

In Her Words

Canadian girls and women consistently participate in recreational sport at lower rates than boys and men regardless of income level, education, culture, or geography¹.

Though we have very little information about physical activity and sport participation of people with a disability, we have some data that shows girls and women with disabilities are less active than boys and men with disabilities and less active than those without disabilities.

In Her Words is a novel project that explored the physical activity and recreational sport experiences of mothers with disabilities – for their own health and well-being, and as mentors to their school-aged daughters (9-15 years). Eight women (all mothers with disabilities), through virtual interviews and a focus group, shared what physical activity and recreational sport means to them, the unique barriers they face, and what is needed for them to remain active participants and role models. Based on our discussions, we have provided recommendations that we hope will influence community practice and policy to reduce barriers and facilitate the participation of mothers with disabilities in physical activity and recreational sport.

¹Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute (www.cflri.ca), various reports.



**“I’m actually part
of the adventures
now”**

The Meaning of Physical Activity and Sport

Women spoke about the physical and mental health benefits that contributed to their quality of life; the importance of physical activity in fostering togetherness with family, in particular with their daughters, and the ways in which participation in physical activity and recreational sport provided an opportunity for them to be a role model.

The Benefits of Being Active

“For me, [being active] is how I centre myself and kind of de-stress so it’s really a part of my physical, my mental and my emotional wellness ... quality of life for me is being able to do what I do on a day to day, because of my disability I need to remain flexible and strong and so there’s that. If I stop, I might not be able to do what I want to do.”

JULIA

“Being in sports drastically improves your quality of life. And there’s purpose behind it, it’s so good for your mental health to be active, whether it’s a team sport or an individual sport, it just gives you so much more than you realize. I think sport is so important for everybody and your disability shouldn’t discriminate how you participate in the sport.”

MADDISON



Connecting through Physical Activity and Sport

“The first year I got my bike and I went out riding with my family, you know I was just learning how to be out on trails and in nature again, and I could go up some pretty gnarly stuff and like rides I never thought I’d ever be able to see ... And I was just like, my heart exploded – it’s truly a way for me to bond, not only with my son but my husband, his family. Realizing that has just been a huge game changer. I don’t hear about the adventures. I’m actually part of the adventures now.”

LEANNE

“When I played tennis, I took both of my kids out to the tennis court. And they were at first curious and unsure how it was gonna go with me being in the wheelchair. And the curiosity got them out and we had great tennis matches, and I’m better at tennis than them. So that felt good, because they got into it. And it definitely gave us something else to bond on.”

MADDISON

There’s those awesome conversations that you might not have playing a board game.

“And then if we talk about being with my daughter, if you’re doing an activity, like a hike, there’s those awesome conversations that you might not have playing a board game and there’s seeing a world in nature, hopefully traveling, like we did the Grouse Grind [hiking trail in BC] together. And no expectations, put a backpack on filled with snacks. And if we had to stop, you know, every 10 minutes, but to say that we climbed a mountain!”

JULIA



Being a role model

“I don’t really see myself as a role model ... it’s just part of my role as a parent to encourage them to be healthy and to be active.”

MADDISON

She’s watching me so I’m very aware of my influence in terms of her relationship with disability.

“[Physical activity] was such a large part of my identity, that it’s hard to kind of break that apart ... I think particularly for a woman, it was a huge self-esteem booster, it gave me a lot of confidence. Growing up, knowing that I had talents and value in things that were healthy habits and a healthy lifestyle ... And I want [my daughter] to see me being active, it was a really hard – I mean there was lots of things to mourn at the time and I’m still grieving a journey – like oh my gosh, she’s not gonna see me, she’s not gonna know that whole prior life of me, so it’s important for me, for her, to see and to be an example of [how] you can be active in different bodies.”

ELLEN



“I am very aware that there are two little eyes watching me and that I’m her mother and she’s gonna be watching me anyway. I think I’m in a very uniquely powerful or influential position. And I don’t take that lightly. So yeah, I am very like, try to be mindful of even how I talk to my body. I used to be really apologetic when I inconvenienced someone else or the way that you speak to your body, like stupid arm or stupid leg, you know. I have tried to cut that out because she’s very bright. She’s watching me so I’m very aware of my influence in terms of her relationship with disability and I’m also leaving room that it’s going to be different for her than it was for me, yeah, but it’s a special weird bond.”

ELLEN

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Promote the benefits of physical activity and sport participation while placing an emphasis on building strength and mobility, positive mental health, self-compassion and self-esteem, social and family connectedness and enhancing quality of life.
- Ensure disability is represented in physical activity messaging. For example, include images of active women with disabilities as part of ongoing campaigns.
- Offer programming and other opportunities for mothers with disabilities to participate with family and friends (vs. programs specifically for people with disabilities on their own). This may include having adapted equipment available at low or no cost, ensuring the program space is accessible, and listing the specific accessible features in program or facility information.

“I don’t like to look like I can’t do things in front of friends”

The Physical Activity and Sport Experience as a Mother with a Disability

As women experiencing disability, mothers with disabilities described the different physical and emotional experiences they faced accessing physical activity and recreational sport in their communities. Despite encountering participation barriers in the community, they described their desire to persevere, re-frame, and overcome them in order to be active with their children.

“I just went [to moms and tots swimming] because I love swimming. And I wanted to be in there. For me, it comes back a lot to attitude. But was the instructor going to be weirded out that I’m there with my kid? Yeah, because they’re going to ask me to hold her head and I knew I’m not going to be able to. I did not go to a single library story time, because of all of the actions. And the one thing

that I never did, and I judged myself for a long time was baby carrying which was a big thing. Like the sling. I can’t tie any of them. So, going for walks with other mom friends and they’re all carrying their babies [in the sling] and that means we can’t go on the trail with those 500 steps because I can’t carry my baby in one of those carriers [slings].”

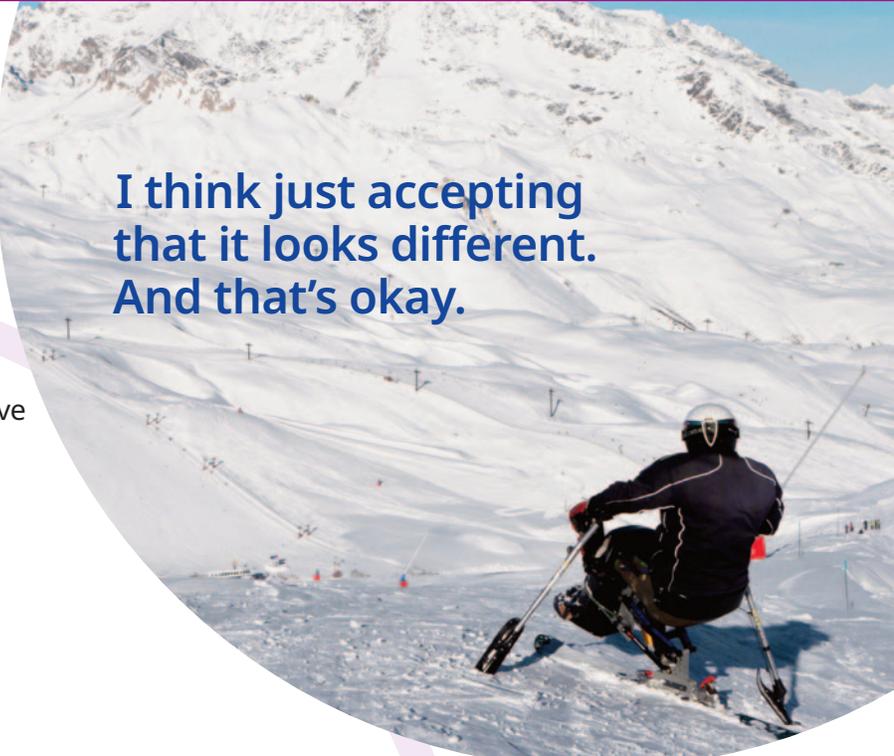
JULIA



“When you acquire an injury or disability things are so different than you thought they would be. There is a kind of grieving as a parent that I envisioned I was going to be the one coaching, the mom coaching all the teams and just was hoping that my child would have a love of sport in particular, but some kind of passion as a part of active living. So, I think just a lot of adjusting of expectations and what that relationship looks like, I’ve certainly had to adjust my competitiveness. Yeah, so I think just accepting that it looks different. And that’s okay.”

ELLEN

“I’m not independent fully because as soon as I put on all those chunky layers, I lose mobility. As flexible as I am, to reach around the snow pants and the puffy jacket and I can’t hold on to mitts so I become a second child. There’s a lot of families that will take their kids night skiing after school but my husband is the ‘go-to’ because I

A circular inset image showing a person in a dark jacket and helmet skiing down a snowy slope. The skier is in the lower right of the circle, moving towards the left. The background is a vast, snow-covered mountain range under a clear blue sky.

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And that’s okay.**

don’t like to look like I can’t do things in front of friends. And my daughter is almost old enough that when we go skiing she’s probably at a point soon where she could help me to ratchet up my ski boots. I love skiing but it takes so much effort for me to go.”

JULIA

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Encourage mothers with disabilities to become involved as volunteers or coaches. Be clear about accessibility (i.e., accessible features in the facility) and invite them to discuss access and participation needs.
- Offer peer support or mentorship opportunities in your community, at recreation and sport facilities, or virtually. Support women who seek to start these initiatives.
- Offer an adapted physical activity-specific “mom’s group” that offers different activities such as community walks/wheels, racquet sports, and swimming. Ensure activities take place in accessible locations and communicate well with participants so they can make additional access requests as needed.
- Focus on creating welcoming environments for mothers with disabilities. Ensure that staff are informed and available to talk about access and inclusion needs and explore solutions. Include images of mothers with disabilities being physically active in communication materials.

“It’s ok to ask for help, but it’s also a weakness”

Support from the Community

Mothers described the ways in which they were supported by family and professionals as well as how people’s attitudes and perceptions demonstrated a lack of social consciousness about disability and the sense that it was an “afterthought”. The attitudes and actions of people in recreation spaces and places can make all the difference when it comes to supporting active participation for mothers with disabilities.

The People who Support

“Going to the pool, going with a [recreation] therapist, really upped my confidence at first. I know not everyone has the opportunity. It’s scary, there’s all these little things that you don’t think of, like trying to get the safety pin off of the locker, you can’t do that with one hand. I’ve been living this way for three years and I wouldn’t have thought about that. So having a professional with you, at first for me has been a huge confidence booster.”

ELLEN

“It can be frustrating because I’m not an able-bodied parent. So, there’s things that are set up for an able-bodied parent with a disabled child. But thankfully, my husband is able-bodied. So, we’re able to do those things with his help.”

ELLEN

“Having an attendant or having someone with you because there’s always things you don’t think of. But for me, like not being afraid to ask for help, is huge and a lot of that for me has just come with building confidence and not being apologetic for the fact that I’m disabled.”

ELLEN

“I still do love to swim. And if some [of] my family isn’t there to help me or a friend, then I need to just put myself in that space and ask for help. And society tells you it’s okay to ask for help, but also says that is a point of weakness. So I think there’s that when I say vulnerability, that’s what it is. I think the automatic connotation around disability is that there’s a lack of independence that you need help. And so when you’re kind of showing people that that’s true, perpetuating that societal connotation is exhausting.”

JULIA



I think the automatic connotation around disability is that there’s a lack of independence.

Impact of Attitudes from Others

“I took [my daughter] to soccer when she was probably five, and they had the parents come in to kick around the ball with them. And I just knew, I knew that people would freeze. And so there’s that emotional energy for me, even as confident I am. And I think now that I’m almost 45 I’m kind of just tired that society is still there. But still I went on the field because I love to play with my daughter. But the kids who hadn’t noticed me or my arms on drop-off did because it was in a bubble. And there was those frozen moments of staring. And then the coaches just don’t know what to say.”

JULIA

We need to shift the conversation.

“I was moderating a Paralympic event and one participant said that she gets up at four o’clock in the morning, to run outside because ‘I don’t want people to see my body.’ How do we live in 2022 when young women with disabilities feel like they need to hide? We need to shift the conversation.”

JULIA



“I have good days, and I have bad days. Everything I do looks awkward to people, because you don’t see a lot of people like me walking around. And I guess that’s different than you see people with guide dogs and canes and wheelchairs. But when you have a disability like mine, that presents quite differently, people do tend to stare. And then when you’re at the grocery store with your kid in the car seat and people are like, Can I help you? No, I’m okay. Are you sure? I’m okay. And they ask a third time, you’re pretty sure I said I’m okay.”

JULIA

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Employ staff, particularly women, who identify with a disability.
- ALL staff should be educated on accessibility features, adapted physical activity program offerings, and subsidized services (e.g., free entry for support personnel) rather than having one, or a few, points of contact who are aware. Streamlined service provision will help ensure that all staff, from those taking phone calls to the front-desk staff, have the same level of knowledge, eliminating uncomfortable situations for people with disabilities.
- Ensure staff are equipped with the knowledge and skills to provide practical assistance or the ability to problem-solve situations that people with disabilities may encounter, including the potential inability to participate or issues related to safety.
- Provide family-friendly programming and facilities so people with disabilities can easily be accompanied and supported by an attendant, family or friends.

“We have the push button and the rail, but that’s not enough”

Designing community spaces and places

Community accessibility must ensure that the physical space is considered, and acknowledges the diverse experiences of disability. It is not enough to “have a ramp and a push button” as the quotes below demonstrate. Rather, engaging with members of the disability community with different lived experiences is extremely important when it comes to designing spaces and places that are accessible to all.

Accessibility of community spaces and places

“On a more community level, moms who are able to go to adaptive parks with their kids that are totally wheelchair accessible, and they can push their kids in the swing things as simple as that just means so much to people who are living with different mobility issues.”

LEANNE

A simple thing that you used to do with your family is now like 100 times more expensive.

“You know, I might have to pee in a bottle if I can’t get into the bathroom...a lot of ski hills may or may not have accessible washrooms or the accessible washrooms are really not wheelchair accessible. It’s kind of like, yeah, we have the push button. And we perhaps have a rail. But that’s about it. We never thought of anything else. So there’s a lot of awkward moments or moments where at least I feel like ‘now what?’ and that’s when reality sets in and it’s like, I do have limitations. Which can dampen a fun experience.”

ADRIENNE

“We have a fairly new recreational pool. And they have no lifts. And they told me that I’m a liability because I could not get myself physically from the wheelchair into the water and they didn’t have any rails and I would have to go through the kiddie pool, because it was the only ramp into the water, but then I would have to be sprayed by all the toys. So accessibility is really, really an issue and even accessible places, I find are not wheelchair accessible.”

MADDISON

“Not being able to change the layout, or the construction of a facility or any of those kinds of things, you pretty much change your plans, if it’s not gonna work. In the worst ways you don’t participate.”

JULIA



Access to specialized equipment

“The cost of adaptive equipment is insane. And it’s like to do a simple thing that you used to do with your family is now like 100 times more expensive and everything’s custom and it’s just wild.”

ROBYN

There are so many things that I see my kids doing that I want to be doing with them.

“These pieces of equipment are super expensive. We were renting bikes, just a normal bike was \$15 for the day and to rent a recumbent bike was like \$90 bucks. It was like a disability tax.”

ELLEN

“The cost of equipment, like this, sit ski that I use was donated to the skiing society here, so it actually belongs to them. It doesn’t even belong to me. Getting funding for equipment or even trying to save your own little bit of money that we make to buy it, it’s crazy. There are so many things that I see my kids doing that I want to be doing with them.”

ROBYN



The Diverse Nature of Disability

“So much is geared towards wheelchairs but there’s a lot of stuff as a hemiplegic that I just can’t do with one arm, so just broadening what accessibility means, that it’s not just about wheelchairs, that is very important. Including people’s voices with disability, a variety, because it branches outside of wheelchairs.”

ELLEN

It’s not just about wheelchairs, that is very important.

“The universal symbol of accessibility is a wheelchair so people’s default is putting in a ramp and an elevator. If [those with other disabilities] haven’t shown up at the gym, [staff] don’t think about it. They don’t think about spacing the equipment out or having rollers for a wheelchair user next to the treadmill or the Stairmaster or the arm erg[ometer]. And then there’s all the other disabilities that don’t fall into that universal design or universal symbol of disability.”

JULIA

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Messaging and communication materials should include representation of women with various disabilities (e.g., images that include other visuals beyond wheelchairs and ramps).
- Consider providing a liaison, someone who can help guide people with disabilities to find facilities, locate equipment and learn about different programs in the community.
- Accessible washrooms are critical. Ensure that the necessary aids are present (e.g., multiple handrails) in more than one place (i.e., vertical and horizontal handrails by the toilet, handrails on either side of the sink), barrier free sinks, and a large space (e.g., for large wheelchairs, to accommodate a family member or attendant).
- Consider the location of classes. Many programs that take place in basements are not accessible to participants or for parents/caregivers to come and watch.
- Consider the social environment of spaces. Create spaces that promote the feeling of safety among individuals with disabilities, accounting for needs outside of environmental accommodations, and making places where individuals feel welcome regardless of their disability. This might look like a group fitness class in which the instructor takes an extra minute before the class begins to ask participants if they have any questions or to let participants with disabilities know they will be providing variations on movements throughout the class.
- Have affordable accessible and/or specialized equipment available to rent as a family.

To the Mothers

Of course, this resource, featuring the unique perspectives of mothers with disabilities would not be possible without the mothers who participated in our interviews and focus group! Women who are bold, passionate, role models for their daughters (and sons) and who have a desire to change perceptions, advance the conversation about disability, and inspire communities to truly embrace accessibility so that no one is “an afterthought”.

The Partnership

In Her Words was conceived of and developed by four organizations whose work has, for a collective 96 years, been dedicated to promoting physical activity, recreation and sport to people with disabilities and to supporting community organizations to understand and implement accessible programs, facilities and policies.



Abilities Centre is a not-for-profit organization that provides accessible and inclusive programs and services of the highest quality and value. Our purpose is to unlock potential through accessibility. We support members of the community, no matter their ability, age or background, to improve their quality of life by positively impacting health & well-being, social inclusion and economic participation. Abilities Centre is committed to building accessible and inclusive communities through programs and services in the areas of education, employment, sport, recreation & leisure, research and life skills.



Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability (ALACD) envisions a Canadian society where people with disabilities regularly participate in meaningful physical activity. The ALACD encourages people with disabilities to make physical activity a regular part of their lives and helps build the capacity of communities and organizations to make this possible. Our activities fall under three main priority areas: Influence, Capacity Building and Governance.

In Her Words was a project supported by the CPRA Gender Equity in Recreational Sport Community Grants initiative. The grants, funded by the Government of Canada, supported community interventions that aimed to increase the participation and/or retention of girls and women in recreational sport across Canada.



The Steadward Centre (TSC) is a leader in Adapted Physical Activity and Parasport development, annually serving more than 1000 children and adults experiencing disability and training more than 250 students. As part of the Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation at the University of Alberta, the Centre's strong research and education focus allows it to deliver innovative programs and to share expertise with community fitness and sport leaders across Alberta.

As a Centre focused on research, teaching and service delivery, we support:

- Leadership, innovation, and inclusion for people living with impairments
- Meaningful advances in Adapted Physical Activity and Parasport achievements in personal fitness, motor skill development and athletic performance
- Future leaders, educators, coaches and healthcare professionals



Established in 2013, **the Canadian Disability Participation Project (CDPP)** is a federal-funded alliance of over 50 university, public, private and government sector partners working together to develop evidence-informed strategies to enhance the community participation among Canadians with disabilities in the areas of Sport & Exercise, Mobility and Employment. For more information on the CDPP, including free access to its resources on quality sport and physical activity participation, go to www.cdpp.ca.