

VicSport Update

Physically Active Schools Community Project

The important role physical activity plays in promoting healthier and happier lifestyles amongst our children cannot be overestimated. Being physically active is so important the Children's Hospital at Westmead has specifically developed a *Charter of Physical Activity and Sport for Children and Youth* which states that:

1. Regular participation in physical activity and sport by children and youth is essential for their optimum health, growth, well being and self-esteem.
2. The right to be physically active and play sport should be recognised as a fundamental aspect of education and cultural life for all children and youth in Australia.
3. Access and opportunity to participate in affordable physical activity and sport must be made available to all children and youth of all ages and abilities.

Without doubt the school system plays a vital role in providing physical activity opportunities for children. Outside of the home, schools have the greatest impact on the development of our children and play a vital role in instilling the positive health and exercise habits our children need to develop for life. However despite minimum physical activity levels being mandated in Victorian schools, there is much concern school sport and physical education is falling off the schools agenda. These concerns are supported by recent research from the Queensland University of Technology which showed today's school leaver has access to around 5000 hours less school-based physical activity than children did in the 1970's.

Providing the resources necessary to ensure every school can offer physical activity opportunities to all school children is a key to improving health in the long term. In addition to essential school based physical education, children also require access to sports and other active recreation activities outside of school hours to bolster their school-based activity.

ABS statistics indicate less than 50% of Australian children participate in organised sport once per week or more outside of school hours, whilst 27% of children aged 5-14 did not take part in any sporting or cultural activities outside of school. Clearly the role the community sport and active recreation network plays in providing physical activity options for school aged youth outside of school hours to compliment that which is provided within the school curriculum must be developed and strengthened.

Schools and community sport and active recreation organisation need to work more closely together to ensure we have the accessible pathways we need to keep young people engaged. With a view to developing a model for creating accessible pathways between schools and the clubs within their communities, VicSport, with funding support provided by the Department of Education, is undertaking the Physically Active Schools Communities (PASC) research project.

The aim of the PASC project is to increase the level of physical activity amongst school age children by establishing strong links between schools and 'safe' sport and active recreation clubs in their surrounding community.

In Victoria, the Federally funded Schools Network has already facilitated a range of programs whereby schools and community sport organisations have made connections that have had a significant impact on increasing the physical activity opportunities available to school aged children. The Schools Network works with schools, national and state sporting organisations and departments of sport and recreation and education on strategies to improve links between schools and school programs and community opportunities for sport and physical activity.

By way of example, in the Shepparton Region, Handball Victoria approached local schools with the concept of developing a handball competition and has successfully established a local school-based handball club and after-school competition. In Ballarat, three rural schools have worked together with the Ballarat Tennis Association to initiate a tennis coaching program to encourage young people to learn the basics and create pathways into their local competition and wider regional associations.

Building on the work done by the Schools Network, the PASC project aims to establish links between a school and all 'safe' sport and active recreation organisations within a 5 km radius thereby providing children with a greater opportunity to access activities outside school hours. In summary, the PASC project will initially work with four identified schools to establish links in these pilot areas. As a result of this work a best-practice 'blue print' will be developed that can be used as a guide for establishing successful links.

When completed this resource will be made available in an online environment for access by all schools, members of the active sport and recreation sector, and any other interested parties. By developing an evidence based best-practice blue-print we hope to facilitate access to ongoing physical activity opportunities for children in safe sporting environments outside of school hours.

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