

# Active Facts:

## *Parks, Trails, and Recreation*

**Making it easier to play again ... for all of us!**

Not so long ago, say in the 1950s and 60s at most, kids grew up with the run of their neighborhood and community. There was always a park, a ball field, the “Y,” or “rec center” that they could head off to on their own, riding a bike or walking. Nearly everyone over the age of 40 can readily recall their own tales of adventure in “the woods,” which usually included a brook or stream.

Most of the time the activities – games, play, and exploration – were done with young friends, and without the direct supervision or intervention of adults. The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget stated that it is through the experience of unsupervised play that children develop their sense of ethics. Today, this kind of play is a rare thing to find. What happened?

A recent book, *Last Child in the Woods* by Richard Louv, offers a clue. He suggests that children today are growing up with a condition he terms “nature deficit disorder.” By denying them access to the natural world and opportunities to explore and play there, Louv says children are suffering in terms of physical fitness, as well as long-term mental and spiritual health.

And, it isn’t just “the woods” that are out-of-reach; in many communities there are few, if any, places to play – parks, recreation facilities, or trails – within walking or biking distance of where kids live. This is true for their parents, too. For many of us, *driving* to a fitness center or putting the bikes on the car and *driving to the trail* have become accepted if illogical conditions of our lives and communities. This isn’t good, for any of us.

According to Active Living Research (ALR), having recreation, park and trail facilities near where you live makes a real difference in how much physical active people get. Studies listed in the ALR’s fact sheet on *Designing for Active Recreation* show that,

- Creating and improving places to be active can result in a 25 percent increase in the percentage of people who exercise at least three times a week.
- People with the best access to a variety of build and natural facilities were 43 percent more likely to exercise 30 minutes most days than those with poor access.
- The closer people lived to a bikeway, the more likely there were to use it.
- 43 percent of people with safe places to walk within 10 minutes of home met recommended activity levels, while just 27 percent of those without safe places to walk were active enough.



PHOTO BY SHARON ROERTY



Active Living  
**RESOURCE  
CENTER**

Providing technical assistance to  
create active communities

Take a moment to think about what your neighborhoods and communities might look like if they were designed to fulfill the need for each of us to be active? In terms of recreation facilities, parks, and trails you might expect to find:

- 1) *Basic park and recreation facilities available in every neighborhood, and most users walking or biking to them.*
- 2) *Other recreation facilities easily accessible by transit.*
- 3) *Most children going to their neighborhood parks by themselves or with their friends.*
- 4) *Most organized sports activities taking place at neighborhood parks or school sites located in or near the neighborhoods where the children live.*
- 5) *Trails within walking distance of most residential areas, regularly used by people of all ages*

To make them places that meet our physical activity and play needs, we need to change how our communities are planned, designed, and built. Here are some objectives you can give to your local elected officials, to the heads of your local park and recreation agencies, to local planners, and to other community leaders, to let them know what you want your neighborhood to be like.

- Provide park and recreation facilities in new developments and find places for them in existing neighborhoods. It is not enough to have a few, big, regional parks; play areas are needed close to home. Zoning and sub-division regulations can be used to ensure that this objective is addressed.
- Make sure that these neighborhood park and recreation facilities are safely and easily accessible to most people, especially children. This means they need to be close to where people live, and connected by sidewalks, bicycle facilities, and trails. Your community should have good standards for neighborhood park and recreation facilities.
- Make full use of neighborhood and community school sites and facilities to help meet the needs of the whole community for physical activity, recreation, and play. All appropriate public agencies – schools, parks, recreation, libraries, etc.. – should be working together to help ensure that public facilities are easily accessible from where people live ... and not just by driving there!
- Develop a network of trails, with connections within walking distance of every neighborhood. If people can readily get to trails they will be more active ... and healthier. Again, you shouldn't have to get in a car a drive to a trail!

## Indicators

Here are some questions you can ask to help assess how well your community is doing on providing recreation facilities, parks, and trails. If you don't like with you see and find, ask your Mayor, City Council, and local officials to make some changes.

- Does your community have a policy and/or standards for park and recreation facilities that call for making them available in neighborhoods, within walking distance of where people live?
- Do local land use regulations require neighborhood parks and recreation facilities in new residential developments?
- Is there a plan to develop park and recreation facilities for existing neighborhoods that don't have easy access to them now?
- What percentage of the community can easily get to a parks or recreation facility by bicycle or on foot from the surrounding neighborhoods?
- What percentage of local schools are used for other kinds of community activities, including having nice playgrounds?
- Is there a community trails plan and is it being implemented? Does it call for providing trails within walking distance of most people?
- What percentage of the people who live in your community have a trail that they can walk to?

## Resources

For more information and background on using recreation facilities, parks, and trails to create more physically active communities, see: [http://www.bikewalk.org/vision/vision\\_recreation.htm](http://www.bikewalk.org/vision/vision_recreation.htm)

Here are the links to the items above:

*Last Child in the Woods* by Richard Louv  
<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1565123913/104-3988044-4481538?v=glance&n=283155>

Active Living Research (ALR)  
<http://www.activelivingresearch.org/>  
Their fact sheet on Designing for Active Recreation: <http://www.activelivingresearch.org/downloads/recreationrevised021105.pdf>



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