



Promoting Unstructured Free Play in Your Community: A Resource Manual



COMMUNITY HEALTH &
THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT



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Overview

This manual has been designed to be used as a tool to implement an **unstructured free play program** in your community. In this manual you will find an introduction to unstructured free play, steps to establish an unstructured free play program in your community, and a wide variety of games and activities.

What is unstructured free play?

- Activities and games that are not heavily structured or supervised¹
- Examples include biking, walking, tag, skipping or playing at the park

The **objective** of an unstructured free play program in your community would be to familiarize children and youth with enjoyable, unstructured free play games and activities. The program is designed for children and youth of all sociodemographic backgrounds to have the opportunity to play, engage in physical activity, and have fun with one another regardless of who has the best or most expensive equipment.

The premise is that once children and youth are introduced to fun, unstructured free play games and activities, they will be eager to initiate these activities during their own free time. It is anticipated that this will lead to an increase in overall activity levels, which will improve the physical health of young people and ultimately reduce the incidence of overweight and obesity.

Why is it Important to Encourage Unstructured Free Play

Ninety percent of Canadian children and youth are not getting the recommended daily amount of physical activity.² Rates of overweight and obesity among children and youth are rising considerably and this is a major concern because of the risks for chronic diseases and premature death.³ There is evidence to support that the increase in rate of overweight and obesity among children and youth is correlated to low levels of physical activity.^{4,5,6} One way to increase the total physical activity levels in children and youth is to promote unstructured free play.

¹ Veitch J, Salmon J, Ball K. Children's active free play in local neighborhoods: a behavioral mapping study. *Health Education Research*, 2008;23(5):870-879.

² Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute. Physical activity among Canadians: the current situation. 2005. Retrieved August 27, 2010 from http://www.cflri.ca/eng/statistics/surveys/documents/pam2005_sec1.pdf

³ World Health Organization. (n.d.). Obesity and overweight. Retrieved August 27, 2010 from: <http://www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/publications/facts/obesity/en/>

⁴ Sothorn MS. Obesity prevention in children: physical activity and nutrition. *Nutrition*, 2004;20:704-708.

⁵ Tremblay MS, Willms JD. Is the Canadian childhood obesity epidemic related to physical inactivity? *International Journal of Obesity*, 2003;27:1100-1105.

⁶ Young DR, Felton GM, Grieser M, Elder JP, Johnson C, Lee JS, Kubik MY. Policies and opportunities for physical activity in middle school environments. *Journal of School Health*, 2007;77(1):41-47.



The amount of time that children and youth are spending engaged in unstructured free play is declining. Safety concerns within neighborhoods are causing parents to limit the amount of time that they let their children play outdoors, where most unstructured free play takes place.^{1,7} Another factor that is limiting unstructured free play is the emphasis on structured activities, such as school and organized sports, and the shift toward more heavily scheduled lifestyles.⁷ These factors have contributed to a decreased knowledge amongst children and youth of how to engage in unstructured free play during their spare time.

Benefits of unstructured free play:

- it contributes significantly to overall physical activity levels,
- it helps children and youth to fully develop cognitively and socially,
- it motivates and encourages children and youth to be active,
- it provides a healthy and active alternative to more sedentary activities such as playing computer games or watching television,
- it is an inexpensive way for children and youth to participate in physical activity, and
- it emphasizes overall physical health and well being of children and youth instead of placing emphasis on exercise for weight loss.⁶

Steps for Success: How to Implement an Unstructured Free Play Program in Your Community

This section outlines the steps that your community will need to take in order to establish a successful unstructured free play program.

Step One: Identify a local social agency, organization or municipal department to house the unstructured free play program.

The unstructured free play program in your community will require a community agency or organization to orchestrate some administrative tasks of the program, offer support and guidance, provide a working space for the Youth Leaders when they are not in the parks as well as handle the payroll for Youth Leaders. If possible, it would be of great benefit to partner with a number of different relevant community organizations to establish the program in your community.

⁷ Ginsburg KR. The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bonds. *Pediatrics*, 2007;119:182-191.



Step Two: Develop a budget.

Once the community partners are on board with the Program, a budget must be developed. Please see *Appendix A* for a sample budget.

Step Three: Employ suitable Youth Leaders to carry out the Program

The Youth Leaders will develop games, schedules and posters to distribute within the community. The Youth Leaders will also implement the games and be present at all play sessions with children and youth. It is recommended to have one Youth Leader assume a supervisory role and another Youth Leader provide support. The supervisory Youth Leader should be very mature, motivated, responsible, and over the age of 18. One of the best ways to find suitable supervisory Youth Leaders for your community's unstructured free play program would be to contact students at local universities or colleges.

The second Youth Leader would provide support to the supervisory Youth Leader and would ideally be a university or college student (or very mature high school student). The Youth Leaders must be highly capable of working with children and have strong leadership skills. For safety reasons, it is highly recommended that Youth Leaders have current First Aid and CPR training. Youth Leaders should also be required to obtain a Police Information Check or Criminal Record Check through the local police service or RCMP detachment.

Step Four: Select parks in your area that could host the unstructured free play program

Parks with soft, grassy areas as well as a flat, hard surface such as tarmac or concrete would be most appropriate for your community's unstructured free play program. Parks do not need playground equipment (such as slides, climbers, or swings), but this type of equipment would certainly be an asset to your program. The parks should be in locations that parents and children can access easily and safely. A key to selecting the park that will host the unstructured free play program is to understand where in the community the majority of children and youth live. It may be helpful to contact your local municipality to get community statistics with this information. This would provide valuable information on which parks are most frequently visited.

What parks are the best for the program?

Through experience, newer, well-maintained parks are more attractive to children and youth than older, run-down parks.

Where are good locations to go during inclement weather?

On rainy days, the program could still run if moved indoors. One suggestion is to connect with local recreation organizations or schools to see if a space could be provided in-kind or rented throughout the summer to house the program on rainy days.



Step Five: Research and develop games and activities

Supplementary to this document is a comprehensive list of enjoyable games that Youth Leaders could introduce to children and youth that participate in your community's unstructured free play program (Document title: *Promoting Unstructured Free Play in your Community: Games Manual*). These games and activities are organized by activity type and age group so that they are easy to find. In order for the program to be a success in your community, it is recommended that the Youth Leaders ensure that the games and activities suit the children and youth present at park sessions. This could be done through further research of games and activities or by modifying those activities included in the appendix of this manual.

Step Six: Develop a schedule of where the unstructured free play program will run throughout the summer (or winter) months

Once the parks in your community that would be suitable for the unstructured free play program have been identified, the Youth Leaders will create a schedule of where the program will run throughout the summer (or winter) months. The type of schedule will depend on the dynamics of your community and the number of parks available to use for the program.

Step Seven: Provide the Youth Leader with a monetary budget to acquire the minimal supplies and equipment for games and advertising

The equipment required to establish an unstructured free play program in your community is minimal (and not required, but would be an asset). Examples of equipment and supplies that would greatly benefit the program might include skipping ropes, balls, paper, and markers. A cost effective way to build a kit of supplies and equipment is to ask local elementary and junior high schools to borrow their equipment for the summer months. Although supplies and equipment are not required for many of the games and activities, having a few small items available would help to ensure that a variety of games could be played during the park sessions. In addition, funding may be required to advertise the unstructured free play program to the children, youth, and parents in your community, but local organizations may be able to advertise the program for free (i.e. on bulletin boards, etc.).



Step Eight: Advertise the unstructured free play program to members of your community

One of the keys to a successful unstructured free play program is effective communication with children, youth, and parents. An excellent way to advertise the program would be through visits to local elementary and junior high schools. It would be beneficial to have schedules prepared to hand out to the children, youth, teachers, and parents at these school visits. Visiting local schools would give the Youth Leaders a chance to introduce themselves to children and youth, and this would increase the likelihood that many would participate in park sessions. Familiarizing the children and youth with the types of games they would play at the unstructured free play program sessions would help in motivating them to participate in the program.

Distributing posters with information about the Program and monthly schedules is another great way to make your community aware of the unstructured free play program. Affixing posters to bulletin boards around your community (such as at recreation centers, schools, libraries, restaurants, and grocery stores) will help to familiarize community members with the program. Advertising through local newspapers, newsletters, and radio stations is another effective way to inform members of your community about the unstructured free play program. *Appendix B* provides a sample community advertisement.

Step Nine: PLAY!

Once all the necessary steps have been undertaken, the Youth Leaders will head out to the park to play with local children, youth and families.



Tip for Success: Start Small

One of the first steps that could be explored before attempting to fully implement an unstructured free play program in your community would be to partner with local high schools. High school students could be provided an opportunity to participate in a Special Projects course, offered through their physical education or leadership class, where they would design games to teach and execute with elementary and junior high school students. This would introduce children and youth to various unstructured free play games while providing valuable leadership experience for the students in the course. It would motivate children to engage in unstructured free play in their spare time as well as participate in the program that will be established in your community. For more information, please get in touch with your local high school or school board to discuss partnership opportunities.

Supporting and Constraining Factors

Supporting Factors

Your community likely has many factors in place that would greatly support the implementation of an unstructured free play program. Some examples of supports include:

- Local elementary and junior high school teachers and principals to provide assistance in advertising to children and parents;
- Parents that are interested in supporting an unstructured free play program in your community in order to promote physical activity and healthy living among children and youth;
- Local organizations (such as recreation centers) to provide the administrative support and guidance required by the Youth Leaders;
- Town Councillors or representatives interested in promoting healthy lifestyles in their community to provide support for obtaining required funding;
- Large, open playing spaces and parks that would be appropriate to hold the unstructured free play program during the summer (or winter);
- Enthusiastic and motivated children and youth in your community that would like to get out and participate in this fun Program!

Constraining Factors and Solutions for Program Start-Up

The objective of an unstructured free play program is to provide communities with the support that they need to encourage unstructured free play among children and youth. *Table 1* below outlines some factors that might constrain the implementation of a successful unstructured free play program in your community. Also outlined are possible solutions to these factors that will assist in the establishment of your community's Program.



Table 1: Possible Constraining Factors and Solutions to Overcome Constraint

Possible Constraining Factor	Solutions to Overcome the Constraint
<p>There is not enough money in our community to implement an unstructured free play program</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ It is possible to apply for Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP) funding from the Government of Alberta to provide a salary for the Youth Leader(s) in your community while trying to work an unstructured free play program into your community's budget for future sustainability. For more information, visit: http://employment.alberta.ca/CES/3158.html ▪ The cost of an unstructured free play program is incredibly low. Most of the games simply require a playing area or field and minimal or no materials. One suggestion is to ask local elementary and junior high schools to borrow their equipment over the summer months. This is a cost effective way to build up the unstructured free play materials for your community. ▪ There is the potential that the Youth Leaders could be hired on a volunteer basis. ▪ Check with local universities and colleges as many leadership, education and physical activity diploma and degree programs require practicum components and are frequently searching for community-based projects for students.
<p>It will be too difficult to find a dedicated, reliable, suitable Youth Leader in our community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Excellent places to find a Youth Leader are local universities and colleges. One suggestion is to advertise to students in certain faculties through announcements, emails, or informational flyers. ▪ Students from your municipality attending universities or colleges outside of your community may be interested in working in their hometowns during the summer months.
<p>The children and youth in our community will not show any interest in an unstructured free play program; they enjoy their usual summer activities (watching TV, playing video games, etc.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The premise of an unstructured free play program is to introduce unstructured activities to children and youth and for them to be motivated to engage in these activities during their own spare time. The goal is that once children learn how to spend their free time engaged in unstructured free play, they will prefer to spend future free time participating in these types of activities. This will lead to an improvement in overall physical health.



Example of an Unstructured Free Play Program in Action: St. Paul MOVES!



Overview of the St. Paul MOVES! Program

St. Paul MOVES! (Motivation, Opportunity, Variety, Enjoy, Success) is part of a larger project within the University of Alberta's Centre for Health Promotion Studies called Community Health and the Built Environment (CHBE). The idea for St. Paul MOVES! emerged during a meeting with researchers and town representatives while attempting to determine the type of health intervention program that would be most beneficial to the Town of St. Paul, Alberta. Community partners were concerned about decreasing levels of physical activity amongst children and youth. In addition, community representatives suggested that they "no longer saw children playing games out on the street anymore". The name of the St. Paul MOVES! was created by the community representatives to communicate the goals of their program to the community in a fun and catchy way.

The community working group in St. Paul determined that the implementation of an unstructured free play program would be one of the best ways to promote physical activity and healthier living among the children, youth and families of the community. The goal of St. Paul MOVES! was to introduce children and youth to enjoyable, unstructured free play games and activities in order to motivate them to engage in such games and activities during their own free time. The primary goal of this project was not to reduce the incidence of overweight and obesity among the children and youth of St. Paul, but to motivate children and youth to lead healthier, more active lives.

During the pilot stage of this project in early 2009, high school students from two local school boards (St. Paul Education Regional Division and East Central Francophone Education Region) were offered an opportunity to develop and organize enjoyable unstructured free play activities for elementary students through a Special Projects course. As part of this Special Projects course, high school students visited elementary schools and implemented the unstructured free play activities into the daily school routines of elementary students.



To continue the progress initiated by the Special Projects course for high school students, two of these students were hired as Youth Leaders through a partnership with a local community organization (Community Futures) for July and August 2009 to teach games to children and youth and play these games with them at a local park. To build off of the momentum of the 2009 program, in April 2010, a university student was hired as a Youth Leader to research and develop more games and activities to play with children and youth in local parks.

Throughout the month of June the Youth Leader visited local elementary schools and introduced the games that she had developed. When the school year ended in late June, a high school student was hired as an additional Youth Leader. The Youth Leaders developed a schedule of the dates and times that they would be present in the parks. Different parks within the Town of St. Paul were visited during the summer. Youth Leaders visited one park in the mornings and another in the afternoons.

Bulletins were published in the local newspaper weekly to inform children and parents about which parks the Youth Leaders would be in for the following week. The Youth Leaders created posters about the program and affixed them to bulletin boards at various locations (such as grocery stores, restaurants, the town office and recreation centre) around the town of St. Paul. Community Futures Lakeland provided an office space and guidance for the Youth Leaders from April to August 2010. This donation of space and resources was critical to the success of St. Paul MOVES!.

Throughout the months of July and August, the Youth Leaders began their scheduled sessions at local playgrounds. Between twenty-five and thirty children participated in the program each week. The majority of participants would attend the park sessions more than once. Throughout the summer, the Boys and Girls Club joined in with the St. Paul MOVES! park sessions two to three times a week. In the early weeks of the program, Youth Leaders were more involved with teaching children the unstructured free play games and activities and leading them. Although seemingly structured, this step was necessary to familiarize children and youth with enjoyable, unstructured free play games and activities. Toward the end of the summer, the children and youth present at the park sessions were engaging in unstructured free play activities with few prompts from the Youth Leaders. In addition, many children and youth were creating their own games to play with one another.

The community partners anecdotally suggested that the program was a huge success as they saw more children and youth engaging in unstructured free play activities and previously underutilized park spaces were being used by the children and youth of St. Paul.



Difficulties Encountered with St. Paul MOVES!

Table 2 below, presents some of the major difficulties encountered by the St. Paul MOVES! Program and suggested steps to work around the difficulties in the future.

Table 2: Potential Difficulties and Possible Solutions

Difficulty Experienced	Possible Solutions or Suggestions
<p>Parents began to use the program as a child care service (dropping children off and not remaining at the park).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Encourage family participation within the program. The idea behind St. Paul MOVES! is to encourage children and youth to come out to park sessions to learn how to play unstructured free play activities and games, but also for parents to be present and participate. The program is not set up to be a child care service, but rather a program to help children and youth to learn more unstructured free play activities and games that they can engage in during their spare time. ▪ One way to avoid this problem could be to establish a family challenge, where children and parents receive points for participation in park sessions. The goal could be for families to accumulate as many of these points as possible and a prize could be awarded to the winning families. St. Paul MOVES! is supposed to be accessible by everyone (economically and physically), so it would be a good idea to work with members of the community to try to come up with solutions to the problem of parents using the program as a child care service.
<p>Few youth over the age of 15 came out to park sessions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Youth of high school age may not be interested in participating in activities with younger children. One suggestion would be to have one Youth Leader prepare and play games with the older children and youth present, and another Youth Leader prepare and play games with the younger children. This would allow for children and youth of all ages to be involved in St. Paul MOVES! park sessions. As the program builds momentum in the community, there would be potential for the age groups to be integrated.
<p>On rainy days, children and youth could not participate in the park sessions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ As mentioned in the "Steps for Success" section, above, a solution to this problem could be to partner with organizations that would be willing to donate an indoor play space to use on rainy days. Examples of such play spaces could be school gymnasiums or classrooms, recreation centre facilities, or unoccupied community halls.



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Appendix A: Sample Budget

One University Student Youth Leader (16 weeks, 40 hours/week at \$12.00 per hour)

\$6,708.00 Gross
\$258.00 Vacation Pay
\$274.00 CPP
\$162.47 EI
Total Cost \$7,402.77

One High School Student (8 weeks, 40 hours/week at \$10.00 per hour)

\$2,254.00 Gross
\$98.00 Vacation Pay
\$0.00 CPP
\$67.71 EI
Total Cost \$2,713.71

Advertising and Game Supplies

Total Cost \$1,500

Total cost to run the program: \$ 11,616.48

Funding Grant (Summer Temporary Employment Program) -\$2,695.00

Actual Cost for Two Students \$8,921.48



Appendix B: Sample Advertisement

Below is an example of a poster that could be used to advertise the program within your community.

Attention all Parents, Children, and Youth of [name of your community]:

This summer, our community is implementing a program to encourage our children and youth to engage in unstructured free play activities. Starting in July, two Youth Leaders will be present at each park location to play unstructured free play activities with children and youth. The objective is for children to learn new games and activities that they could play in their free time to increase physical activity levels and enhance overall health. If you have any questions about this program, please call: ____-____-____

July 2011

Monday		Tuesday		Wednesday		Thursday		Friday	
9 -11am	2-4pm	9 -11am	2-4pm	9 -11am	2-4pm	9 -11am	2-4pm	9 -11am	2-4pm
								Oak Park	Pine Park
4		5		6		7		8	
Oak Park	Birch Park	Spruce Park	Birch Park	Oak Park	Pine Park	Oak Park	Pine Park	Pine Park	Spruce Park
11		12		13		14		15	
Spruce Park	Birch Park	Oak Park	Pine Park	Oak Park	Pine Park	Pine Park	Spruce Park	Oak Park	Birch Park
18		19		20		21		22	
Oak Park	Birch Park	Spruce Park	Birch Park	Oak Park	Oak Park	Birch Park	Spruce Park	Birch Park	Oak Park
25		26		27		28		29	
Spruce Park	Oak Park	Birch Park	Spruce Park	Birch Park	Oak Park	Pine Park	Oak Park	Pine Park	Spruce Park

Park Addresses

Pine Park
2 Pine Street

Oak Park
11 Oak Street

Spruce Park
10th Street and 3rd Avenue

Birch Park
3 Birch Boulevard

