

AN ACCESS REPORT ON PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND RECREATION ACCORDING TO CANADIANS EXPERIENCING DISABILITY



PREFACE

Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability (ALACD) encourages people with disabilities (PWD) to make physical activity a regular part of their lives and helps build the capacity of communities and organizations to make this possible. ALACD believes that the stories and experiences of PWD must inform and influence all aspects of ALACD's work.

To better understand how PWD were affected throughout the COVID pandemic, including their physical activity experiences, the ALACD reached out to PWD from across the country. These discussions with Canadians with disabilities also revealed many possible solutions to these issues and illustrated the importance of physical activity in the lives of Canadians with disabilities.

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Introduction

There are many physical, mental, and social benefits associated with regular participation in sport, physical activity, and recreation (SPAR). As the number of people living with disability continues to grow, we know that people experiencing disability face many barriers when it comes to accessing and participating in their desired SPAR activities. Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability (ALACD) encourages people with disabilities (PWD) to make physical activity a regular part of their lives and helps build the capacity of communities and organizations to make this possible. To support this work, ALACD believes that the stories and experiences of PWD must inform and influence all aspects of ALACD's efforts

To better understand how PWD were affected throughout the COVID pandemic, including their physical activity experiences, the ALACD with support from [The Steadward Centre for Personal & Physical Achievement \(TSC\)](#)ⁱ reached out to PWD from across the country. Following these discussions, many barriers were shared, and we identified common themes, which are particularly relevant as we focus on rebuilding community connections: training needs within organizations, peer mentorship to address individual factors, and a critical emphasis on community accessibility. The pandemic further highlighted these barriers and emphasized the importance of consulting with PWD during every guideline, policy, or initiative that takes place. These discussions with Canadians with disabilities also revealed many possible solutions to these issues and illustrated the importance of physical activity in the lives of Canadians with disabilities. We hope these findings will support ALACD's work in the future and spark other organizations to consider how to get more PWD active.

Setting the Scene

It is estimated that Canada includes about 6.2 million people aged 15 years or older living with a disability. Worldwide, this number is estimated to be about 1.5 billion people. It has been reported globally that people living with disabilities are 16-62% less likely to meet physical activity guidelines, which has substantial risk factors for the individual's health and well-being (Martin Ginis et al., 2021).

We know that people with disabilities (PWD) face significant barriers when accessing physical activity (Rimmer et al., 2004). For example, PWD encounter barriers in the built environment, economic and financial barriers, difficulty accessing appropriate equipment and finding knowledgeable professionals, challenges associated with negative perceptions and attitudes towards disability, and policies and procedures that continue to exclude at the community and facility level. Interestingly, unlike general population data, little research exists on the role physical activity plays in preventing chronic diseases in PWD. Although the World Health Organization published physical activity guidelines for PWD, the studies largely consisted of participants that do not include PWD. As researchers have shown, this indirect evidence may place greater risks on disability groups than the actual benefits of physical activity. Two disability groups have general exercise guidelines, specifically spinal cord injuries and multiple sclerosis, however, no further disability-specific groups have guidance when it comes to physical activity. This creates additional barriers to participation when little is known about the policies and practices that need to be in place to support safe settings for people to be active in.

Interestingly, the most common disability types in Canada are related to pain, flexibility, mobility, and mental health. The benefits of physical activity, including physical, mental, and emotional well-being, may assist people in coping with these elements of disability, thereby increasing the importance of ensuring PWD have access to their desired physical activity opportunities.

Of further concern is for the next generation of PWD, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic led to the creation of additional barriers. In Canada, movement behaviors for children and youth with disabilities (ages 4 to 17 years) decreased and many experienced a decline in their mental and physical health when the pandemic struck.

We know the significant benefits of physical activity and the opportunities that regular participation can create for PWD. We know many of the barriers that exist, and we are slowly starting to understand how the pandemic may have impacted people being active. We also know that PWD have historically been excluded from important decisions, discriminated against, oppressed, and misunderstood. This has inevitably resulted in a lack of access.

We at ALACD believe turning to those with the lived experiences and stories, would be the most valuable way to better understand these numbers across Canada. We need to understand the barriers, the reasons people do participate, and what solutions PWD believe would support others in becoming active.

Below we will share a narrative of what was discussed when we brought together a group of Canadians experiencing disability, including the tremendous value placed on physical activity. We will highlight the key themes that were identified from these conversations and provide valuable resources that may assist organizations to provide quality participation experiences. We also hope these recommendations will encourage others to reflect on current practices within the sector and how we can further support PWD in becoming physically active.

What we did

In 2021, ALACD conducted three online focus groups that included 14 individuals from across Canada that identified as experiencing disability. Eight identified as female and six identified as male. Of the fourteen, four participants were more involved in recreational activities and ten participants identified as having some type of sporting experience, ranging from

grassroots programming to high performance. Diversity of disability experiences was also present as descriptions ranged from physical disabilities to visual impairments, mental illness, and intellectual disabilities. Age diversity also existed as participants ranged from 18 to 65 years of age.

The discussion was held online to ensure a broad reach across Canada and ALACD felt it was the best way to spark conversations and stories. Although these groups were very conversationally driven, four general questions were asked. These focused on how people got involved in sport or physical activity, the barriers and solutions that worked for them within these spaces, potential barriers that occurred during the pandemic, and any ideas or solutions for the future in getting more PWD involved in sport and physical activity. Following these discussions, notes were recorded and examined to identify common ideas and summarize the key messages.

Important Note about the Voices we Heard from:

During these discussions, it was evident that many PWD had experienced barriers to participation. It was also evident that resiliency and adaptability were instilled within everyone. It's important to note, that following these conversations, we, at ALACD, have been asking important questions about who was missing, as we focus on who else is struggling with these barriers and does not have the skills to overcome them. We recognize those who may have been missing in these conversations, noting that we didn't require people to self-identify intersectional identities they may have carried, including people of colour, Indigenous voices and folks from our northern provinces and territories, people identifying as LGBTQ2+, anyone who does not have access to the internet, French speaking, folks who are hard of hearing, and members of the Deaf community. We recommend these voices be prioritized in future engagement efforts to better understand what others may be experiencing and develop ideas of how best to assist organizations in supporting these groups.

What we learned

After reviewing the notes, four themes were identified from across the discussions:

- Knowledge (training needs) of others (non-disabled staff)
- Peer mentorship to address individual factors
- Critical need for community accessibility
- Experiencing disability during the pandemic

Knowledge (training needs) of Others (non-disabled staff)

This theme is focused on the importance of the knowledge and training needs of organizations, specifically related to disability affirming approaches. As Colin Cameron mentions in his work, the affirming model within disability essentially describes that “our impairments are a core part of our being and of our experience”. Disability affirming approaches seek to highlight the complexities within the disability community, provide a broader view about disability experiences, and celebrate the variations in lived experiences.

Many PWD described positive experiences with physical activity under the following conditions: a) those in leadership roles changed their perceptions towards disability, b) people were willing to learn and ask questions, c) those experiencing disability overcame the hurdles of typical ‘safety and medical liability issues’, and d) appropriate resources were found. Considering that disability brings in a range of different ways of living, organizations and society need to be better equipped to offer individualized supports and services that view people as such, individual human beings.

Unfortunately, many of the participants in the discussions had to overcome hurdles to get to these positive experiences. One important recommendation was having more trauma informed practices within the sector, which has direct implications for recommendations about

training needs. Many described triggering events within these environments that could have completely deterred them from physical activity. Why these participants continued in sport compared to the many who left is unknown, however, it is crucial to look at this further to better understand how to avoid these negative practices in the future. It is important to note that although these triggering events are unintended, due to in part to a lack of training, they still occur. We will provide recommendations about disability specific training and trauma informed practice that organizations may want to consider below. These resources were either mentioned in our discussions or exist within disability organizations we recommend.

- To create more disability affirming spaces, language is a great place to start. The ALACD has developed a useful resource for this called [The Language of Disability](#).
- For those looking to authors with lived disability experience, [Demystifying Disability by Emily Laudu](#) is a wonderful read.
- To provide specific assistance to those with disabilities, be sure to check out two resources including [Supporting Physical Activity among Canadians with Physical Disabilities](#) and [Disability Tip Sheets](#).
- Another important suggestion from the focus group participants was to offer training in both [Emotional CPR](#) and [trauma informed practices](#).

As Eales and Goodwin (2022) express in [their research on trauma informed](#) practices within adaptive physical activity, these practices “assist in creating safer, more inclusive services where we can recognize the impacts of trauma and affirm those who experience it” (p. 141). The first step for those within adaptive physical activity spaces, according to these researchers at the University of Alberta, is to create awareness and begin your own readings in this area to begin the journey of the necessary reflection work.

Peer Mentorship to Address Individual Factors

It was clear that many of the PWD that we spoke with experienced barriers to participation in their journey to being physically active. As described above, navigating spaces

that lack knowledgeable staff can be a hindrance. Further barriers included individual factors related to mental health, perceptions of self, lack of knowledge about participation opportunities, health issues that often accompany living with disability, and socialization challenges where connecting with others was difficult through a screen.

The hidden labour of participation is a unique challenge within the disability space and was expressed in the discussions as different than the experiences of non-disabled people. One recommendation to help those experiencing disability to navigate these individual challenges was introducing structured peer mentorship opportunities. As one participant described their first involvement in sports and recreation, “the opportunities and support network grew, in a domino effect kind of way.” Improving support networks and mentorship opportunities can lead to further acceptance, encouragement, and may decrease the challenges of perceptions from non-disabled people in these spaces. Peer mentorship and support can also lead to support for organizations, whether into mainstream or segregated spaces, by providing people experiencing disability with positive first experiences and assistance with navigating the various resource barriers one may have. The amount of peer support that we observed during these discussions, emphasized that we need to prioritize these types of opportunities in the sector. Further recommendations, including what peer support could look like for organizations will be highlighted below.

- Making time for conversations is critical as it was evident that even the discussions we held brought about feelings of empathy and provided times of mentorship to those who were navigating barriers.
- Tools such as the Blueprint for Building Quality Participation in Sport may assist in ensuring people have a positive first experience.
- Positive first experiences set the stage for future involvement, which is facilitated by leaders who can ensure the building blocks of quality participation are being met. Having peers trained in the areas of leadership, avoiding peer-need thwarting behaviors (i.e.,

controlling leadership styles), how to deal with [resistant narratives](#), and [advocacy](#) are also crucial components to consider (Orr et al., 2018 & Perrier et al., 2015).

- ALACD and TSC have launched two youth centred initiatives focused on developing leadership and mentorship skills: Athletes2Coaches and a Youth Summit.

TSC continues to develop and deliver [Athletes2Coaches](#), a program for para athletes interested in building their skills related to coaching. This mentorship program brings in various voices that discuss mentorship, [transformational coaching](#) and provides diverse views for para athletes to reflect on (Turnnidge and Côté, 2017). In early 2023, ALACD and TSC partnered to host a summit for youth to come together to share stories and support one another in their pursuit of physical activity. We also hope to provide further mentorship to those who want to become advocates within their communities. We continue asking the question of who isn't participating and how can we support them to be involved? Peer mentorship may be one of the key ways to support this.

Critical Need for Community Accessibility

Community accessibility received significant attention in the group discussions. The need for more knowledgeable staff and peer support was highlighted as having immediate impact whereas participants acknowledged that addressing every barrier in a community may not be feasible right away. We know from the literature, specifically James Rimmer's (2004) [research](#), that many participation barriers exist, including inaccessible locations for those living in rural settings, financial barriers, transportation, accessibility, and the lack of resources in adapted physical activity (equipment, guides for those visually impaired, etc.). We will discuss how to navigate these barriers and offer resources to address physical barriers if organizations are unsure where to start.

Physical barriers (e.g., not being able to enter a building due an inaccessible entrance) are not a new [topic](#) within adapted physical activity as suggested by [the literature](#) (Nikolajsen et al.,

2021, Richardson et al., 2017). The following resources are a good place to start when it comes to community accessibility:

- Developed by TSC, [Becoming Para Ready](#), is a guide to provide coaches and club administrators with knowledge, confidence, and tools to be more proactive to support participation of athletes with disabilities.
- The [AIM FREE](#) Audit Tool is a great resource to ensure facilities are accessible.

When it comes to accessibility and community spaces, we also wanted to highlight the importance of online accessibility. This is a priority for us at ALACD and TSC as we have begun the work to ensure our sites are accessible for everyone and we encourage you to do so too. As [Peers et al.](#) (2019) discussed, making sure that you specifically identify adaptive physical activity and para sport programming on your website is critical. If you are a mainstream organization or serve a range of people, including statements on how you can best serve everyone including people experiencing disability, is a great first step.

Experiencing Disability During the Pandemic

Finally, given the timing of these discussions, the main topic of conversation was the ample barriers the pandemic created for people experiencing disability to participate in physical activity. Interestingly, the common response was, “health measures did not consider people with disabilities and our unique needs.” Barriers included booking times for gym or swimming pool access not being long enough for someone navigating spaces with a disability, bathrooms being closed, stay-in-car guidelines that excluded those who took transit, online options not being accessible to everyone, mask requirements for those with language barriers or the Deaf community, navigating lineups, inaccessible entrances and exits to aid in one way traffic, and unknowns when it came to creating social bubbles and who to include within those when support staff were required.

These barriers, though mostly about the physical environment, greatly impacted each participant’s access to physical activity during the pandemic. Further, the suggestion to get

outside more when gyms were shut down significantly influenced people’s ability to access physical activity, as outdoor spaces also bring about a multitude of barriers for those experiencing disabilities. These health guidelines severely excluded those who have various needs to access both physical activity and the outdoors. Though we don’t have all the answers, we will provide recommendations on where organizations can start to unpack the impact the pandemic had on the people they serve and how best to move forward.

The barriers associated with the pandemic will continue to challenge us in the SPAR sector. Though we don’t have all the answers to address these challenges, it is clear that the ‘lack of a disability-inclusive response’ left many feeling isolated and put further risk of trauma and stress on the disability community (Jesus et al., 2021, Lund et al., 2020). Some recommendations from the literature include:

- Post pandemic physical [activity guidelines tailored to strategies for PWD](#) (Moore et al., 2021)
- Professionals understanding trauma and how the pandemic may have impacted PWD differently (Lund et al., 2020)
- Development and implementation of disability-inclusive public health measures and policies (Kamyuka et al., 2020)

At ALACD, we hope to continue advocating at the government level to influence future decisions that impact PWD and their access to physical activity. As a starting point, we recommend other organizations reach out to disability communities to better understand how post-pandemic strategies may assist in getting more people involved in physical activity again.

Wrapping it up

The statement “nothing about us without us” is a powerful statement that needs to be taken seriously when it comes to marginalized communities such as people with disabilities. It is

critical that we continue to learn from and with those experiencing disability. These discussions with Canadians experiencing disability provided valuable insights into the physical activity experiences people are having and they provided a space for people with disabilities to connect and learn from one another. We hope this report is useful to create more inclusive community spaces and to support folks looking to support the advocacy work within the disability space. As a few participants put it “being outside and physically active engrains a sense of freedom” and “with a little bit of problem solving, which we all have the tools to do, we can push the envelope for what people with disabilities can do.”

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ⁱ The Steadward Centre for Personal & Physical Achievement (TSC) is a teaching and research centre, housed within the Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation at the University of Alberta. TSC actively supports inclusion and independence for children, youth and adults experiencing disability through programming, knowledge-sharing, research, education, and collaboration with local, national and international organizations.