



WellSpring

Sharing physical activity knowledge

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Active Living Research:

Building evidence for action

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Introduction

Since 2001, Active Living Research (ALR) has been at the forefront of building evidence on how to create communities that increase opportunities for physical activity in the United States. Over the last 17 years, and in collaboration with researchers and practitioners from over 30 distinct disciplines involved in 260 studies funded by ALR, we have learned a lot. Not only have we learned about the benefits of communities designed to increase opportunities for physical activity and health, but also about the importance of developing long-term partnerships that can help to communicate research for greater impact.

The Alberta Centre for Active Living (ACAL) shares a similar goal to ensure evidence is effectively communicated to inform policy debates and guide effective solutions. Over the years, both ALR and ACAL have reviewed and synthesized thousands of studies to guide the work of foundations, city planners, developers, government departments at all levels, school systems, employers, and advocates. These efforts have led to an increased awareness about the importance of designing places and policies that help people of all ages incorporate physical activity into daily routines.

As the evidence grows, it has become clear that there are multiple benefits to active living that appeal to many different stakeholders. A critical step to communicating these benefits is to develop resources that translate the key findings into sound bites that will resonate with the target audience.

Active Living Research resources

One of our main funding priorities was to award research grants that produced actionable evidence that policy-makers and practitioners could use to promote change in their communities. Researchers were required to engage relevant stakeholders in defining research needs and dissemination channels. Here are some examples of resources that have been developed with support from ALR, which could be used in your own work:

S U M M A R Y

Active Living Research is an inter-disciplinary team with internationally-recognized expertise and strong connections in public health, transportation, planning, parks & recreation, school activity programs, behavioural science, and obesity prevention.

Their goal is to support, share, and put into practice research that can promote daily physical activity for children and families across the world.

Translation products

Our website features reports and guides to present data in an easy-to-read and visually engaging format for non-scientists. Following are some examples that have been widely shared through strategic partnerships with prominent companies and organizations.

Designed to Move: Active Cities

Although daily physical activity is central to our work, it is not the main priority for some of the disciplines we work with. It is important to understand that creating activity-friendly environments can do more than get people moving. For example, changing zoning codes to favour mixed-use development that encourages walking is also likely to enhance property values and reduce carbon emissions.

To better understand these co-benefits, ALR explored a wide range of literature and summarized the evidence on the co-benefits of activity-friendly environments.¹ An extensive, but non-systematic, review of scientific and “gray” literature indicated that designing and creating parks, communities, transportation systems, schools, and buildings that make physical activity attractive and convenient is also likely to produce a wide range of additional benefits. These co-benefits are likely to appeal to decision-makers in numerous sectors that could help in the creation and sustainability of activity-friendly communities.

The findings from this literature review are featured in *Designed to Move: Active Cities*,² which is a guide developed by Nike for city leaders. It is a blueprint to transform any city into an active city and includes practical guidance, sample metrics, and inspirational examples from around the world. A great resource that can appeal to multiple stakeholders, the report translates evidence with infographics and bulleted key findings on five co-benefits: economic, safety, environmental, physical/mental health, and social benefits (Figure 1).

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Figure 1. Designed to Move: A Physical Activity Action Agenda.™ ©Nike, Inc. (2012, 2013).

Eight Ways Parks Improve Your Health

Trust for Public Land Fitness Zones® are special areas of public parks set aside for free outdoor exercise equipment. ALR funded a research translation project to share findings from an evaluation of Fitness Zones,³ comprehensive park and playground renovations, and the importance of parks and recreational facilities to physical activity in general. Learn about eight ways that parks improve our health through a fun, 2-minute animated video and a free full-color booklet featuring the latest research on the connection between parks and health.⁴ Due to high demand for the Eight Ways Parks Improve Your Health print brochure, it was also transformed into a digital e-book with links to additional articles, reports and videos. The Trust for Public Land developed these materials that translate the scientific evidence to encourage public and private sector investments in parks and play spaces.

Research briefs and syntheses

Research briefs are short, accessible versions of the material presented in academic journals, with actionable recommendations for policy-makers, practitioners, and advocates to use in their work. More than 40 publications summarize the latest evidence on a wide variety of active living topics from many fields, including health, planning, education, transportation, and recreation. They also highlight promising approaches for preventing obesity, increasing physical activity levels, and improving overall health.

Infographics

To communicate multiple findings quickly and clearly to practitioners in an even more accessible format than research briefs, we developed infographics that are available for download through the Move! Blog on the ALR website. You can easily share these infographics through social media or use them in presentations to provide a visual representation of key statistics on a variety of topics. Figure 2 highlights one of our most popular infographics, *Active Kids Learn Better*, which features evidence on how physical activity and fitness may help school-aged children improve their academic performance.

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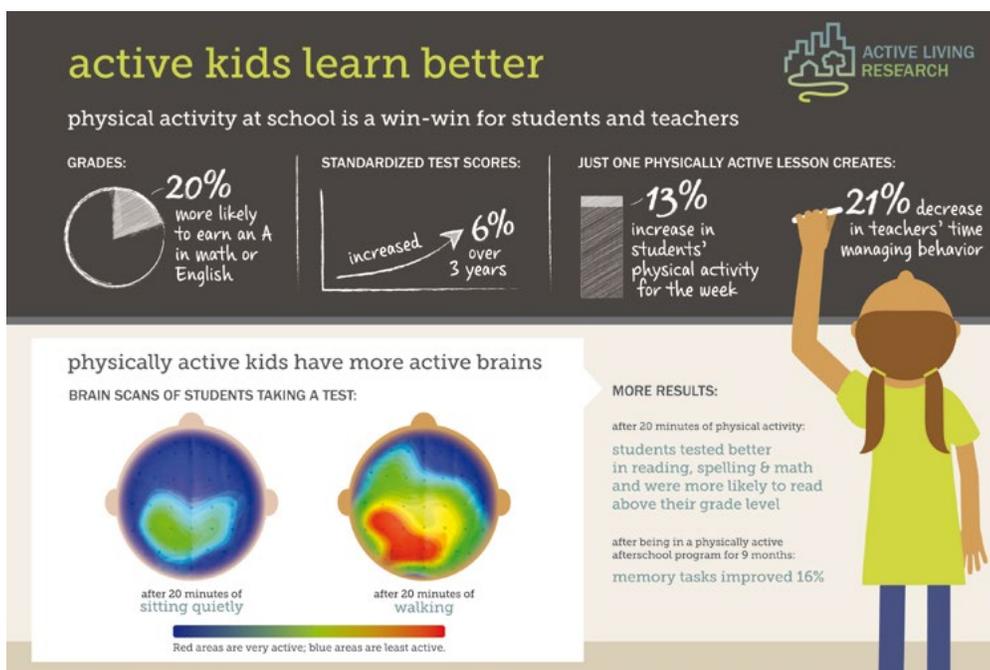


Figure 2. Infographics: active kids learn better.

Community Tools

Does your community have neighbourhoods and streets that encourage safe and enjoyable walking and bicycling? If not, how can you document where you need to make improvements? Free tools are available to help collect data on streets, schools, parks, or other community settings to see how well they support physical activity. Data like these can illustrate the need to make changes in your community and help leaders determine the most effective way to do so.

ALR has three types of tools to help:

- observational tools to assess the environment;
- observational tools to assess physical activity; and
- surveys to assess perceptions of the environment.

Although some tools are long and complex, there are several designed specifically for advocates and community members. Below are a few examples of tools you can use to collect data in different settings.

Microscale Audit of Pedestrian Streetscapes

The *Microscale Audit of Pedestrian Streetscapes (MAPS)*⁵ collects information about the pedestrian environment and walkability in neighbourhoods. The 15-item *MAPS-Mini* tool is an audit, meaning someone can walk down the street and complete a short survey for each block and street crossing. The survey items evaluate street level features that are modifiable and most of them have an impact on physical activity.⁶

Community Park Audit Tool

The *Community Park Audit Tool*⁷ is a user-friendly and reliable tool designed to evaluate parks for their potential to promote physical activity. The tool is six pages and contains four sections — Park Information, Access and Surrounding Neighborhood, Park Activity Areas, and Park Quality and Safety.

Physical Activity School Score

The *Physical Activity School Score*⁸ is a free, user-friendly, web-based, 8-item tool that assesses and helps increase awareness of evidence-based physical activity practices at elementary schools. Upon completing each of the eight items, you will receive a numerical score with feedback and recommendations on how the school can improve.

Network and learn more at ALR2018



The 15th annual ALR Conference will take place February 11 – 14, 2018 at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity in Alberta, Canada. It is the first time the conference will take place outside of the United States, and it is the first to be co-hosted with a partner organization (Alberta Centre for Active Living). The ALR conference is a venue for both cutting-edge research and for making findings useable by practitioners and decision-makers. The convening draws a diverse audience and is a rare opportunity for researchers and practitioners from many fields to come together to exchange information and advance the discussion about how to create healthier communities. Because we think it is important to “walk the talk,” we have created an active conference with extended physical activity breaks that have a dual purpose as networking time.

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If you are interested in working on collaborative research projects, we encourage you to check out the [Physical Activity Policy Research Network Plus \(PAPRN+\)](#). The PAPRN+ is comprised of researchers and practitioners working together to advance physical activity policy research at local, state, regional, and federal levels, addressing all aspects of the policy process — formation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation, as well as dissemination.

Summary

We hope the resources we have shared will encourage practitioners and active living champions to develop long-term partnerships with a variety of organizations, disciplines, and sectors. ALR would also like to learn about you - what research, tools, and partnerships have been particularly helpful in your work? Please share with us on social media — Twitter: [@AL_Research](#); Facebook: [@activelivingresearch](#) — so we can amplify our collective work to achieve activity-friendly communities. Along with our partners at ACAL, we look forward to seeing you at the ALR2018 conference, February 11 - 14 in Banff, Alberta, Canada.

References

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