



## LIFELONG ACTIVITY

### RECREATION CAN SHAPE THE FUTURE

Recreation centres have always been gathering places—for everyone from babies to seniors. They have used our facilities and programs to improve their fitness, meet their friends, and escape from the harried pace of life in the city. As Toronto grows and the population changes, our challenge will be to accommodate shifting and sometimes competing expectations.

The greater the income and education, the higher the rates of participation in recreation and sport. However, even well-educated immigrants are 50 per cent less active than the average Canadian. Immigrants are landing here at the rate of 60,000 to 80,000 per year. In 2001, the Census found that 49.4 per cent of Toronto's population was born outside of Canada, 21 per cent had arrived within the last 10 years, with Asia replacing Europe as the source of most new arrivals. The 2001 Census records that 30 per cent of families with children under age 15 in Toronto still lived on less than the Low Income Cut Off.<sup>55</sup> About 19 per cent of all families and 38 per cent of people living on their own had incomes below the Low Income Cut Off.<sup>56</sup> Half of low income children live in sole-support families.<sup>57</sup>

To reactivate Toronto, to help newcomers develop the habit of lifelong activity, we need to get people educated about the importance of sport and recreation, keeping in mind that poverty is a barrier to physical activity and well-being.

There are so many things we know about the benefits of physical activity and recreation. We know it cuts the risk of death and illness from major disease throughout life and therefore extends life.<sup>58</sup> The rich, who take good care of themselves, live longer than the poor. We know that in addition to preventing disease, vigorous physical activity and recreation is also therapeutic—it helps people get over surgery, depression, anger, loss and anxiety.<sup>59</sup>

The more we learn about the development of children, the more we realize that human brains and human temperaments are shaped by physical activity and social interaction. It's not just stronger bones and muscles children are building when they're clambering on climbing bars and tearing across the soccer fields. They're also learning how to lead, how to be accommodating, how to be part of something larger than themselves. They are building self-esteem, and learning to view themselves as people who can do things.<sup>60</sup>

We know that children who study art, drama and music do 20 per cent better in math, science and languages than those who don't. We know children who spend a third of their day doing physical activity in school perform better academically than those who don't. We know children and youth who are involved in organized sport are much less likely to be involved in deviant

TOP:  
SPECTATORS AT  
SOCCER GAME,  
EGLINTON FLATS  
SPORTS FIELD, 2004.

BOTTOM:  
A TENNIS LESSON,  
TRINITY BELLWOODS  
PARK, 2004.

activities, much more likely to stay involved with their communities as adults—to contribute, to volunteer, and to have a positive impact on the society around them.<sup>61</sup> Teenaged girls who do competitive sports have 80 per cent fewer unwanted pregnancies, and are 90 per cent less likely to use drugs than their inactive peers.<sup>62</sup> So it follows that community support for children and youth is one good way to shape the future.

And finally, Toronto’s population is aging. By 2010, 17 percent of us will be over 65. Studies have shown that even moderate levels of activity help seniors maintain their health and sense of well-being. We can’t expect seniors to fit themselves in around the needs of children and youth. Out of respect alone, we should be providing more seniors-only programs at facilities across the city.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

36. Finalize, and seek support for the Seniors’ Recreation Strategy, with the Seniors’ Round Table.
37. Increase the number of physically active Torontonians—10 per cent by 2010 and 20 per cent by 2020.
38. Implement the Children’s Recreation Strategy fully.
39. Increase the number of children registered in programs by 20 per cent by 2020.
40. Provide new Canadians, especially those from warm climates, opportunities to learn and play Canadian winter sports.
41. Ensure all children in Toronto have the opportunity to learn to swim.



BALL HOCKEY AT  
KEW GARDENS, 2004.

HUMAN BRAINS AND HUMAN TEMPERAMENTS  
ARE SHAPED BY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND SOCIAL  
INTERACTION.

# BARRIERS

## RECREATION LIFTS THE POVERTY BAR

No one knew that recreation can treat poverty's worst side effects until McMaster University's Dr. Gina Browne and her colleagues finished an outcomes study in 2001.<sup>63</sup> Browne and her group followed 765 households with 1,300 children headed by single parents (mainly women) on social assistance. In a randomized trial, most were helped by direct interventions: they were offered advice from public health nurses, job retraining and subsidized, high quality recreational day care for their children. A control group had access to these services, but had to find them on their own. Browne found that 15 per cent more of the parents who received active help got off social assistance by the end of the first year of the study than those who didn't. Browne also zeroed in on the effects of good recreation on those children who were experiencing emotional and learning disorders. Children with such problems who received top quality subsidized recreational child care (as opposed to those whose parents had to seek it out and pay for it themselves) enrolled in more programs and were able to keep up academically and physically and socially with classmates who were healthy. The increasing emotional and physical health of these children also rebounded on their parents who had fewer mental health complaints than their counterparts. Parents used medication, counseling, and the food banks less often.<sup>64</sup>

## SO, IS TIME REALLY MONEY?

Most Torontonians are not on social assistance: in fact, as the economy expanded at the turn of the 21st century the total number of people in Toronto with low incomes fell by 15 per cent. The average household income climbed by \$10,000 between 1995 and 2000.<sup>65</sup> Yet only 33 per cent of Torontonians are moderately active, almost 11 per cent below the national average.<sup>66</sup> Fifty-six per cent are not active enough to maintain optimum health: that's uncomfortably close to two thirds of our whole population. Most people we surveyed knew that activity is good for them, and inactivity is bad.<sup>67</sup> So why such low rates of participation in Toronto?

An Environics poll told us that the main factor that prevents Torontonians from being more active is time (51 per cent).<sup>68</sup> Torontonians told us that promotion and education would have much less impact on changing their behavior than having a few more hours in the day. We were told by 34 per cent of those we surveyed that there was nothing Parks and Recreation could do to make it easier for them to be more active.<sup>69</sup>

## NO, MONEY BUYS TIME

And yet, our graphs charting patterns of use tell a different story. We think there is something we can do. Canadians over 15 have 5.8 hours of free time every day, averaged over a seven-day week. Men, on average, have a half hour more free time than women. They spend more of their free time on leisure activity.<sup>70</sup> Over 27 per cent of respondents to the Mayor's Listening to Toronto sessions told us that user fees, affordability and accessibility make a big difference to their use of City facilities. Those who need to participate in programs under our Welcome Policy (which allows those who can't afford to participate for free), find the application and means test process is cumbersome. Some also find it demeaning. Our own community centre visits chart shows that fees have had a significant negative impact on activity. Before the introduction of fees, 46 per cent of users came to our facilities once a week. In 2003 that was down to 37 per cent, while the percentage of those who came less than once a month rose from 21 per cent to 25 per cent. Adults over 60, who often live on fixed incomes, are our smallest group of fee-paying registrants. Park visits, on the other hand, which are free, went in the opposite direction: 48 per cent of respondents told us in 2001 that they went to a city park at least once a week. By 2003, that number went up to 56 per cent, while the number of those who said they never use a park had gone down from nine per cent to five per cent.<sup>71</sup>

Fees mean fewer can participate. Fees mean fewer will participate. Fees are a barrier to getting Toronto moving again.

## FLEXIBLE AND NIMBLE AT WARP SPEED

Sport and recreation can be like paths in a forest—they can guide a newcomer’s way into the heart of a new community. But to follow a path, one has to know it’s there, and that it can be used by everyone. And sometimes signs aren’t enough: our staff learned through years of experience that refugees and immigrants from warm climates often arrive with preconceived ideas about Canada and sport. Sport helps to define a culture. To outsiders, Canadians excel at sports involving ice and snow. Our staff learned to turn this idea on its head: if doing winter sports is Canadian, learning winter sports can turn everybody into a Canadian.

We introduced children from warm climates to hockey: we provided the skates, the equipment, the welcoming hand. They learned that this country, like the sport, is open to everyone.

Newcomers also arrive with their own sports and recreation cultures, and with very different beliefs about appropriate behaviour in the public sphere. It’s not just that soccer is the premier team sport throughout Latin America and much of Europe, whereas traditional Canadian team sports are lacrosse, basketball, football and hockey.

Some communities also bring with them deep concerns about personal modesty, and strive to maintain customary boundaries between men and women, boys and girls. These ideas, on the surface, directly conflict with Parks and Recreation’s unshakeable commitment to gender equity. But our staff have found ways to bridge such chasms. We met with representatives of one religious community which felt public swimming pools could only be used by women of their faith if they are emptied of all other users. We offered female-only swim hours, with female lifeguards. We also covered the windows on our gyms so women who use them during female-only hours can move freely without being seen by males. And it worked. Now we’re working on expanding all our programs for women so that the value we place on equity is better reflected by the programs we offer.

Newcomers arrive, settle, get on their financial feet and then move on. Populations in our neighbourhoods change constantly. There is a large Russian community in North York, a Somali community in Etobicoke, each with its likes and dislikes. We need to be quick on our feet, know our communities, and offer them what they like.

We also need to be responsive to the needs of the disadvantaged, particularly the homeless.

Flexibility and nimbleness should be the defining characteristics of our whole system. We don’t have the same facilities in the east, west, north and south districts of the city. Each area has a different history, with different ideas about sport and recreation. We can’t wipe out our differences: we have to make them work for us.

TOP:  
GLEN ROUGE  
CAMPGROUND,  
ROUGE PARK,  
2004.

BOTTOM LEFT:  
SKATING RINKS  
AT CHRISTIE PITS,  
1923.

BOTTOM RIGHT:  
NEW CANADIANS  
LEARN THE GREAT  
GAME, 2002.



## **EQUITY MEANS ACCESS FOR ALL**

The City of Toronto is committed to equity and access for all. But that wasn't always the case. We should never forget that until 1947, some groups were not welcome in some of Toronto's recreational facilities. Harry Gairey, an African Canadian, had to petition City Council after his son, and his son's Jewish friend, were refused admission to a skating arena because of skin colour and religion. As a result, City Council passed a motion to end discrimination. Gairey was eventually honoured for his courage and determination to demand equal access and respect for everyone. The City believes groups which have suffered discrimination need a special welcome at our facilities. Parks and Recreation values and respects the inclusion of all aboriginal Canadians; other visible minorities; women; bisexuals, gay, lesbian and transgendered people; and people with a disability.

We have legal obligations that we will be hard pressed to meet with regard to equity of access for people with a disability. The Province of Ontario proclaimed the Ontarians With Disabilities Act in 2002, requiring all public agencies to create plans and become accessible. We have no hard numbers on how many among us have a disability, since that is an area of voluntary reporting to Statistics Canada, but we believe the percentage in Toronto is high. About 40 per cent of Canadians over 65 have a disability. At least three per cent of our children have a disability or a special need. Many of our older facilities have not been properly retrofitted to serve those with a disability. Only one half of one per cent of our registrants are people with a disability, which is clearly unacceptable.

It's not just that our old buildings are inappropriately designed, but that those with a disability often need the help of caregivers. We don't have the staff to meet present demand. In addition, some of our policies are contradictory. It is better for environmental stewardship if our swimming pools are maintained at a lower temperature. But it is painful and counterproductive for a person disabled by arthritis to get into a cold swimming pool.

We have a long way to go to properly serve people with a disability.

## **INITIATE, WELCOME, COACH, CHEER**

Our Strategic Plan calls for lifelong activity because it's what we must all do to stay healthy until the end. It calls for a focus on the development of children and youth because we know they are our future and they are not sufficiently active to maintain their health. It calls for environmental stewardship because without a clean and green environment, and special attention to growing the urban forest, the City within a Park will only be a dream.

To bring our Strategic Plan to life, Parks and Recreation must initiate programs, welcome and coach communities and individuals, and recognize their achievements. These are roles we are qualified for. Who knows better than Parks and Recreation staff what a change for the better physical activity can make in the quality of peoples' lives? Our staff loves their work because they know it makes a difference.



## RECOMMENDATIONS:

Parks and Recreation staff should:

42. Ask Council to direct Parks and Recreation to report by spring 2005 on options for free programs for children and youth.

43. Develop a capital plan by spring 2005 to retrofit facilities for use by people with disabilities that is based on the requirements of the Ontarians With Disabilities Act.

44. Ensure staff at all levels reflects the diversity of all the communities we serve, and invest in staff training to achieve a welcoming environment for all.

45. Increase capacity to improve community recreational development and citizen engagement.

46. Promote the programs, services and benefits of recreation across the city. Building public awareness requires a broad effort.

47. Be the coach for the whole city. We need to demonstrate the value of lifelong activity through the use of our parks, trails, and community centres.

48. Create a Stakeholder Engagement Plan to guide, recognize and celebrate volunteers, advisory councils and advocates.

49. Support the Mayor's Community Safety Neighbourhood Plan through the increased use of multi-service-multi-agency program delivery methods in high-risk neighbourhoods.

TOP LEFT:  
NEW STRIDES SUMMER  
CAMP, CENTENNIAL  
PARK, ETOBICOKE, 2001.

TOP RIGHT:  
SWIM CLASS AT  
GUS RYDER POOL,  
1993.