

WellSpring

Developing Policy to Advance Physical Literacy in Child Care Settings in Alberta

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It is no secret that Canadian children are not active enough. According to the Canadian Health Measures Survey (2007-09), only 7% of children are meeting the daily recommendations for physical activity (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2011, p.16).

Children are also spending alarming amounts of time being sedentary. Canadian children spend approximately 6-7 hours per day participating in “screen time” activities such as watching TV, playing video games, and recreational computer use (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2011, p.7).

In 2011-2012, a pan-Alberta Advisory Committee (the Committee) came together to tackle this physical inactivity dilemma, in relation to licensed and approved child care across Alberta.

What's in This Article for You?

- Rising to the Challenge
- Following the Policy Cycle Model
- The Policy Cycle: Preparing an Action Plan



The Committee worked to create a physical literacy policy for Alberta child care settings that may leverage motivation among professionals and organizations to make a difference. The purpose of this article is to share our experiences in helping to create such a policy.

The Committee included experts in child development, health, recreation, child care, and policy development. At the outset, the Committee’s work was framed, in part, by the following questions:

- “How do we reach families and the early childhood professionals who work directly with children with a message about the importance of physical activity and literacy?”

- “How can we support adults to set an example for children to maintain healthy lifestyles?”
- “Is educating early childhood professionals and members of the community enough, or are regulations and guidelines required in order for this challenge to be taken seriously?”

Rising to the Challenge

The Committee used a policy development tool called the Policy Cycle model (Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009; Pal, 2009). This was used to create a well-planned policy proposal that could be distributed, to promote change.

The Policy Cycle model provided our committee with a pathway that narrowed our focus and allowed us to plan potential strategies.

Starting the process seemed daunting at first, as many members of the Committee were not familiar with policy development. However, as our work progressed, the Committee learned from and worked with policy experts; this helped us prepare to approach and communicate with provincial regulatory bodies and systems.

We realized that in order to get our message across to a variety of audiences – from early childhood professionals, to parents, to the Alberta Government – we needed to provide information in different ways, to better reach a variety of stakeholders.

Following the Policy Cycle Model

The next sections describe the steps our Committee took, using the Policy Cycle model, to create a solid policy proposal.

Collaboration was one of our most valuable tools. Our Committee members represented the frontline child care sector, including:

- the Alberta Child Care Association (ACCA);
- the Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement (ARCQE);

- regulatory bodies and boards, such as the Alberta Association for the Accreditation of Early Learning and Care Services (AELCS); and
- the Calgary and Area Child and Family Services Authority (Child Care Licensing).

It was a definite advantage to include stakeholder groups from the outset, given we sought to have buy-in from these groups for our policy proposal. Members of these groups were able to offer first-hand insight on strategies that may or may not be effective.

Having strong partnerships also gave us more access to additional stakeholders, such as other advocates for physical literacy and physical activity in the community.

The Policy Cycle: Preparing an Action Plan

Defining our Problem

In order to create a policy plan and get results, it was critical to develop a specific problem definition.

Committee members raised issues related to low levels of physical activity among children, children’s health, and the lack of adult role modeling for healthy lifestyles.

We learned (through using the Policy Cycle model) that our problem definition needed to be short enough to be easily understood, but also specific enough to show the need for a policy.

Included in our problem definition was “the need for increased and improved understanding of physical literacy and physical activity...through the development of standards...in licensed and approved child care settings.”

We wanted our stakeholders to be clear that, in our communities, schools, and child care settings, there is a lack of understanding of the importance of physical literacy.

Including “development of standards” in the definition highlighted the fact that adequate

standards and guidelines for physical literacy and activity do not currently exist in Alberta child care settings.

Establishing a Clear Goal

It is important to have a clear and specific goal. As infants, toddlers and other children aged 12 and under are in many different child care environments throughout the day, we realized that creating a policy to target all of those environments was not realistic.

We decided to focus on Alberta child care settings which include day care, family day homes, preschool, and out-of-school care. Child care settings could act as a “hub” to relay information between families and the community, and also have a positive influence on children’s behaviour because they can spend many hours per day in care.

Our goal was broad: to increase the amount of a child’s physical activity and physical literacy in licensed and approved child care settings.

After our target environments were established, we needed to confirm our agenda. We decided that we would address our goal from three main areas: guidelines, education, and resources.

We needed to:

- develop a set of guidelines, supported by current research, that could be used in child care settings;
- educate early childhood professionals, parents, regulatory bodies, and the general public about the importance of physical literacy and physical activity for children (even the youngest ones); and
- distribute resources directed towards all of the target stakeholders.

Deciding on an Approach

Once we knew what we wanted to provide for stakeholders, our next step was to decide on the instruments or approaches to use.

We could use a *persuasive* approach and attempt to convince our stakeholders that physical literacy and activity are important for children’s well being. Or, we could develop a policy that would require early childhood professionals to comply through a *regulatory* approach.

After much debate, our Committee decided that both methods were necessary. We needed to persuade in order to create buy-in for the policy. Therefore, we drafted regulatory guidelines and created several supplementary and educational materials, to give our stakeholders a complete package of information.

That “Bump in the Road”

Just as any successful sports team may study their opponent to be prepared for any challenges or surprises, it is important to consider the potential barriers that may arise in proposing a policy and brainstorm potential strategies or solutions to address them.

Our committee found this process extremely valuable as it gave us a sense of preparedness to address any objections or barriers that may arise. We decided to include the list of barriers with potential solutions in our policy package for stakeholders.

Taking Action

It was now time to take action and determine appropriate steps to having the policy implemented. During this stage, we sent out our policy proposal packages and supplementary resources (“companion package”) to our target stakeholders.

Another part of the implementation process was to create buzz in the community. We did this by networking among organizations and delivering key messages to the general public through newsletters and magazine articles, websites, and community events.

We were also extremely fortunate that, near this time, the Alberta Government was revising accreditation standards for licensed and approved

child care settings. We were able to submit our proposed policy for review, through a province-wide consultation process.

Measuring Success

When asking stakeholders to invest in an idea, it is necessary to be able to present a clear vision of the outcomes of the project and have a plan for how the results will be measured.

Both short-term and long-term outcomes should be considered. For example, one of our proposed short-term outcomes is to see an increase in the amount of daily physical activity in which children in child care settings are engaging. A measurement tool to assess this could be a self-administered survey conducted by early childhood professionals.

Reflection on the Policy Process

For individuals working in the field of health or human services, it is not uncommon to seek change; however, many of these individuals do not have an understanding of policy process.

Members of our Committee stated that they learned an incredible amount about the policy process and are now much more familiar with the strategies that will lead to long-lasting change through policy development. As Duane Bratt commented to the committee, “The Policy Cycle is often used to analyze past policies, but it can be a great tool for developing policy.” 

1 The authors of this article are all associated with Mount Royal University in Calgary, Alberta. Two of the authors, Dawne Clark and Elaine Danelesko, co-chaired the committee. The Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks & Wildlife Foundation is gratefully acknowledged for its financial support of this policy development project.

To view the references and useful links associated with this article, go to www.centre4activeliving.ca/publications/wellspring.html.

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Working with practitioners, organizations, and communities to improve the health and quality of life of all people through physical activity.

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IF YOU HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS OR QUESTIONS, WE'D LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU.

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