



Family and Community Involvement in the Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program

KRISTIN CIPRIANI

CHERYL RICHARDSON

GEORGI ROBERTS

The least implemented component of a Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program—engaging families and communities—may be the most important.

The critical role of families in the development of a child is undeniable (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2011). Daily family routines establish norms, influence behavioral patterns, and shape the “typical” lifestyle for children. While this lifestyle varies from family to family, what children learn at home transfers to other aspects of their life. Although not as great an influence as family behaviors, practices of the local community also influence the development of a child’s world view. By observing the behavior and lifestyle of those in the community, children begin to familiarize themselves with and adapt to norms that exist outside of the home. While many different behaviors, practices, and lessons can be observed and learned from families and community members, one aspect that is frequently overlooked is the effect that the family and community can have on the development of a physically active lifestyle for children.

Daily physical activity provides many benefits for children, from maintaining or improving health and fitness levels to positively influencing academic achievement. Additionally, consistent engagement in physical activity during youth sets children on a path toward a lifetime of physical activity. Although youth participation in physical activity is influenced by many factors, families and community members play a major role. When families and communities are active together, a culture of healthy living emerges. By supporting and participating in physical activities, families and communities foster an environment that encourages continual engagement in physical activity.

For physical educators, family and community involvement means including family and community members in school activities related to physical education and physical activity. That entails making connections between the school and community to create and support physical activity opportunities, as well as providing access to school physical activity facilities outside of school hours (American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance [AAHPERD], 2011). While this concept seems simple enough, family and community involvement is one of the least frequently implemented components of a Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program (CSPAP). Knowing the great influence that families and communities can have on developing physically active children, who will potentially remain active for a lifetime, all schools need to implement this CSPAP component with vigor.

Engaging families and communities in physical activities with or for the benefit of children is an extension of the role of a physical education instructor. Although it is possible for a physical educator to generate ideas that encourage families and communities to move, a certified director of physical activity (C-DPA) would be better trained to more easily facilitate family and community involvement in physical activity.

This article will provide a brief review of existing research about the benefits of family and community involvement in creating a physically active environment for children and will present a number of strategies that a physical educator, especially a C-DPA, can implement to make family and community involvement a reality.

What Does the Research Say?

With children spending the majority of their waking hours in school, the hope is that increased access to and subsequent participation in physical activity will enable children to establish the foundation for a lifetime of health and physical activity. For this foundation to have any effect, exposure to physical activity cannot cease when children leave school; rather, exposure must extend into a child's life outside of school, which entails the need for family and community involvement (AAHPERD, 2011).

To date, research investigating the relationship among physical activity, family and community involvement, and various health outcomes in children has been sparse. Of the studies that have been conducted successfully, results and conclusions have varied widely, illustrating that this line of research is still developing.

The physical activity interventions that exert the most impact used a multicomponent approach (similar to the CSPAP model). It is notable that when family and community involvement were included as part of the multicomponent approach, studies have shown an even greater increase in the overall physical activity levels of children (van Sluijs, McMinn, & Griffin, 2007).

These findings are positive, but many questions still remain (Salmon, Booth, Phongsava, Murphy, & Timperio, 2007). While physical activity interventions can increase physical activity levels, it has not been determined whether the increased activity is apparent only inside of the school building, or whether they are seen in the home environment as well. Although the multicomponent intervention has shown positive results, there are still questions about the generalizability of these results for both children and adolescents. Furthermore, while the multicomponent approach has registered the greatest impact in some studies, in others it has had little to no impact. Although not all studies agree that parent and community involvement greatly enhance the effects of a physical activity intervention program, no studies indicate that family and community involvement hinder these effects (Salmon et al., 2007). Therefore, family and community involvement should be sought and implemented.

Strategies to Increase Family and Community Involvement

Increase Communication. The foundation for successful family and community involvement in a CSPAP is effective communication. It is critical that the C-DPA provide families and community members with information about physical activity and physical education. The great news is that, as physical educators, many potential C-DPAs are already communicating effectively with family and community members through school newsletters, parent-teacher conferences, and the school web site. With these communication channels already in place, it is easy to add to the conversation. But even when starting from scratch, C-DPAs can increase communication easily.



Georgi Roberts

A family fitness night can provide physical activity opportunities for the whole family in a community setting.

The C-DPA must inform families and community members about upcoming events in the school and community. He or she can also work with the technology department to develop a physical activity section on the school web site that provides a variety of resources, including a physical activity message board, a physical activity calendar, and quick facts pertaining to healthy living. The physical activity message board would create an open forum for discussion about physical activity opportunities in the community—what is available currently and what families and community members would like to have available. This would open communication between the C-DPA and members of the community and help to further understanding and to meet existing needs. The physical activity calendar could announce physical activity events occurring at the school and in the community. The C-DPA could invite community members to submit their events for posting. Quick facts about healthy living are a great way to give community members digestible information. This information could be uploaded as a PDF document to the physical activity section of the web page. Updating the “quick facts” regularly will maintain community-wide interest.

In addition to the school web site, the C-DPA could use social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) to spread the word about upcoming events or healthy living facts to families and community members. If these social media do not yet exist in the school, a C-DPA could easily create a school Facebook page or Twitter account and encourage members of the school community to become a fan. Additionally, all school and community events, as well as healthy living tips could be posted on these sites.

Using technology is an excellent way to inform families and community members about physical activity opportunities. However, it is also the role of the C-DPA to educate families about what is happening in physical education. A great way to accomplish this is for the C-DPA to invite families to observe physical education classes and physical activity experiences, or to host a demonstration night to showcase

Figure 1. ML Phillips Morning Walking Program



the activities that students engage in during class. Scheduling this event in the evening can maximize attendance.

The C-DPA should communicate with the members of the school's parent-teacher association (PTA) about all of the activities that he or she coordinates. In addition to providing volunteer support for various activities (e.g., a field day), PTA members are a potential funding resource.

Create Active Events. Beyond informing family and community members about active events, it is important to create physical activity opportunities to support family physical activity as part of school-related events. A C-DPA could assign physical education "homework" that encourages families and children to move together. One example of this is a "family fitness challenge." A list of family-centered activity ideas and a record-keeping chart could be sent home with students. Additionally, an award or incentive could be provided for students who meet the challenge along with their families. To show that they have met the challenge, students could return their completed chart. The National Association for Sport and Physical Education's (NASPE's) monthly physical activity calendar (www.naspeinfo.org/toolbox) is an excellent resource for family fitness challenges. Updated monthly, this calendar suggests a physical activity for every day.

Family physical activity does not have to happen only at home. Social events, such as a family fitness night or a 5-kilometer run/walk, provide physical activity opportunities for the whole family in a community setting. International dance nights, sport showcases, and a field day can all include activities for adults and children.

The C-DPA should be aware of the community resources available during and after school and should not restrict activity to the school building just because school is in session. Field trips can also incorporate physical activity. For example, a trip to the local golf course would enable students to practice in a "real life" setting the skills learned in physical education. Additionally, a C-DPA should provide students with the skills and knowledge needed to comfortably use physical activity facilities in the community. By surveying the community for available physical activity spaces, lesson plans could be developed based on this availability (see, for example, Tarkinton & Karp, 2010).

Establish Partnerships and Share Expertise. Meeting with physical activity and nutrition professionals in the community (e.g., golf pro, yoga instructor, personal trainer, dietitian) and learning from their expertise is an excellent way to build relationships. As a result, physical education classes could be enriched if one of these activity professionals attended class and taught fundamental skills or basic nutrition principles.

The C-DPA should work cooperatively with community-based organizations to create additional activity opportunities for students and for the community at large for little or no cost. The school's facilities provide many opportunities for physical activity, especially if they are made available to community members outside of school hours. For example, the hallways could be made available to walkers before the beginning of the school day or the gymnasium could be made available in the evenings or on weekends for various sport activities. Similarly, making public recreation facilities more accessible to schools would increase physical activity opportunities. Joint use agreements (Beighle & Moore, 2012; Spengler, Connaughton, & Carroll, 2011) would help a C-DPA overcome some barriers to the shared use of facilities.

Examples in Practice

Lily B. Clayton Elementary School in Fort Worth, Texas, used physical activity as the basis for a creative fundraiser. Avoiding the typical magazine or wrapping-paper sale, the elementary school started a Walk-a-Thon. This creative fundraiser is a win-win situation, as all profits can directly benefit the school, while community members receive the opportunity to participate in a physical activity. To advertise the event, the elementary school placed a map and event details in the school newsletter.

Mary Louise Phillips Elementary, also in Fort Worth, Texas, has initiated a walking program that takes place before the beginning of each school day. These 20-minute walks are sensitive to the busy schedules and tight time constraints of parents. Additionally, since the walks occur so close to the start of the school day, it is convenient for students to arrive a little early and engage in the activity. The school uses the sign in front of their building to invite community members to walk with them during this recurring event (figure 1).

Daggett Montessori School uses after-school hours for family events. The school's Family Wellness Night brings together experts from around the community who offer physical activity and nutrition sessions to attendees. The physical activity session has included 10 stations, providing fun movement opportunities for all skill levels. The nutrition session has included an overview of MyPlate and recipe demonstrations by a member of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service. This event exemplifies an excellent way to combine physical activity and education in one experience.

Conclusion

Many national initiatives besides CSPAP—including the National Physical Activity Plan, Let's Move in School, and

Healthy People 2020—support the concept of family and community involvement. These initiatives provide numerous strategies related to family and community involvement (table 1).

Undoubtedly, families and communities greatly influence

children’s behavioral patterns and help to establish habits. It is thus evident what a great impact a physically active family and community could have on developing physically active children. While engaging families and communities in

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Table 1. Other National Initiatives and Strategies that Promote Family and Community Involvement

	National Physical Activity Plan	Let’s Move	Healthy People 2020
Description	A comprehensive set of policies, programs, and initiatives designed to increase physical activity among all Americans	An initiative developed by First Lady Michelle Obama to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic. In support of this initiative, a task force was charged with identifying strategies to achieve this goal.	An initiative to establish benchmarks for improving the health of Americans
Web Site	http://www.physicalactivityplan.org	http://www.letsmove.gov/white-house-task-force-childhood-obesity-report-president	http://www.healthypeople.gov
Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote programs and facilities where people work, learn, live, play, and worship to provide easy access to safe and affordable physical activity opportunities. • Develop partnerships with other sectors for the purpose of linking youths with physical activity opportunities in schools and communities. • Provide access to and opportunities for physical activity before and after school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask federal, state, and local education agencies, in partnership with communities and businesses, to support programs that offer and enhance physical activity opportunities beyond the school day. • Encourage “active transport” between homes, schools, and community destinations, including to and from parks, libraries, bus stops, and recreation centers. • Increase the number of safe and accessible parks and playgrounds, particularly in underserved and low-income communities. • Encourage local governments to enter into joint use agreements to increase children’s access to community sites for indoor and outdoor recreation. • Encourage businesses to consider which resources, such as fields and gyms, can be used to increase students’ access to recreation venues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the proportion of the nation’s schools that provide access to their physical activity spaces and facilities for all persons outside of normal school hours, including weekends, summer, and other vacations. • Increase the proportion of adolescents who meet current federal physical activity guidelines for aerobic physical activity and muscle-strengthening activity. • Increase the proportion of adults who engage in leisure-time physical activity. • Increase the proportion of adults who meet current federal physical activity guidelines for aerobic physical activity and strength training.

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Brent Heidorn (bheidorn@westga.edu) is an associate professor in the Department of Leadership and Applied Instruction at the University of West Georgia, in Carrollton, GA 30118. Erin Centeio (erin.centeio@gmail.com) is an instructor at Wayne State University, in Detroit, MI 48202.

Cipriani

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physical activity is a simple concept, it is the least frequently implemented component of a CSPAP. Since creating activities for families and communities extends beyond the role of the physical education instructor, a C-DPA is the prime candidate to implement these activities. While C-DPAs may be best equipped to implement the strategies discussed in this article, they are not the only individuals who can do this. Any motivated parent, community member, physical educator, or teacher can take the first step toward making their community and the families in it more physically active.

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Kristin Cipriani (kcipriani@aaahperd.org) is a program manager, and Cheryl Richardson (crichardson@aaahperd.org) is senior director of programs for AAHPERD, in Reston, VA 20191. Georgi Roberts (georgiann.roberts@fwisd.org) is director of health and physical education for the Fort Worth Independent School District, in Fort Worth, TX.

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