compared to 9% of boys) achieve recommended levels of daily physical activity.

Observing children & youth's mental health

Situations and circumstances may negatively influence a child's mental health. At times, challenges or stressors may overwhelm them and their capacity to manage/

regulate themselves. These difficulties often show themselves in their behaviours. In determining whether a child may be in need of additional support, it is important to consider the frequency, duration and intensity of their behaviours.

Some of the signs you may notice include:

- Emotional signs like mood swings, crying, irritability, being withdrawn, and being overly worried.
- Behavioural signs like acting out, playing too rough, whining, nail biting and bullying.
- Expressions of low self-esteem or feelings of worthlessness.
- Changes in thinking skills such as focusing, remembering, and problem solving.
- Difficulty making friends or getting along with others.
- Headaches and stomach-aches.
- Changes in sleep and appetite.

(CMHA ON, 2012)

Quality, active after school programs

Quality, active after school programs have a unique opportunity to positively impact the mental health of girls and young women. Specifically, they can:

- Promote participation in physical activity and sport to reduce stress.
- Connect girls and young women to their bodies through positive physical activity experiences.
- Build girls' relationship skills (such as respect for themselves and each other, establishing positive friendships, develop assertiveness skills, prevent bullying.)
- Form relationships between girls (such as through ice breakers, social time), and with program leaders and other staff members as positive role models.

- Build girls' media literacy and critical thinking skills through integrated educational sessions and discussions, helping them successfully navigate through mixed messages.
- Challenge all staff to consider their practice, and how they can contribute to a positive environment for girls and young women.
- Influence gender equity throughout the organization, examining policy and practice at all levels.

What does a quality, active after school program look like?

A quality, active after school program is one that provides an intentional, child-centred, community based and needs driven environment for children. It begins the moment the school day ends and continues until the moment the parent or caregiver resumes care for their child.

A quality program must include:

- ✓ Leadership from caring, trained and skilled staff, ideally supported by mentored youth leaders.
- ✓ Daily opportunities to enhance the well-being of all participants, and ensure their physical, social, emotional and intellectual development.
- ✓ A variety of physical activities provided each day for at least 30 minutes in duration. These physical activities should be of moderate to vigorous intensity, age and stage appropriate, and include skill and knowledge components.
- ✓ A good balance of both play and instruction to ensure the mastery of fitness and life skills. The activities should be fun and challenging, and designed to bring about improvements in health and skill.
- ✓ Maximal access to a variety of indoor and outdoor community facilities that are safe and secure, and have well-maintained and modern equipment.
- ✓ Opportunities to develop friendships and positive social interactions are nurtured between children.
- ✓ Inclusive environments for all children (this includes valuing – as well as planning and budgeting).
- ✓ Nutritional food offerings for snacks and meals, as well as appropriate portion sizes.
- ✓ Ample opportunities for input from participants, their parents/guardians, and all members of the leadership team.
- ✓ Policies and procedures are drafted, taught, implemented and reviewed regularly.
- ✓ A safe environment for children to grow.

Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual:

- realizes his or her own potential
- can cope with the normal stresses of life
- can work productively and fruitfully
- is able to make a contribution to the community

(WHO, 2007)

Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS)

CAAWS is a national non-profit organization dedicated to creating an equitable sport and physical activity system in which girls and women are actively engaged as participants and leaders. 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. Visit www.caaws.ca

The Canadian Active After School Partnership (CAASP) is a comprehensive and collaborative initiative of six national organizations working to enhance the quality of active after school programs to improve the health of Canada's children and youth. For more information on quality, active after school programs, including links to other relevant resources please visit: www.activeafterschool.ca

