
Government Involvement in Sport for Youth

Ron R. Schuler MLA

With youth obesity rates at an all-time high in Canada and daily youth physical exercise at an all-time low, government involvement in youth sport has become desperately needed for Canadian families. Without a strong set of core changes made by government to youth sport, Canadian families will continue to struggle with pressures such as; good nutrition, consistent meals, increasing cost barriers for sport registration fees, aged facilities, the decline of volunteerism, a lack of early age athletic development, a lack of programming for inner city youth, and the continuation of poor showings during international competitions. These growing problems require a change in culture and with obesity costing the country over \$7 billion a year, the issue is a significant concern. This article looks at some possible solutions including successful models implemented in Europe.



The cost of government funded health care is spiraling out of control and room must be made for the health of youth. Top heavy and unwieldy with issues that affect the whole country, the Canadian health care system is based on the concept that after a citizen contracts an illness or becomes injured, the

system is accessed to attempt to deal with and mitigate the consequences as best as possible. For some larger issues such as the rampant child obesity problem throughout the country, the health care system has a tendency of normalizing the issue.¹ With more than 50% of the parents of obese children overweight themselves, this combination of busy lifestyle, reliance on convenience foods that are high in fat and calories, and too little physical activity all contribute to an issue that stems from the household.²

In contrast to this would be a pre-emptive health care system, or what is often referred to as a “holistic approach” to health. Shifting the focus from weight to activity instead of telling people about the

importance of losing weight could be much more effective and make it easier for people to get out and be physically active in their communities. The promotion and development of exercise and sport at a young age allows an active approach to maintain a healthy lifestyle, for not only children, but for the parents who are responsible for setting an example. Government can make noticeable contributions to prevention, by simply making neighborhoods more walkable or using public money to create safety in public parks.

Another pre-emptive solution is the development of a strong youth sport public policy. Physical activity not only reflects traditional sports, but should also include the wide variety of exercise available such as; badminton, golf, bowling, dance classes, and hip hop and jazz classes. Thirty minutes of activity in adults and one hour of activity in children are suggested by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as it can help to reduce weight gain, stress, and is important for those who are at risk of or who already deal with diabetes. If Canadians could ensure that children grew up with a love of physical activity, they would improve their health and save health care dollars down the road, as well as increase the ranks of fit and athletic young Canadians.

The two largest youth problems facing the Canadian health care system are youth obesity rates and the increase in youth susceptibility to Type 2 diabetes. About 1 in 11 or 8.6% of children in Canada are considered obese, and in youth, the prevalence of

Ron Schuler represents St. Paul in the Manitoba Legislative Assembly. This is a revised version of his presentation to the 34th Canadian Regional Seminar of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association held in Edmonton on October 13, 2012.

obesity has tripled between 1979 and 2008.³ The Public Health Agency of Canada found that physical inactivity (a person active less than 15 minutes a day) is the greatest predictor of obesity. Alongside rising obesity rates is the problem with increasing rates of Type 2 diabetes within Canadian youth. A study by the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences (ICES) has found a 3% increase per year in the rate of diabetes in children from 1994 to 2004. Childhood diabetes is a chronic disease that can cause major health problems. "It is concerning that we are seeing more children... diagnosed with this serious chronic disease, we need to better understand why this happening and ensure that adequate healthcare resources are available..." says principal investigator and ICES Scientist, Dr. Astrid Guttman.⁴ Dr. Guttman found that overall rates of diabetes are higher than those reported in the United States of America, with the highest incidence rate among 10 – 14 year old, which may be due to genetic susceptibility, but also environmental changes such as the rise in obesity amongst children.⁵

Although there is currently an increased amount of government focus on youth obesity rates and youth susceptibility to Type 2 diabetes, the attention is often on older youth. It is unfortunate that these types of health issues are only looked at in earnest during the teen years, when children enter junior or senior high school, rather than at an earlier age. These later teen years are often when most children come into their own and know when to ask for help in terms of their health, or begin to embrace their healthy lifestyle fully. This age is when political/policy statements on the need for more physical activity for teens begin by society and the government and not at the younger ages. Physical activity at any age should be encouraged, but a far more important goal is the necessity of targeting the healthy life style of physical activity at children when they are young and at a more impressionable age. Most physical activity models that are looking at targeting a younger demographic tend to focus on the 8 to 10 year olds and more discussion needs to be taking place on moving the target age to 4 and 5 year olds. This would take a substantial cultural change at the policy developmental stage, which is far behind the reality of "mini-soccer" and "Timbits Hockey" that is already taking place.

Another area that has taken on a life of its own in political circles is that of the rise of youth crime when sport and positive physical activities are not present. The largest group of at risk youth historically has been those who have grown up in urban centers, where the proliferation of gangs has taken hold. Statistics show that the city of Winnipeg has not only has the

largest amount of youths between the ages of 10 – 24 in Canada, but the highest rates of youth crime as well.⁶ In order to prevent youth from falling into this lifestyle, government should be providing these kids with something to do after school in order to stay off the streets. Funded programs that get more children involved in organized sport so that they do not become involved in crime, give them something positive to belong to. The ability for government to provide community benefits and allow groups to apply for coach's funding, would provide an avenue for experienced mentors who aim at keeping kids in school and steering them into job training and careers, as well as staying active. A little goes a long way in these situations and in order for government to be successful, there needs to be a sense of pride given to the youth, that they belong to something safe and have fun doing it. From here, confidence, leadership, and most importantly a sense of belonging can be instilled through the values of organized sport.

Compounding these challenges is often the large amount of immigrants and refugees who find themselves in these urban settings. They are often brought into this setting due to the lack of affordable housing and the majority of what Immigration Settlement Services can provide, is located in these city centers. These youth find that outside of school they do not have the same access to extracurricular activities that might otherwise be provided in suburban communities. Further to this, the focus of Canadian sports is not congruent with the sports that immigrant youth are accustomed to. Many of these new Canadians have never seen ice, let alone a hockey game, and will likely never put on a pair of skates. The match of youth to sport must be a natural fit or the attempt to encourage inner city youth to try sports as a gang alternative will fail.

The single greatest barrier for Canadian families and new Canadians is the cost for children to be registered for sports. On top of this, many of Canada's most popular sports require a large amount of equipment, which can often place enough of a financial burden on a family that the sport no longer becomes an option. Recently at the Southdale Community Centre, little warning was given to community members that fees would be going up from \$85 per family to \$110 per hockey and ringette player.⁷ With most families registering multiple children, the price quickly added up. With no public debate on the matter, the fees were being raised to pay off a \$9 million expansion for the facility.⁸ For many parents, the cost was no longer even an option. Financial support for families does exist in very limited forms, but it is often deemed too

restrictive and cumbersome to actually aid parents in need. In many cases, families have no knowledge of the programs and how they work, not to mention the language barriers new Canadians face. In recent years, the newest and latest sports equipment has driven costs to unprecedented levels. Not only is there a fashion component, but also a safety factor that keeps adding on to the ever escalating cost of sports. Though some sports by nature are less prohibitive to suit up for and play (such as basketball and volleyball) but even their cost has escalated substantially in the past 10 years. Hockey remains Canada's most expensive youth sport and has reached the point where even middle to upper middle class families find themselves making substantial sacrifices for their children to participate in the sport. Due to this, registration for hockey has declined consistently over the last two years.⁹

It would seem that the era of outdoor sports during the winter months has become a thing of the past. The push to develop more indoor facilities has taken on a new sense of urgency and is a major accelerator of youth sport costs. This cost is not just something that affects one sport, rather impacts all youth sport costs. Another accelerator of youth sport costs seems to be the increased travel that families of young athletes face. Travel within city and provincial limits for most families is fairly expensive to begin with, however when dealing with out of city and out of province costs, not only has the cost of travel increased substantially with gas prices continually on the rise, but even more so with airfare. There seems to be no end to sport fundraisers, with more parents and athletes vying for an ever scarce donation dollar.

One of the issues currently facing all sports organizations and community clubs is the serious decline in volunteerism. Years ago a position on a community club board was viewed as a coveted position and was often settled by an election between competing individuals. This is now something of the past, as most organizations have positions that remain vacant. The demand in many communities far outstripped the ability of the clubs to provide services. With hundreds of children enrolling in outdoor sports and seemingly no parents willing to coach, club president have begun to run out of options. Ultimatums such as "...you either coach or lose the program." are not uncommon in organizations and unfortunately are often the only way to recruit volunteers. With most family's parents working full time, there are many reasons why volunteerism is in decline. Volunteering when parents can barely make ends meet is seemingly not there, and often they are overwhelmed with all the duties of parenting making coaching not an option.

This lack of development at an early age has a direct effect on Canada's ability to perform at elite international levels amongst its peers. After the final smoke had cleared from the fireworks of the past summer Olympics, questions began to surface about Canada's poor medal standings. Canada has always ranked low in international competitive sports, save that of winter games. The main weaknesses of Canada's Olympic teams have mainly been accepted as its relatively shallow pool of young elite athletes. With no deep rooted traditions of government support, the only role models for young athletes to aspire to are those who go against all odds, such as the bronze medalist women's soccer team. The same holds true for the FIFA World cup, where Canada places far below where a country of its stature should rank. In October 2012 Canada's men's team ranked just slightly ahead of Armenia, Nigeria and Guinea, but behind soccer power houses like Haiti and Iran. With the lack of development and competition at an early age, there seems to be a tendency for most Canadian sports to be more interested in picking winners. Although much attention is given to national organizations on how hard they work to develop their sport, in reality this is more of a theoretical effort than any real practical help. Most children see their first development in sport at a community club and developmental club school program level. In most cases, level entry is often at the community club where parents register and begin their child's sport experience. As the child advances, they often try out and are tiered in various sport development clubs. It is usually only the more skilled children who move up to the higher levels, although there still is a degree of developmental philosophy earlier on.

In 1996 the German Soccer Federation came to the realization that their soccer sports program was in need of a serious reorganization. With very little domestic talent coming up through the ranks, the national team was in dire need of players who could compete internationally, and more importantly, were German citizens who could play for the national team. By 1999, a new three point system was put into place where one hundred and twenty one national centers were built, their focus to be concentrated on the 10 – 17 year olds in Germany. The second step saw two full time paid coaches added to each center, who would work with the youths and get them involved in the soccer program. The last step was a mandate that all professional clubs were to add a youth component or academe to their respective program.¹⁰ The end result has been one of the youngest and most dynamic soccer programs in existence today. The German National Soccer Team

has the youngest team of players in the world and always place near to or at the top of all rankings. The interest in youth sport has grown tremendously, as home grown talent is a far bigger draw than unknown outsider athletes. More importantly, youth are once again being given new facilities to play in and are not relying on a diminished volunteer base, but rather on paid full time coaches. Young German soccer players feel there is now a real prospect of making it on to a strong professional team, or even the National team. With youth once again engaged in sport, health and justice issues can be addressed by youth given the opportunity to spend time at a new sports facility, with professional staff, as compared to youth looking for activities and potentially finding their way into negative situations.

This model, though not entirely applicable to Canada's situation, supports the notion that when a strong central body makes a radical change and puts real dollars behind it, the outcome is very positive. Simply put, Canada must look at developing a child centered strategy, where children as young as 4 and 5 are encouraged to become active. These programs should not be treated as a curiosity or mere low level activity, but the national sports organizations should have to spend a large percentage of their budget ensuring that families are aware of the benefits of early childhood physical activity. Just like in Germany, Canadians need access to proper coaching for their children, and not the current system that allows anyone to coach, so long as they volunteer. Focusing tax dollars on child centered sports must become a reality, as the era of relying on volunteers no longer exists today. Canadian sports organizations wait for a star to rise and then claim them as their own, lavishing time and money on them. This attitude of "picking

the winner" has proven to fail, as not enough talent is being developed at the younger ages, causing so few stars to rise. The pool of young athletes must be enlarged to include all children in Canada, for every child has a gift or talent in some sport or activity. If an ounce of prevention equals a pound of cure, then it is about time Canadians take child centered sport activities seriously. Healthy living, proper eating, a clean lifestyle, and athletic development at an early age are all factors in reducing high obesity rates, diabetes rates, and youth crime rates in Canadians, as well as developing elite competitors. In order for this to be made possible, there must be a change in culture and youth sport programs by the Canadian and provincial government.

Notes

- 1 Carley Weeks, "How fat has become the new normal," *The Globe and Mail*, September 30, 2012.
- 2 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Overweight and obesity data and statistics," August 28, 2012.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 News Medical, "Increase in diabetes among Canadian children," June 9, 2009.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Aldo Santin, "Stats story a mixed tale," *Winnipeg Free Press*, July 24, 2012.
- 7 Dan Lett, "Southdale centre hits families with hike," *Winnipeg Free Press*, August 21, 2012.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 James Mirtle, "Bauer takes on sagging minor hockey enrolment," *The Globe and Mail*, October 3, 2012.
- 10 Raphael Honigstein, "How Germany reinvented itself," *Sports Illustrated*, July 1, 2010.