

PHYSICAL (IN)ACTIVITY AMONG  
LOW-INCOME CHILDREN AND YOUTH:  
PROBLEM, PROSPECT, CHALLENGE

Our young people live in a physical and social environment that makes it easy to be sedentary and inconvenient to be active.

U.S. Department of Education, *Promoting Better Health for Young People through Physical Activity and Sports* (2000)

The way Americans conduct sports has certainly not made us healthy, in any sense of the word.

George Vecsey, *New York Times* (December 16, 2002)

If left to choose, children instinctively seek the joy of movement.

Pete Egoscue, *New York Times* (May 10, 1998)

When today's adults reach back in their minds to childhood, their strongest memories often include physical ones—running, skipping, bicycling, playing ball, jumping rope, chasing and being chased. Being physically active was a defining dimension of urban and suburban childhood for at least the first two thirds of the 20th century. Over the past 20 or so years, that has become less and less the case, and in the past few years physical inactivity among children has come to be viewed as a distinct social problem. In this paper, I examine the reasons for what some are calling an epidemic of inactivity among low- and moderate-income children and youth and discuss what it might take to address this problem. I examine the potential roles of after-school and youth programs and of organized youth sports, as well as such broader responses as renewing outdoor play and recreation spaces and reinstating recess in school.

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My basic argument is that, in developing policies, programs, and a research agenda to address physical inactivity, we have to keep in mind that it has multiple, intertwined roots. Unfriendly and unhealthy physical environments, economic pressures on (and necessary priorities of) low-income families, the growing institutionalization of childhood, unbridled advertising and damaging messages from popular culture, rampant consumerism, the often unhealthy way in which American society “does” sports, and not least, dysfunctional public policies in a wide range of spheres (e.g., support for working families, urban planning, environmental policy, organization of the school day, regulation of business) all contribute to the problem. This multicausality does not mean that discrete responses—for example, promoting youth sports—are destined to be ineffectual. The most useful responses to complex problems are often focused. Moreover, the development of one response often leads to awareness of the need for and subsequent development of others. At the same time, it does not make sense to invest in particular corners of children’s lives without worrying about the other corners.

### **Considering Physical Activity**

Physical activity is a broad and heterogeneous concept. It encompasses both organized activities and informal ones, games and play, sports and arts—basically whatever stimulates movement—from physical education and recess at school to taking dance classes, dancing at a rock concert, roaming the neighborhood, jumping rope, playing hopscotch and tag, wrestling and tussling with friends, or practicing capoeira. It is sometimes deliberate, sometimes spontaneous, sometimes the point, and sometimes a by-product.

Physical activity has important developmental dimensions. The meaning of, motivation for, and nature of physical activity change as individuals move through childhood and adolescence. Until the age of 8 or 9, children naturally explore and interact with the world physically as well as verbally, often through the medium of play. Physical activity (and being physical) is almost not a separate thing but how the self is composed and expressed, how learning occurs, how children explore and master the external world. Children “are programmed by nature to be little whirling dervishes” (Egoscue, 1998, p. A29). The exhilaration, risk, and loss of control associated with movement are sources of pleasure. In her study of children’s play behavior on the school playground,

Thorne (1993, p. 15) was struck “not only by kids’ rapid movements, but also by their continual engagement with one another’s bodies—poking, pushing, tripping, grabbing a hat or scarf.” She noted that children did not seem to experience these intrusions as antagonistically as adults might expect.

In the later years of middle childhood and into adolescence, physical activity not only declines in absolute amount<sup>1</sup>, but also is shaped by different factors. What was natural and instinctive must, in many respects, be relearned and reincorporated. Being physically active becomes a matter of social learning and an element of identity development, as children look (and listen) to others—to parents, relatives, and other adults in the community; to siblings and friends; and, increasingly, to popular culture—as models of who and what they might be and how they should engage the world. For example, parents’ own participation, enjoyment, and valuing of physical activity serve as an important influence on their children (Weiss, 2000).

Physical activity is strongly shaped by gender. There are gender differences in—or perhaps gender stereotypes about—the types of physical activity that boys and girls view as acceptable for themselves, and in their perceptions of their likely competence in particular activities (Lee, Fredenburg, Belcher, & Cleveland, 1999). Parents and children themselves believe that boys and girls have different natural abilities. Although both boys and girls cite having fun, being with friends, and developing physical skills and/or fitness as the main reasons for participating in organized physical activities, boys have been found to be more competitively oriented and girls more goal oriented in their approach to such activities. With respect to space, boys tend to define and use larger fixed spaces for organized games and sports; girls define smaller spaces and use them more flexibly.

Physical activity is also strongly influenced by social class and race. These shape the physical environments in which children grow up, the resources to which they have access, the goals of organized activities for children, parental priorities, and a host of other factors. For instance, close to three quarters of African American children in the United States grow up in “racially segregated, densely settled, and geographically restricted” neighborhood environments, with little or no safe, usable outdoor play space (Sutton, n.d.). Low-income

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<sup>1</sup> Between the ages of 6 and 18, boys’ physical activity reportedly decreases by 24 percent and girls’ by 36 percent (Baker, Freedman, & Furano, 1997, p. 4).

children and youth have significantly less access to organized sports than do their more advantaged peers, and the activities to which they do have access are more likely to be viewed as preventive or remedial interventions than as normative child development supports (Baker, Freedman, & Furano, 1997; Littel & Wynn, 1989). Meanwhile, parents of low-income children and youth are more likely than more economically advantaged parents to restrict their children from playing outdoors.

There are also, obviously, individual differences among children and adolescents in how they view and experience physical activity. Children have varying perceptions of their own physical competence and varying capacities for physical risk taking. They experience physical proximity and touch differently. Adolescents make very different meanings of their participation in organized physical activities. Larson (1994), for instance, found that ego-involved adolescents (i.e., those focused on winning and losing as measures of self-worth) appeared to get less satisfaction from sports participation than did mastery-oriented ones (i.e., those who focused on their own progress and performance).

### **Benefits of Physical Activity**

The benefits of physical activity for children, though seemingly obvious, bear restating. Most immediately, they include cardiovascular health, muscle and bone strength, kinesthetic awareness, sense of vitality, and sense of physical competence and integrity. In some forms, physical activity appears to have self-regulatory benefits for behavior and emotional state and even a self-regulatory effect on chemical/hormonal balances in the body. Physical activity can reduce anxiety, feelings of stress, and, according to a few reports, depression. For all children, but particularly for those who are vulnerable for reasons of disability, temperament, traumatic experience, or the like, physical activity seems to have a “normalizing” effect. It fosters social inclusion and strengthens children’s sense of self as not just physically but socially competent. Describing the effects of martial arts classes for girls who have had difficult life experiences, the director of the Center for Anti-Violence Education in Brooklyn, New York, said, “Moving the body opens you up, [because] anger and hurt live in your body” (Musick, 1999, p. 37).

For some children, physical activity becomes a principal means of self-expression and creativity. For older children and youth who have experienced little success in other areas of their lives, physical activities can come to serve as

a foundation for recovering a sense of competence in other domains. Not least, physical activity is an important vehicle for building social community in childhood. It operates through a universal language that can—though does not necessarily—bring children with diverse backgrounds together.

### **How Serious Is the Problem of Physical Inactivity?**

The data point to a moderately serious and growing problem whose effects on children and society as a whole are just beginning to be understood. With respect to prevalence, there are numerous direct and indirect signs of a decline in day-to-day physical activity among children. For instance, walking and bicycling among children ages 5 to 15 declined 40 percent between 1977 and 1995 (U.S. Department of Education, 2000, p. 10). One study found that fewer than 1 in 5 children in Georgia who live less than a mile from school walk to school on a regular basis (Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 1999). In many low- and moderate-income neighborhoods, fewer children are playing outdoors—on sidewalks, in playgrounds, and in parks. Recess and physical education are disappearing from urban school schedules. More children are spending more time indoors at earlier ages, in institutional settings (day care, after-school programs, etc.), or at home. Time diaries and surveys suggest that children and adolescents are spending more time in sedentary activities, such as watching television, listening to music, and playing video and computer games. For these reasons and others to be discussed shortly, fewer than 1 in 3 adolescents currently get what is considered an adequate amount of regular physical exercise.

The effects of physical inactivity can be understood in part simply by subtracting from children's lives the numerous benefits noted above. More immediately, the medical literature is reporting an increase in a variety of pediatric health problems that appear to be caused by a combination of physical inactivity and increased calorie consumption.<sup>2</sup> As has been widely reported, childhood obesity has doubled over the past 10 years. A third of adolescents are either at risk of obesity or are already obese (Cohen, 2000, who also notes, p. 10, that “between 70 and 80 percent of obese adolescents will remain obese as adults”).

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<sup>2</sup> Children are consuming 100 to 200 more calories each day than they did just a few years ago. Pollan (2003, p. 6) reports that “agribusiness now produces 3,800 calories of food a day for every American, 500 calories more than it produced 30 years ago.... So what's a food company to do? The answer couldn't be simpler or more imperative: get each of us to eat more. A lot more.”

Recent research in San Francisco found that close to half of the local population of Latino children 6 to 11 years old were overweight, and more than half of adolescents.<sup>3</sup> Obesity-related pediatric health problems reported to be increasing in frequency (and to which physical inactivity contributes) include Type 2 diabetes (which has tripled in the just the past five years), incipient heart disease, sleep apnea, gallbladder and skin disorders, and orthopedic problems (Cohen). Obesity also causes or contributes to problems such as depression, social discrimination, and social withdrawal.

## **Causes of Physical Inactivity**

### **The Disappearance of Childhood**

Although there is a biologically and developmentally rooted decline in physical activity as children grow older, this decline may be occurring earlier than in the past, a specific expression of the more general phenomenon of “age compression” that has been noted among American children. Some have described this as the disappearance or erosion of childhood (Suransky, 1982). The rhythms, routines, and preoccupations of childhood have been lost. Constraints to physical activity that used to be characteristic of early adolescence are now found in 8-, 9-, and 10-year-olds. Children are more self-conscious about their bodies at younger ages. Awareness of, and anxiety about, social and physical competition occur earlier. Adult agendas for out-of-school time intrude earlier in life. There has been, especially, a growing adult preoccupation with productive use of non-school time, seen in ubiquitous efforts to extend the school day for purposes of academic remediation.

INSTITUTIONALIZED CHILDHOOD. The earlier decline of childhood pursuits is attributable in part to the fact that more low- and moderate-income American children are spending more time in institutional settings during non-school hours than in the past. In 1986, Roger Hart presciently noted that as long as children had more freedom in the city, it did not matter that the play spaces and institutions created and controlled by adults were so restrictive and sometimes boring—but it was beginning to matter at the time, and it matters even more today. Some 25 percent of low- and moderate-income children now

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<sup>3</sup> In a recent conversation, the founder and director of a major youth-serving agency serving Latino children in New York City told me that obesity was rampant among the children and adolescents he served.

spend three to five afternoons a week in after-school programs, and the numbers are growing.

As I will discuss more fully later, institutional settings such as after-school programs tend to standardize and routinize children's activity, and in many programs children spend a majority of the time seated—doing homework, having a snack, or participating in crafts or table games. Lack of space in many after-school programs creates impediments to both informal and organized physical activity. More subtly, institutional settings tend to lack the necessary psychological, social, and temporal conditions for play to thrive (Suransky, 1982). Such conditions include physical and social space for spontaneity, physicality, and unrestricted movement, as well as a measure of privacy, lack of formal temporal structure (or schedule), freedom to manipulate the material environment, and at least a modicum of unpredictability. To cite just one common constraint, children in after-school programs are warned again and again to avoid touching others, to control their bodies, and to limit their movements.

### **Gender-Specific Constraints**

There are a number of gender-related constraints to children's physical activity. For boys, there has been a narrowing of the range of behavior considered normal, i.e., a certain amount of aggression, rowdiness, and restlessness. We are seeing, for example, the medicalization of these behaviors with labels of conduct disorder or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, as well as greater attention to the phenomenon of bullying (Angier, 1994). The reasons for this trend are not clear. Extremes of aggressive behavior may be more common in low- and modest-income boys, due to perinatal injury, trauma, diet, popular culture, social despair, and loss of opportunity for less extreme physical outlets.

American society also seems to be in a particularly punitive era with respect to boys from low-income families, especially if they are members of a racial minority. Kozol (2000, p. 16) described what he saw as the "severe agenda that has recently been put in place for inner-city kids," including a preoccupation with discipline and punishment. One can see this exhibited in the martial environment that has been created in hundreds of inner-city schools around the country. We are also in a period of heightened concern with crime, violence, and disorder. Minority boys from low-income families tend to experience the brunt of such social concerns, and their behavior is more closely monitored by teachers, police, and juvenile justice authorities than that of their white peers.

For girls, some gender-associated constraints to physical activity include lack of role models, social pressures, body image issues, lack of parental encouragement (important in part because girls reportedly rely on such encouragement more than boys do), and fewer sports choices. Starting in elementary school, girls assess their general athletic ability more negatively than boys do, regardless of actual performance. Girls sometimes feel less safe in public recreation spaces and use those spaces less for physical than for social purposes, including watching boys play sports (Youth Sports Leadership Project, 2002). The organizations (and individuals) that sponsor and teach selected sports, including wrestling, football, and, more selectively, martial arts and baseball, have been slow to welcome girls as participants.

### **Local Norms and Poverty-Related Factors**

Although American culture as a whole—through all the factors discussed in this paper—exerts the major influence on children’s activity patterns and levels, group and community norms, interacting with individual family needs, also play a role. Johnson (2000) noted that almost any activity can at times be prohibited or restricted for particular genders, ages, or reasons of religion or custom. Immigrant families may not feel that they know or trust the community environment well enough to release their children into it. And some—though certainly not all—immigrant communities have long viewed play and sports as frivolous, an unaffordable luxury relative to academics or work (Halpern, 2003).

In local Latino communities, youth are often expected to begin contributing economically to the family by age 15 or 16, one reason for drop-off in sports participation over the high school years. Latino girls appear to face particular constraints to pursuing physical activity, including parental discouragement, a significant burden of child care and other family responsibilities, cultural norms against girls’ competitiveness, lack of public role models, and extreme parental restrictions on outdoor activity. In one *New York Times* article, a young Hispanic female softball player told a reporter that “a lot of Hispanic girls are more into makeup, hair and nails. In my whole family I was the only girl who played a sport. I was the only one outside playing with boys” (Williams, 2002, pp. C15–C16). In one sports league (primarily softball) for girls in the mostly Dominican Washington Heights/Inwood section of Manhattan, child care responsibilities were a significant issue, as was lack of support from parents, especially for older girls (Baker et al., 1997).



Some of the dynamics operating within local Latino communities may also be present in African American communities. Kane and Larkin (1997), for instance, cited a survey finding African American parents significantly more likely than Caucasian parents to say that sports are more important for boys than for girls. This may partly explain the finding in a study sponsored by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute that the decline in physical activity among girls over the course of adolescence is particularly great for African Americans.

**POVERTY-RELATED CONSTRAINTS.** Poverty places a variety of stresses on families that constrain children's time and opportunity for physical activity. Parents forced to do physically exhausting work for low wages may not view being physically active as a discrete, positive, or important value to promote in their children. (Literature on parents' roles in determining children's physical activity in fact finds that economically advantaged parents place a higher value on children's physical activity than do those who are economically disadvantaged. Women, who often head low-income families, are also less likely than men to put children's needs for physical activity ahead of other family needs.) Recent changes in welfare policy have led a greater proportion of adults in low-income families to work long hours, which reduces the amount of time parents have to link their children to community resources.

Low- and moderate-income working parents may place a variety of restrictions on their children's movements after school, wanting them in a defined indoor place, whether home, after-school or youth program, or library. Poverty-related family stresses such as divorce, single parenthood, and domestic violence also put a variety of pressures on children and youth that affect their psychological availability to participate and persevere in activities. Psychological factors such as worry, anxiety, depression, and shame contribute to social withdrawal as well as lack of energy.

### **Loss of Outdoor Play and Play Space**

Common sense would suggest—and there is some evidence to argue—that time spent playing outdoors is a major determinant of children's physical activity levels.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In a radio program, Dr. Jo Salmon of Deakin University in Australia reported on a study finding that “the single biggest predictor of children's activity levels, above and beyond anything else, is the time that children spend outside” (*Health Dimensions*, 2002).

Put somewhat differently, the spaces children inhabit, and are directed to, strongly shape the developmental experiences to which they have access, including the kinds and amounts of physical activity in which they engage. Over the past half-century, students of urban geography, plus a handful of sociologists and of ecologically oriented psychologists have argued that (a) being able to play and otherwise use the outdoor city environment is developmentally important to children (as one writer noted, the outdoors has an affective importance to them); (b) cities are becoming increasingly inhospitable places for children; and (c) children and adolescents appear to have less opportunity for unstructured outdoor play in particular.<sup>5</sup>

Colin Ward, writing of inner-city children and youth, noted already in 1978 that “there is no way which makes sense to them of becoming involved, except in a predatory way, in their own city (p. 21).” A more recent report described children’s lack of access to the outdoor urban environment as a crisis (Aitken, cited in Monaghan, 2000). Writing in the *New York Times*, Pete Egoscue (1998) observed that most children’s lives offer fewer and fewer opportunities for unstructured, spontaneous motion; he called this “motion deprivation.” When staff at a network of inner-city after-school programs run by the Child First Authority in Baltimore asked children what they would like to see more of in their programs, “two answers dominate[d]: more outdoor play and more field trips.” The staff had restricted outdoor play, “fearing harm from broken glass, drug paraphernalia and playground disrepair” (*Child First Times*, 2002, p. 2).

The inhospitality of the city to children’s outdoor play is far from a new complaint; in fact, it has been a theme in municipal reform at least since the 1880s and was certainly a major concern of Progressive reformers early in the 20th century. For at least the first two thirds of the century, children nonetheless seemed to thrive on city streets, stoops, playgrounds, and play lots. They effectively borrowed the city for their own purposes, using walls, fire hydrants, lampposts, and manhole covers (Dargan & Zeitlin, 1990). Children created and passed on games, developed their own small governments, and did what they could to resist adult intrusions into their world. Although adults criticized children’s informal outdoor play as idleness, it taught children quickness of mind, self-confidence, and the ability to cope with all kinds of people and situations.

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<sup>5</sup> There is even some evidence that access to outdoor play spaces influences children’s sense of loneliness (Parke & O’Neill, 1999).

Children's outdoor play was associated with a certain amount of risk and risk taking, in the positive sense of these concepts.<sup>6</sup>

At some point over the past 30 years or so, the balance between the developmental benefits and the risks of outdoor play environments shifted toward the latter. Informal social controls in inner-city neighborhoods thinned out, there was a shift from ethnically based or turf-driven gang conflict to drug-related violence, and adults were no longer willing or able to monitor children's and youth's behavior. In fact, neighborhood adults were transformed from protective figures to potential threats to children's well-being. Over the past 20 years, street culture, historically a source of play, learning, and experience for disadvantaged children, has become much riskier for them. Parents in many communities no longer permit their children to use playgrounds due to perceived danger, especially drug dealing, and to neglect by parks and recreation departments. Equipment remains unrepaired for years. Playgrounds and parks are littered with broken glass, drug paraphernalia, and condoms, among other items. In general, children do not use their physical community as fully as they did in the past.

### **Popular Culture, the Media, and the Marketplace**

For a variety of reasons, including parents' reluctance to let children or adolescents wander the community freely after school and the attraction of amusement and diversion, television watching, video games, computer games, and the Internet are contributing to sedentary "lifestyles." Across social class lines, children and adolescents are spending 3, 4, and in some cases 5 or more hours a day on such activities.

In an obvious and strict sense, TV watching and related activities combine physical inactivity with increased likelihood of snacking, a perfect formula for obesity. (Snacking is not just a parallel activity; intense advertising of snack food and soda during children's peak television viewing hours may actually stimulate

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<sup>6</sup> In discussing the general developmental value of children's self-directed outdoor play, Sutton-Smith (1990, p. 5) offered a long list of things that children were doing when they were "just playing": legislating differences, displaying power, clarifying meaning (of rules, etc.), changing meaning, redefining situations, distinguishing pretend from real, coping with exclusion, changing roles, dealing with conflict, and learning about space, boundaries, and territoriality. In a similar list, Middlebrook (1998, p. 16) included (among other things) finding refuge, exploring and developing relationships, and experimenting with authority and power.

eating.) More subtly, as Dargan and Zeitlin (1990, p. 169) have argued, modern amusements are “placeless; the world they create is on the screen, in the mind” and not on the block. As Aitken (cited in Monaghan, 2000, p. A21), put it, they create a “virtual reality that responds to cravings that are more likely to stultify than enhance the development of the child.” And their messages are designed to turn children and adolescents into consumers.

Childhood used to be at least somewhat protected from “the marketplace,” but that is no longer the case. Children are now viewed by advertisers as a prime market, and the bulk of messages explicitly or implicitly targeted to children undermine the value of health, physical vitality, and activity. Children’s bodies—not to mention their identities—are increasingly “commodified” and “branded” in television programming, magazine articles, and especially advertisements, which try to shape what children eat and drink, what they want to look like, whom they want to emulate, and what they should think and worry about. Oliver (2001, p. 144) noted, for instance, that girls are constantly “bombarded with messages about their bodies” suggesting that using particular products will make them more attractive. Indeed, the messages that girls get from teen magazines—messages that are “a very powerful source of information for the girls”—is that they are “bodies first and people second” (Oliver, p. 153). There is much that is positive about the girls’ sports movement (itself an expression of a broader cultural movement reflected in the term “girl power”). But no sooner did it appear than it was co-opted by athletic apparel makers, who saw a new market that could offset stagnant sales in the traditional male market (Geissler, 2001). Nike and other companies are well aware that billions of dollars a year are spent on girls’ clothing.

Boys too are increasingly susceptible to the marketplace’s interest in children’s bodies as sources of profit. One sign of this is the growing use of steroids and steroid precursors (such as androstenedione) by boys as young as 9 or 10 years old. As Egan (2002, p. A1) reports, more boys “are trying to find designer bodies, not just in a gym but also in a syringe of illegal steroids,” which can “basically shut down normal adolescent development in male bodies.” These damaging drugs, viewed by older children and youth as shortcuts to acquiring attractive bodies, are completely unregulated and are sold by the dietary supplement industry, which, like cigarette manufacturers, protests that its marketing efforts are not aimed to those under 18 years of age.

The food subsidiaries of the large tobacco companies have begun to use the advertising techniques that have been effective in marketing cigarettes to young people. In a related vein, the (sometimes government-subsidized) overproduction of food by agribusiness has led to a phenomenon called supersizing:

Since the raw materials of soda and popcorn, french fries and even hamburgers represent such a tiny fraction of their retail price (compared with labor, packaging and advertising), expanding portion size becomes a way to multiply sales without adding much to costs (Pollan, 2003, p. 6).

The supersizing of meals served to children occurs not just in fast food outlets but in schools, as well.

Close to a majority of high school students, particularly those living in moderate-income families, now work after school and/or on weekends, for as many as 20 hours a week. This work rarely contributes much to adolescents' development and may even cause developmental harm by limiting time for physical activity, as well as other extracurricular activity and schoolwork. Some or much of adolescents' desire to work in the out-of-school hours is driven by consumption, rather than by the necessity of contributing to the family—that is, by the desire to purchase whatever goods are being worn or used by friends or being pushed on television or in teen magazines.

### **The American Way of Sports**

It might seem ironic in a paper on the causes of and approaches to addressing physical inactivity to identify sports as part of the problem. But in American society, much of how sports are organized, carried out, and celebrated may have the sum effect of contributing to inactivity. In the first place, Americans' tendency to equate leisure with amusement extends to sports, where primary forms of participation are vicarious and somewhat passive—being a fan or a spectator, glorifying celebrity, deifying star athletes, making them into heroes. Baker et al. (1997, p. 1) argued that being a fan can contribute to sports participation: “Youth watch sports on TV, don the attire of their favorite teams, plaster their walls with sports posters, and mimic their heroes in countless hours of informal athletics.” This author believes, however, that in the long term the process is less positive, leading primarily to passivity rather than to activity. Nathanson (1992) described the experience of being a fan of a local team or famous athlete as being about “borrowed pride.” He wrote (p. 353) that “those of us who cannot or dare not

compete on our own hire others to fight or play or contend in our stead.” There may also be a degree of “borrowed” effort—the more we are inclined to watch others exert themselves, the less we are inclined to do that work ourselves.

In American society, children’s (especially boys’) view and understanding of sports come primarily from the media. In a provocative article entitled “The Televised Sports Manhood Formula,” Messner, Dunbar and Hunt (2000) identified a number of recurrent themes in the televised sports programs most watched by boys. These include the positive value of extreme aggressiveness (including fighting); the importance of being willing to sacrifice one’s body and health in the service of winning (it is heroic, rather than stupid, to play hurt); the derision of softness; the need to prove oneself constantly; a view of sports as war; a sexualization of women and, relatedly, the presentation of women as masculinity-validating props; and the idea that the costs of masculinity are worth the price. *New York Times* sports columnist George Vecsey (2002, p. D8) noted that “all the evidence suggest[s] that watching sports makes many of us surly, stupid, flabby, [and] passive.”

The hypercompetitiveness, violence, and extreme aggression characteristic of professional sports have spread downward and outward, infecting all kinds of organized sports. Sports medicine specialists report seeing more and younger children with overuse injuries, children who sometimes have played through pain with the blessing of a coach or parent. Glorification of violence and aggression in both old and new media complicates children’s, especially boys’, efforts to find ways of expressing their natural aggression in manageable, appropriate ways. Such themes also serve to limit news and coverage of women’s sports. Older children and youth who are not willing or able to buy into the dominant sports ethos may reject sports as a whole.

### **School-Related Trends**

Two established school-related trends have contributed to the growth of physical inactivity among children and adolescents: the disappearance of recess and the decline in physical education. We violate the natural rhythms of children’s and adolescents’ lives by putting them in rigidly controlled environments all day and by not spacing out learning activities. A third trend, the “extension” of the school day into the after-school hours to provide academic remediation, is also becoming a notable problem. Less directly, as I noted earlier, in the name of improving the learning environment and general sense of order and structure,

there have been increasing constrictions on children's freedom of movement in school.<sup>7</sup>

Many reasons have been proffered for shortening or eliminating recess: the need for more time for academics and safety, health, and drug education; the fear of lawsuits; unsavory adults lurking around playgrounds; the shortage of willing supervisors. Johnson (1998) quoted an Atlanta school superintendent as saying, "We are intent on improving academic performance. You don't do that by having kids hanging on monkey bars." Yet recess is beneficial for many reasons, in addition to sheer physical activity. It offers children a change of pace, a chance to decompress,<sup>8</sup> some novelty in a school day increasingly defined by repetition and routine, a modicum of escape from adult control, the opportunity to develop and practice social skills, and the chance to spend a few minutes outdoors.

The decline in physical education has three dimensions: (a) fewer children are participating in physical education in general; (b) those who do are participating fewer days each week, on average; and (c) the proportion of vigorous physical activity during physical education appears to have declined. For instance, Lowry, Wechsler, Kann, and Collins reported in 2001 that only half of all high school students have physical education at all; in addition, the percentage of high school students participating in physical education that involves strenuous physical activity declined from 34 percent in 1991—already low—to 21 percent in 1997. Baker et al. (1997) reported that only about 10 to 15 percent of physical education involves vigorous physical activity.

### **Dysfunctional Public Policies**

Through sins of both omission and commission, public policy in a range of domains contributes to constraints on children's physical activity. At a broad level, one striking characteristic of child and family policy in the United States is a lack of public policy addressing normative child and youth development concerns (what in other countries is often called "youth policy"), other than

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<sup>7</sup> Also compounding the effects of loss of physical activity are the problems of unhealthy food served to children in school lunchrooms and schools as purveyors of fast food. For example, while two thirds or more of schools serve soft drinks, salty snacks, and high-fat baked goods, only 18 percent serve fruits and vegetables (Becker & Burros, 2003, p. A12).

<sup>8</sup> Pellegrini and Bjorklund (1996) found that when recess time was reduced, the intensity of physical activity during recesses increased.

those for formal education. The United States lacks any deliberate, coherent, public vision of the supports—and protections—to which youth are entitled as citizens and community members. That is why corporations feel free to exploit children and adolescents as a potential market for unhealthy products and activities, why recreation and sports programs have to fight for whatever crumbs fall off the public funding table, and why children's healthy development is considered a family responsibility. One reason that physical inactivity has been defined as a public health concern is that it is not obviously the concern of any other department of federal, state, or local government.

**NEGLECT OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH THREATS.** Among the basic protections to which children should be entitled are nontoxic environments, and there is a lack of public policy and law designed to protect children and adolescents from the damaging effects of severely polluted outdoor and indoor environments in low-income neighborhoods. This issue is, finally, on the radar screen of both the public health community and urban policy makers. Awareness first took root through the long campaign to force recognition of the prevalence and effects of lead poisoning in children. Researchers have recently begun to document the levels and effects of a broad array of environmental hazards, including air pollution, solvents, pesticides, secondhand smoke, PCBs, asbestos, rodent and cockroach feces, and mold. Almost all of these are present at significantly higher levels in low-income communities (inside as well as outside homes) than in advantaged ones, and in particular in communities with high proportions of Latino and African American children (Korenstein & Piazza, 2002).

There are no data on the extent to which environmentally induced health vulnerabilities in children affect day-to-day physical activity levels. In various combinations, these toxins have been demonstrated to affect children's respiratory, nervous, endocrine, and immune systems and to cause particular kinds of cancers in children. Children with environmentally induced asthma are likely to be less active (childhood asthma rates have increased 40 percent in two decades), as are children with endocrine and immune system vulnerabilities that affect day-to-day health status. Ironically, active outdoor play, by increasing respiration rates, can exacerbate children's exposure to environmental hazards.

**CHILD-UNFRIENDLY URBAN PLANNING AND LEGISLATION.** A number of observers have noted over the decades that Americans design urban spaces in



a way that is inhospitable to children's and adolescents' play—in hospitable even to their very presence (see, e.g., Jacobs, 1961). Americans appear to have a deep cultural ambivalence about where they want children and adolescents to be and be seen, and perhaps about children's and adolescents' physical activity itself, especially in public spaces. Aitken (1994, p. xi) argued that “we put children in their place.” And James, Jenks, and Prout (1998, p. 37) wrote that children, when noted at all, are often perceived to be in the wrong place. One illustration of these arguments can be found in the growing restrictions on street play in communities around the United States, with local city councils banning such play and local police forces occasionally confiscating equipment. In a narrower vein, playground design in the United States has tended to focus on enhancing safety and limiting risk. This preoccupation has made playgrounds less appealing to children and has led to missed opportunity to create challenging and stimulating environments. It has been argued that the lack of sidewalks in some new housing developments is at best an example of lack of attention to children's needs and, at worst, a deliberate effort to restrict where children play.

**DECLINE IN MUNICIPAL RECREATION BUDGETS.** In most cities there has been a long-term decline in municipal public recreation budgets, reversed modestly and briefly during the economic pseudoprospersity of the 1990s. Many of the older cities in the Northeast and Midwest have lost half or more of their parks and recreation staff. Chronic capital disinvestment in urban parks and playgrounds has led to a severe decline in the condition of recreation facilities, contributing to crime, safety concerns, and even more disinvestment. The capital needs of public parks and recreation programs have doubled in the past five years. (School playgrounds, sometimes considered part of urban playground space, have also suffered from neglect.) In part due to resource constraints, urban park districts have tried to use parks and athletic fields to generate revenue. That trend, combined with generally growing demand for athletic fields, has reduced or eliminated their availability to children and youth for informal sports and games.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> At the same time that there are shortages of playing fields, there is often a significant amount of unused public (or privately owned) land in low-income neighborhoods, for instance, vacant lots seized for non-payment of taxes (Chavis, n.d.). But this land is typically not available for development as play and sports space for children. City authorities want to hold it for sale for future development. Wealthy individuals sometimes also donate land to cities to be used for civic purposes, and this land also can be, but often is not, used to create play space for children.

The current fiscal crisis in city and state government is leading to dramatic cuts in discretionary spending, putting further pressure on parks and recreation budgets. Atlanta, for example, is facing a \$5 million cut. (Parks and recreation departments that have independent taxing authority, such as Chicago's, are somewhat protected from current fiscal pressures.) The principal source of federal funding for capital improvement, the Urban Parks and Recreation Recovery Program (run by the National Park Service), has been significantly underfunded since it was first created in 1978. The Bush administration quietly tried to "zero out" funding for the program but under intense pressure was forced to allocate \$30 million, still a tiny sum when spread across scores of cities.

### **Responding to the Challenge of Physical Inactivity**

At one level, the solutions we are looking for, the policies, practices, and ideas we want to promote, require attention to a variety of kinds of issues. How we think about and treat low-income childhood, how we design urban space, how we invest in urban environments, how we use municipal budgets, how we balance work and family life, what happens in school, what we let the mass media do, how we think about and try to address our culture of celebrity and hero worship, how we understand and promote health itself—all of these must be considered. However, the broad agenda of needed responses is nowhere in sight.

There are, still, a number of positive developments to be built on. The problem of physical inactivity among children and adolescents is on the verge of becoming a public issue. (In American society, that means an issue discussed in the media and among policy/political elites.) In recent years, numerous stories in print and broadcast media have noted physical inactivity as a problem, usually in relation to obesity. Recent congressional sessions have seen a handful of bills intended to promote physical activity (offered by Senator Bill Frist, Representative Bernie Sanders, and a few others). Some funding from the Department of Transportation, through the Transportation Equity Act for the Twenty-First Century, and the Department of the Interior, through the Land and Water Conservation Fund, is available for developing bike paths and trails, creating safe routes to school, and improving park space and other recreational amenities. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has an initiative called Active Community Environments, designed to promote walking, bicycling, and accessible recreation facilities.

The public health, preventive/behavioral medicine, and exercise science communities have also taken note and begun responding to the problem of physical inactivity. For the most part, this has meant designing and testing school- or clinic-based “lifestyle interventions” that employ health behavior modification approaches and focus on specific causal factors. For example, Robinson (1999) designed a school-based intervention to help elementary children learn to self-monitor, and become more selective about, television watching.<sup>10</sup>

A handful of foundations and corporations—the Skillman Foundation, Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Nike (which has a program that provides grants to community organizations to refurbish or construct running tracks), and General Mills (which has a program focused on improving children’s nutritional habits)—have concentrated resources on the problem of physical inactivity. There are numerous national, and a handful of state, organizations and coalitions addressing this issue. Examples include the National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity (which has a Physical Activity for Youth Policy Initiative); American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance; and New York State Physical Activity Coalition. There are organizations and advocacy efforts focused on factors that contribute to physical inactivity, for instance, the Trust for Public Land (on outdoor play space) and the Children’s Environmental Health Network (on environmental health issues).

On the other side of the equation, there is little public pressure for government to address the problem of physical inactivity, in part because of the plethora of domestic and international issues already confronting federal, state, and local governments, from the poor performance of public schools to continuing threats of terrorism and the ongoing war in Iraq. And, in spite of rhetoric from the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, the Surgeon General, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, current federal funding directed toward this problem is less than a drop in the bucket. The Bush administration habitually gives rhetorical support to needed action on social problems while actually trying in its budget requests to reduce or “zero out” funding for programs designed to address those problems. As noted above, the Urban Parks and Recreation Recovery Program is barely alive. Some newer federal programs,

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<sup>10</sup> This intervention was found to be effective in reducing television watching and “adiposity” but did not increase physical activity or fitness. The investigator subsequently designed an intervention—ongoing—that directly incorporated a physical activity component.

for example, the Carol White Physical Education for Progress Program (which the administration also tried—unsuccessfully—to zero out) and the National Youth Sports Program have extremely small budgets, in the tens of millions. Spread out over hundreds of communities, such funding simply disappears. The decision by the Bush administration not to help the numerous states facing budget constraints bodes ill for state discretionary spending on parks, playgrounds, recreation, physical education, preventive health concerns, environmental health, and other items that address obstacles to physical activity.

### **A Role for After-School and Youth Programs?**

Funders and preventive health specialists have tended to look to the schools, and in particular to a renewed emphasis on physical education, as the key to addressing the problem of physical inactivity. An argument can be made that other institutions make as much or more sense in this regard. Physical education certainly needs to be made more regular, active, engaging, and inclusive. Newer approaches, for instance, focus on fitness, a reasonable emphasis for most children, rather than competitive sports, which many children do not appear to enjoy. But numerous students still do not have physical education more than once or twice a week for 30 weeks, the time allotted is still minimal, and many students still have negative perceptions of it.

The nonschool hours are in many respects better suited to efforts to renew physical activity, and in that light some have argued that after-school and youth programs should have a role. Such programs in fact offer significant, though largely unrealized, potential as bases for physical activity, as well as some important limitations. At present, the majority of after-school programs are not consciously and deliberately attentive to children's need to be physically active after a day at school. As adult-controlled, rule-bound institutional settings, after-school programs typically limit children's movement, choice, privacy, and territoriality. It is not uncommon to see after-school programs keeping children at desks for the majority of time they are at the program (in part because homework now takes up so much time). After-school programs often operate in physically constrained space, and between a third and a half are forced to rely on shared or borrowed space. Not least, as children move toward adolescence, they usually participate in after-school programs on a more irregular basis, that is, for fewer hours per week.

On the positive side, after-school programs take place during hours in which school-age children historically concentrated their physical activity. They have

flexible mandates and schedules and can more easily be nudged in new directions than can schools. They are sometimes sponsored by organizations—boys’ and girls’ clubs, YMCAs, municipal parks, and recreation departments—with a history of promoting physical activity. And after-school programs reach a growing number of low- and moderate-income children. Some 25 percent of these children ages 5 to 14 now participate in after-school programs (not including those focused on academic remediation) on a more or less regular basis (Halpern, 2003). Over the next decade participation rates should reach 40 percent or more. (Participation rates in programs serving high school-age children are much lower and patterns of participation are more irregular.)

At their best, after-school programs have certain qualities that make them good settings for children to explore physical activities of interest and to acquire skills, without the costs of excessive competition and comparison. The relatively small groups in after-school programs reduce the intensity of social comparison and give children opportunity to explore new activities and build skills at their own pace. After-school programs cope well with individual differences. They work well as gender-integrated settings. As noted, because their agenda is not as full as school’s, they afford time to pursue activities in depth, at least theoretically. Adults play supportive, nonjudgmental roles, children usually feel safe psychologically as well as physically, and there is a relatively low risk of failure.

Even programs with limited space can be a base for many kinds of physical activity, for example, dance and martial arts. In such activities, one can see the integration of a variety of skills and developing capacities—*aesthetic, kinesthetic, self-regulatory, physical strength, even narrative*. Martial arts seem particularly compelling, with their combination of discipline and self-regulation, carefully sequenced rankings that recognize growth in skill, and “special teacher-pupil relationship, based on formal rules of respect and obligation” (Musick, 1999, p. 36). As noted earlier, this particular form of movement can offer a variety of benefits to children and youth who have few other reasons to feel competent and who, by the time they reach early adolescence, may have experienced years of assaults on their sense of self, and sometimes real assaults on their bodies:

Moving the body opens you up, [because] anger and hurt live in your body. . . . There is time and space [here] to act out your feelings and actions you take with your body can have an effect. The physical training counterbalances feelings of powerlessness—imparting the sense that your body is for more than just for men (Musick, p. 37).

For older children and adolescents, the drop-in recreation center or youth program is a common site for sports activity, whether “pick-up” or organized. Three studies suggest that such programs offer both potential and some problems as bases for sports participation (Halpern et al., 2000; Wilson, White, & Fisher, 2001; Youth Sports Leadership Project, 2002). Sports activity in these programs is typically inclusive, accommodating of those with modest skill or ability, enjoyable, and not overly competitive. Participating youth have a sense of ownership of the space and activities. (For example, youth typically set their own rules.) At the same time, the majority of programs typically have male-oriented, if not male-dominated, cultures. Although girls are welcome, and some sports activity is coed, girls sometimes feel marginalized. They can use gyms or outdoor sports space as long as boys are not using them, but they tend to be pushed aside when boys want to play. As noted earlier, girls sometimes do not feel completely safe in sports-oriented recreation programs, and staff do not always intervene appropriately to stop gender-related problems. (It is particularly problematic that staff members sometimes belittle girls’ complaints of sexual harassment.)

### **Youth Sports**

Sports are, potentially, an important component of a broader approach to addressing the problem of physical inactivity. When conducted in a developmentally appropriate manner, sports have a number of qualities that make them attractive to children. They are strongly social; they are activities in which children are simultaneously working and playing, engaged for external reasons and for intrinsic ones; and they can work equally well as an organized physical activity and as an informal one, with little or no adult involvement.

Organized youth sports are ubiquitous in the United States and have long been a staple of suburban life. As Baker et al. (1997, p. 2) put it, youth sports “constitutes a substantial part of the cultural, social, organizational and physical landscape of childhood in this country.” Different sources put participation rates in youth sports at somewhere between 30 million and 40 million children and adolescents. The majority of traditional youth sports organizations have not yet figured out how to get organized in inner-city communities, where an earlier tradition of sports leagues has all but disappeared. That is, in part, because they are usually not aware of, or remain unconnected to, the local organizations that could help with this task—churches, after-school program

providers, community development corporations, settlements, and so forth. Nonetheless, while still uncommon, organized sports have begun to reappear in low-income urban neighborhoods, including the most disenfranchised ones. The activities are sponsored by a diverse array of mostly newer organizations—some sports focused, others not; some public, some private; some national, some local; some that work across sports, others that focus on one sport. They are based in schools, youth-serving organizations, settlement houses, and parks and recreation departments. And they take diverse forms.

Some initiatives in low-income communities tie sports to other goals, most typically academics, but also workforce preparation and delinquency prevention. The soccer organization D.C. Scores (which has grown into America Scores) involves school-based soccer programs, complemented by twice weekly writing workshops. Site coordinators, some of whom are teachers, are paid a \$1,500 stipend. High school students help out, and the local major league soccer team, D.C. United, provides some assistance. In Chicago's After-School Matters initiative, one component, Sports 37, prepares high school youth to serve as coaches and referees in local sports leagues and lifeguards in municipal pools. The goal is to give youth marketable skills—and to create an avenue for them to contribute to their community. Sports are also emerging as a focus for community organizing. In the San Francisco Bay area, a local organization called Team Up for Youth is sponsoring the Community Sports Organizing Project. In specific neighborhoods, a lead agency is selected and a local collaborative is formed, which develops a neighborhood plan to reinvigorate sports for children and adolescents.

**BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION IN YOUTH SPORTS.**<sup>11</sup> As with physical activity in general, there is a growing literature on the benefits of organized youth sports. As noted earlier, such participation helps children internalize a sense of skill, competence, and strength and incorporate physical activity into their emerging identities. Participation in youth sports especially may change the metric girls use to evaluate themselves, for example, with less reference to boys, media images, and other girls and more to their own growing physical strength

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<sup>11</sup> There are also risks associated with sports participation, and these are often ignored in discussions of youth sports. For instance, physically active girls, especially serious athletes, are at heightened risk of body image and eating disorders—caused by the media, coaches, parents, and peers, as well as by general self-consciousness (Kane & Larkin, 1997)—and of exercise-induced amenorrhea and bone loss.

and skill. Some sports, such as martial arts, appear to be a vehicle for strengthening self-regulatory capacities in children.

Experience with sports in middle childhood seems to be a helpful bridge to sports participation in adolescence, connecting children to a peer group that will tend to be more involved with sports in high school. (Participation in sports has been noted to “provide a sense of affiliation and belonging for young people at a time of life prone to alienation”; Baker et al., 1997, p. 6.) For high school students, the structure, regularity, and even time commitment entailed in sports participation seem to have a disciplining effect on participants’ use of time. There is even speculation that participation in sports may dampen smoking in participating youth, preventing it from becoming a habit.

It is important to note that many of the benefits noted above depend on how sports are organized and implemented. Children who are verbally abused by coaches may not develop a sense of physical competence and will quickly lose motivation to persist with a sport, the key to building skill. It is also important to avoid simplistic claims for the role of sports in addressing academic and social problems. In a longitudinal study of a sample of middle- and working-class boys, for example, Larson (1994) found that sports participation had no influence on delinquency during the middle school years—the two in fact coexisted—but did have some influence in high school. He found that sports do “integrate adolescents into a social world” with a coherent set of norms, but they tend to further integrate those who are already somewhat integrated into that world (p.60). The author concluded more generally that

there is no indication that participation in sports is successful in the mission of promoting generalized prosocial behavior—or specifically, suppressing antisocial behavior. This may not be surprising, given that the worldview of sports does not encourage identification with a single social whole but rather separates society into “us” and “them.” Other activities with less emphasis on competition appear to be more successful in this pro-social mission (p. 53).

**SPORTS-RELATED ISSUES.** If and as youth sports grow in low-income communities, it will be important to attend to a variety of concerns and challenges, some inherent, some related to the larger cultural context for sports in the United States. The central challenge is to keep organized sports developmentally appropriate, maintaining a balance between play and work, fun and seriousness. Adults sometimes get upset at children’s tendency to incorporate play, fool-



ing around, and socializing into their sports activity, forgetting or failing to realize the developmental appropriateness of such behavior. There has been a tendency, too, for the adults involved to forget that children are children and instead to expect them “to think and play as adults” (Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997).<sup>12</sup> Yet when children are asked why they participate in sports programs and what they want out of them, the first answer is having fun, then building skills, being with friends, becoming fit, and experiencing success. Children do get a sense of pride from persevering, but it can be developmentally inappropriate at times to push them to persevere. For older children and adolescents, there is sometimes a tension between skill building, which requires practice, persistence, and a strong goal orientation, and participation in sports as one way of experimenting with identity.

To the present, youth sports programs serving low-income children have reflected a good balance, being low-key and participatory in orientation and avoiding the competitive excesses that have become characteristic of organized sports for more advantaged children and youth. Youth sports organizations have also been sensitive to children’s and adolescents’ varying predispositions with respect to organized sports (i.e., the fact that organized sports are not for everyone). The key will be to maintain this child-centered orientation. The goal of widespread participation in sports leagues and programs serving low-income children clashes with a cultural trend toward earlier and earlier “professionalization” and competition in the larger youth sports world.

The fact that youth sports sometimes require parental support, encouragement, and involvement can be an issue in communities in which such activities may be a relatively low priority. In the D.C. Scores program, it is reported that parents “rarely attend games or indicate their availability to chaperone outings or away games” (Baker et al., 1997, p. 50), although the reasons are not stated. To the extent that a community depends on volunteers to organize and sustain sports activities for children, this requires a community-specific design, sensitive to family pressures and structures. There may also be some misapprehension about what it takes financially to support children’s participation in sports. When asked about obstacles to children’s participation, low-income parents often mention lack of money for equipment and transportation. While these can

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<sup>12</sup> Of even greater concern, Baker et al. (1997, p. 12) reported that 45 percent of young athletes have been “verbally abused” by coaches.

be real obstacles, parents' understanding of the money needed for children to participate in specific sports is sometimes very exaggerated (Cohen, 2000). When there are real obstacles, often they are manageable, with commercial and nonprofit sources of funds to help out.

More generally, we increasingly assume that children's sports have to be organized and supervised by adults to be beneficial to children. Organized youth sports have been described as "rational recreation" and "serious leisure"—even as a "career" for some children. We have to ask, Beneficial in what sense, from whose perspective? Moreover, there is some reason to worry about organized sports pushing aside the remnants of informal sports, although this applies more to boys than to girls. Peer-oriented sports activity is structured and experienced differently than adult-led sports activity. As Mahoney (1999, p. 201) noted,

On a playground you hear kids laugh, shout and show all the signs of pure play or fun. But on a soccer field or baseball diamond in other youth sports leagues, you rarely hear the sounds of laughter. Rather you hear coaches barking out orders and parents exhorting their children to win.

Further, sponsors have always attached instrumental aims to programs and activities for low-income children. As Cottle (1993), Kozol (2000), and others have argued, low-income children have surprisingly little opportunity simply to have fun, a measure of joy in their daily and weekly lives.

### **Reclaiming and Redesigning Public Space for Play and Recreation**

Moore (1986) argues that a strong and rich set of childhood memories of particular places, their qualities and associated experiences, is an important foundation for adulthood. It produces a store of attachments and roots community in a sense of place. While such memories can be generated by institutional settings or organized sports leagues, they are most likely to be generated by the kinds of informal, unstructured play experiences that have all but disappeared from low-income children's lives. Having children and youth out and about in the community—visible, playing games and sports—is not just healthy for children themselves; it is an important contributor to the quality of life in the community. As Cook (n.d., p. 2) wrote, "When people use space they make it a place . . . people infuse space with meaning by playing games in alleyways, gathering in school yards and parks." Inner-city children and youth might be less afraid of public spaces if they were out together, using them for a collective purpose

such as sports. Having children out and about contributes to adults' own sense of investment in the community. (Jacobs, 1961, noted that having children out on the streets brought adults out to watch, a kind of multiplier effect.)

Since children and adolescents cannot effectively compete with adults for public space, they need to be afforded some. Where feasible, older children, adolescents, and parents should have a role in decisions about the use and design of public spaces. And a core principle of municipal urban development policies and community development initiatives should be that a healthy community needs children outside, in public spaces, playing games and sports.

There continue to be many small-scale efforts to claim or reclaim land for public purposes, led by community development corporations and land use groups. These have included efforts to build or refurbish playgrounds, to create community gardens, and to establish pocket parks. For example, in New York City the Trust for Public Land convinced the city to transfer land held by the tax department to the parks department for development as recreation space, with the proviso that if the local community did not use it well, it would be transferred back. Community groups, such as the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Boston, have persuaded local authorities to grant them eminent domain over vacant land. These efforts have yielded both real gains and a number of cautionary lessons. One lesson from playground and community garden development work is that it is much harder to protect and maintain such spaces in low-income neighborhoods than to get them built.

### **Looking to Other Countries**

There are potentially useful ideas from other countries about promoting physical activity, if we take them with a grain of salt. First it should be noted that the apparent decline in children's physical activity, and the attendant worry about it, are not unique to the United States. Many of the economic and cultural forces at work here are global in nature. As in the United States, health authorities in Europe are beginning to respond with specific initiatives. For instance, the author came across a Web site describing a citywide initiative in Sheffield, England, called Active Sheffield, an effort led by local health authorities to mobilize a variety of institutions to promote physical activity across age levels. But Europe also differs from the United States in ways that are worth analyzing.

European countries have been more attentive to the developmental needs of children and adolescents in their urban planning efforts than has the United

States. Urban planning in Europe has been influenced to some extent by a group of influential social geographers and sociologists concerned with childhood who have written extensively about the effects of environmental arrangements on children and on children's need for social and physical space (see, e.g., James et al., 1998). Europeans have been more sensitive to—or at least less ambivalent about—the importance of play in childhood and have viewed a certain degree of riskiness “as important to [child] development” (Ennew, 1994, p. 136). Local school systems in France and other countries have incorporated long periods of unstructured play into the school day, recognizing children's need to alternate academic activity with physical activity.

Playground design in Europe tends to be more creative and developmentally appropriate than in the United States, where playgrounds, it is said, are designed primarily by insurance companies. The “adventure playground,” which originated in Denmark and was tried only briefly in the United States before it disappeared, is worth reconsidering (Cooper, 1974). It is basically a large play area, preferably one in which the ground is not asphalt, and it contains irregular features. There is no fixed equipment in the playground; a variety of building/construction/play materials are left for children, who are free to build, construct, dig, plant, destroy, climb, tunnel, hide, redirect water, and the like. Such playgrounds are designed to be supervised, but with the adults staying in the background, not shaping children's play activities.<sup>13</sup>

Europeans have, finally, more quickly recognized the dangers inherent in the commercialization and professionalization of sports and have begun wrestling with the attendant issues. Anderson (2001), for instance, described a municipal law in Copenhagen reserving “prime time” (4 p.m. to 8 p.m.) in all city sports facilities for children's activities.

### **A Research Agenda**

As valuable as the medical, public health, and exercise science communities are to the challenge of understanding and responding to physical inactivity, it is critical to engage researchers from disciplines such as child development, sociology,

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<sup>13</sup> The adventure playground is an example of an influential environmental design theory posited by the geographer Simon Nicholson. According to the theory of loose parts, “In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of [manipulable] variables in it” (Nicholson, 1974, p. 223). Kennedy (1991, p. 45) puts it more directly: Children need environments that convince them that the world is not “a finished product.”

urban planning, and geography. My admittedly limited look at the literature points to a number of questions bearing attention from a broad, cross-disciplinary research community. How do children learn to become physically inactive? Does failure to develop physical skills—“movement literacy”—earlier in life make it more difficult to acquire such skills later? Are children losing the “play spirit” earlier or do they seek ways to play regardless? Have children really lost the ability—as some claim—to design and carry out their own games, with adult assistance? How do children from particular cultural groups view physical activity and sports? What is the meaning—if any—of the link between low levels of parental education and lack of physical activity in children and adolescents? How do the spaces to which we direct children and youth affect their perspective on specific developmental and social issues, for example, the extent to which children and adolescents are valued as important member of society? How do the physical environments and community features prevalent in most low-income urban communities shape outdoor physical activity and play?

## **Conclusions**

For many of today’s older adults, the memories of unorganized outdoor play—and the world they created for themselves—are among the most vivid memories carried into and through adulthood. In 2005 we nonetheless have to address a problem that was unthinkable 40 or 50 years ago. Moreover, when it comes to children’s physical inactivity, the present creates the future—not just of a worsening epidemic of adult obesity, chronic disease, and musculoskeletal pain, but of a new generation of parents who will be poor role models of physical health, vitality, and activity for their children.

That said, I would argue that we have to think of physical activity not as something discrete, a set of behaviors to promote through an intervention program or module added to a health education curriculum, but as part and parcel of our societal arrangements for low- and moderate-income children. To start with, the underpinnings and attributes of health and physical activity interact and reinforce each other. Children and adolescents are more likely to be physically active when they are healthy; being healthy requires living in healthful circumstances, with safe, decent physical surroundings, minimal environmental pollution, access to affordable sources of healthy food and to decent-quality primary medical care, opportunity to observe healthy adults behaving in healthy ways, having a sense that society cares about their health and well-being, and so forth.

We have to broaden our view of and understanding of health in American society. That view is currently shaped by a focus on preventing and addressing specific diseases, rather than on promoting healthy conditions and lives. Pediatricians, for instance, rarely ask about children's physical activity patterns (or eating habits) in well-child visits, unless a child is obviously obese. Even when health is addressed in a broad way, its economic and political dimensions are neglected. A widely cited report on the problem of physical inactivity among children (U.S. Department of Education, 2000) makes no mention of the role of business, the mass media, disinvestment in low-income neighborhoods, environmental degradation, and other broad factors as causes of this critical public health problem.

We have to attend to the fact that the temporal, spatial, and organizational arrangements that adults create for children also have a direct effect on physical activity. We have created a "tightly organized world for children" (Johnson, 1998, p. A16), but that organization seems to derive from adults' needs, not children's. Childhood is defined not only by greater supervision of children and adolescents by nonfamilial adults, but also by less and less opportunity for play, self-directed activity, and what Egoscue (1998, p. A29) described as "opportunities for unstructured, spontaneous motion." As Shamgar-Handelman (1994, p. 52) argued, "Not only do children not control their own lives, but they are asked and/or persuaded . . . to invest their own resources—physical strength, intellectual capacity, emotional power—in goals not of their choice."

It is important to remember that the patterns of behavior we sometimes worry about in children and adolescents are suited to their developmental period. For physical activity to work for children, they need a mixture of structure and freedom; for children to be inventive and engaged, they need some control. In designing activities and environments it will be important for adults to attend to what motivates younger versus older children, and boys versus girls, to try out and persist with activities, and, conversely, to stop trying. We cannot forget the social goal of creating social and physical arrangements that allow children and adolescents to experience some of the simple joy of unrestricted play and physical activity—of climbing, hiding, building, and tearing apart.

We need to create forums for debate about how we organize, promote, and view sports. In particular, we have to debate whether we want to continue to let market interests have such a powerful influence in sports. Adults may have something to learn by the ways in which children participate in sports, with

their motivation to have fun and their tendency to be playful and social. As Cook (2001) noted, when children participate in sports, they “disrupt the basic distinctions produced in and by competition,” that is, the production of winners and losers, the sense of combat. Indeed, the competitive behavior of coaches and parents can seem a moral transgression. On the other hand, children’s sports have become intertwined with our societal propensity toward violence and aggression in adult sports, and these are difficult for children and adolescents to sort out on their own.

As with related social needs, there is an enormous shortfall in public resources going to address the causes of inactivity in children. The problem of physical inactivity is, nonetheless, not just about lack of money—it is not even primarily about money. It is about power, priorities, values, the hegemony of the marketplace, the fact that childhood is now consumed by consumption itself. Yet money is needed—for after-school and youth programs, both of which are severely underfunded institutions; for capital improvement of urban parks and playgrounds, including school playgrounds; to pay for skilled instructors; to clean up the physical environment of low-income neighborhoods; and for a dozen other things.

Where might significant new funding for supporting physical activity, including but not limited to youth sports, come from? For the moment, public funding appears unlikely. Some observers view the enormous profits earned by the professional sports industry (teams, individual athletes, apparel and equipment makers, media companies) as a potential source of funding for youth sports in low-income communities. Baker et al. (1997, p. 8) wrote that

the size of these profits—coupled with the fact that they are earned by companies, teams and individuals in highly visible industries concerned about maintaining a positive public image—bodes well for efforts aimed at plowing some of these profits back into the lives of youth.

If history is a guide, such funding—a combination of corporate welfare and voluntary sin tax—would be unreliable and come with a variety of strings attached. Some have argued for taxing tickets sold at professional sporting events or taxing sales products such as liquor or soda. There is modest logic to this position as well. To the extent that physical activity is best thought about (and promoted) as a by-product of other activities, such as performing arts, one could hope for a return from investments in such activities. But they are under assault as well. In the past, national foundations have stepped in to address—

and make a national issue of—problems affecting vulnerable children, families, and communities. Perhaps that is what we can hope for with respect to physical activity, especially if this problem is understood in appropriately complex terms.

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