

Active Transportation at the Boys and Girls Club of West Scarborough



Prepared for





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It's shortly after lunch, on a bright sunny afternoon in the fall of 2011. In the basement of the West Scarborough Neighbourhood Community Centre (WSNCC), Jason Leenamkwong and his coordinator team from the Boys and Girls Club (BGC) of West Scarborough are sitting together to reflect on their progress in getting kids more active in the after school time slot between 3:00 and 7:00 pm. The air of stillness around the table belies the imminent energy and excitement about to explode in the Club as 120 or so young children funnel into the Centre each afternoon. Now, however, there's time to think about what's been accomplished and what still needs doing.

Between 3 and 7 pm the Centre is essentially filled to capacity: providing opportunities for 4-11 year olds to play, catch up on homework, engage in sports and have a healthy snack. The '*tracking*' program (the Club's word for the active transportation program that walks kids from their school to the Centre) has been a very important and strengthening addition to the BGC after school program. The Club's success at the Centre has spawned two additional satellite centres in the area. Yet despite this success, it's the older kids from 12 to 17 to whom the thoughts of Jason and his team often stray. "Sure we have the programs", says Jason, "but how do we get them in the door?"

Background

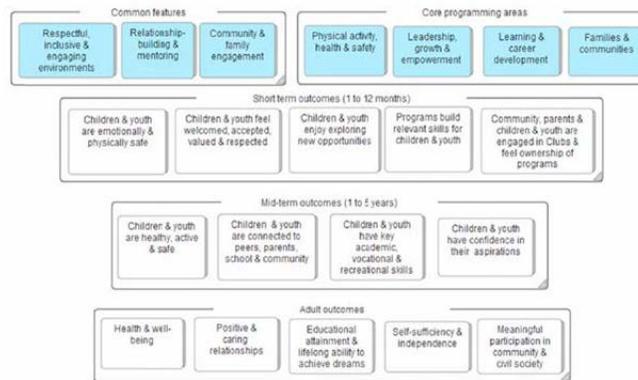
The after school time period is a critical element in determining a child's overall level of physical activity. As much as 50% of the total daily steps taken by children and youth can occur during this time period. However, many children (4-11 years old) and most youth (12-17 years old) are left alone during this time period. The result has been a growing trend to sedentary activities such as watching television, using computers, or playing video games instead of playing outdoors or in public recreational facilities. As a result of this sedentariness, many health professionals now believe we are experiencing an epidemic of obesity among children and youth today. This behaviour seems to have roots in child preferences, cultural shifts and parental concerns over child safety. Added to this, researchers regularly report that the after school period is also associated with poor eating habits and increased juvenile crime and antisocial behaviour.

The after school hours represent the largest block of discretionary time in a child's daily routine, yet many Canadian children and youth sit idle indoors - experiencing as little as 14 minutes per day on average of moderate to vigorous-intensity physical activity (out of a possible 180 minutes). This means 92% of the after-school time is spent in light or sedentary

activities. Despite this obvious gap, 72% of Canadian parents say that their children don't have access to safe, supervised after-school programs that encourage physical activity. And, the older children get, the less time they spend being physically active after school. Outdoor physical activity, once a key, self-directed source of children's after-school activity, is now demonstrably on the decline.

After school programs are more than just day care for older kids. Boys and Girl Clubs, for example, offer respectful, inclusive and engaging environments that foster relationship building and mentoring, and that engage communities and families in order to have the greatest potential to positively impact a child's growth. These features provide opportunities to encourage the development of the whole child – physically, mentally and socially - in playful and fun environments. The theory of change that animates the Boys and Girls Club's programming, suggests an emphasis on these three common features ultimately leads to healthy, self sufficient but caring adults, who cherish life long learning and are active participants in their communities.

BGCC Theory of Change



While after school programming does have the potential to increase the amount of physical activity available to children and youth to help optimize their physiological and psychological health, getting kids from school to an after school location is not straightforward. Several of the BGC coordinators, for instance, suggested that because kids today are so technology oriented, that you have to literally take them by the hand to get them engaged in physical activity. Otherwise, if left to their own devices then they default to playing video games or watching TV with no physical activity whatsoever. *Tracking* literally walks them to the opportunity for physical activity in an after school program.



Figure 1: Games and play at WSNCC

Since transportation to and from after school programs has been identified as a large impediment to participation in after school programs, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada (BGCC), which has been as a major community provider of after school programs for over a century, offered grants to encourage active transportation to all of its Clubs to strengthen their capacity to provide programming. Local Clubs submitted applications, there was a review process and ten were selected, including the BGC of West Scarborough. BGCC is also doing this as a participant in the Canadian Active After School Partnership (CAASP), which receives funding through the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC). The active transportation pilots conducted by Boys and Girls Clubs, like the BGC of West Scarborough, have applied a planning guide produced by the Active and Safe Routes to Schools group, another CAASP partner.

CAASP is working to support better access to resources and tools, including a central online knowledge hub where promising practices can be shared; policy-making among municipal and provincial governments can be facilitated, including better school and recreational facility sharing; training and capacity building among program providers can be offered; strategies and tools to ensure access of all children and youth can be provided, including those with disabilities, girls and young women, and vulnerable populations; and practices that support the elimination of barriers that stem from transportation challenges, children who live in rural or remote areas, or children from low socio-economic backgrounds can be explored.

At the WSNCC, an active transportation program being implemented by the BGC has been ongoing for the past four years and has grown to include 125 children registered in the primary location and approximately 50 children at the two satellite centres that are also run by the BGC of West Scarborough. The PHAC funding has enabled the expansion of both the size and quality of the program.

Local Context

The catchment area for the BGC of West Scarborough includes a very mixed demographic, but it is dominated by recent Jamaican, Indo-Pakistani and Tamil immigrants. The level of poverty in the area is high. In fact, it is considered the poorest postal code in Toronto and there are also lots of single parent families. For instance, Jason, one of the BGC Coordinators, described his experience with one the families enrolled in the after school (AS) program and where a family of seven is living in a bachelor apartment. Within sight of the WSNCC there are probably two dozen or more apartment buildings, many of which appear quite run down –even at a distance. One of those apartment groups is especially notable -- the Dentonia group of apartments, commonly known as Teesdale -- a low income, social housing project largely considered as the roughest in Toronto. Shootings and muggings



Figure 2: The Teesdale Social Housing Project

are not uncommon in the area, making child safety a key factor in any parent's decision to enrol their child in an active transportation or any other after school program.

Yet within the catchment area of the WSNCC, all of the neighbourhood elementary schools have some students that are participating in the active transportation program and/or the after school (AS) program.

After School Program Architecture

There are four BGC site coordinators handling Active Transportation program at WSNCC. Eric Berklemans, Amy Sit and Bridgette Rivaldo are responsible for managing the Club in its three locations -- WSHCC, North Scarborough and Birchmount respectively. Jason is responsible for *tracking* at the satellite locations. At the main location, there are five schools from which they pick up kids while at the two satellite locations there are six schools involved. However, there is still one school that delivers children via school bus to the WSHCC for the AS program.

At the Club, the day begins by offering a program of nutritious breakfasts for needy kids prior to school. This leads to situation where some parents will drop off their kids at 7am and then only come and pick them up by 7 pm. This means that the time they spend with the young adults among the BGC staff is a very significant portion of the total time they spend with adults in their day. Originally the BGC had only two staff people for the 60 kids enrolled in *tracking* but after four years and additional funding from the CAASP after school initiative that ratio has been improved to 1 staff person for each 10-12 kids while employing 20+ staff on a rotating basis.

These improved staff-to-child ratios have been particularly helpful in providing staff to pick up kids at school for *tracking* on a reliable basis. Previously, the BGC relied heavily on high school seniors to help pick up the kids and run the AS programs. However, high school students often had trouble being available to pick up the younger kids from public school when it was let out as they themselves were often still in class. The CAASP grant has allowed the BGC to hire recent high school grads and university students to pick up and do the *tracking* at the needed time and provide better safety for and engagement with the children.

When the children arrive at the Club, they sign in and when they leave with their parents they sign out. Laura, one of the BGC staff, is the Floor Supervisor and she is always there to greet them. She's responsible for signing them in and out. As it turns out, this is not an inconsequential task. Laura is sort of the 'command and control centre' for the entire AS school program. She sits in the front foyer of the Centre casually checking each child off her list. She knows every child by name, their parents, their brothers and sisters, their school, where they're supposed to be at any given time and when they're supposed to be picked up. She also knows who has permission from their parents to come late or leave early on their own. She also seems to know when the kids are legitimately delayed by extra-curricular programs at school. She does this all through long association with the Club and by casually chatting to everyone that passes by.

Laura is just one of the many exceptional BGC staff. The majority of staff have First Aid certifications and all the coordinators have both First Aid as well as ‘High Five’¹ certifications. Many staff have university or college degrees, often in areas of education, child care or social work. A few have more than one. All are passionate about working with the kids and trying to make a difference in their lives. Said Lillian, a recent high school graduate and one of the BGC staff members, “it’s more than just a job. I love working with these kids because for a few hours in my life I get to be silly too and be happy and have fun whether it’s a sunny and warm day or a cold and snowy one.”

In addition to the opportunities for physical activity through *tracking* and participation in the indoor AS sports program, the BGC’s after school program also offers kids an opportunity to do homework and have some healthy snacks. Whenever the opportunity presents itself, staff also try to take time to educate parents about the importance of keeping their kids active and healthy eating.

In the WSNCC area there is little competition from other organizations offering AS programs. The schools themselves offer only a few after school programs such as organized sports or sometimes band or choir practice. A few other organizations offer AS programs in schools, but none offer *tracking*. While there may be lots of day care programs for the little ones, like the *playcare* program at the WSNCC, the BGC coordinators felt that “it’s hard to find AS programs for school-aged kids. Our sense is that there’s lots of money for day care but not a lot for after school programs.”

Tracking



Figure 3: Tracking back to the WSNCC

rain and cold. Nevertheless, the BGC group can be seen tracking groups of children to the WSNCC five days per week -- regardless of weather.

Tracking begins around 3:00 pm, with two or three staff going to a participating school and waiting for about 15 -20 minutes for the children to assemble (either inside or outside depending on school policy and weather). While assembling the children indoors is the preferred choice, “a few schools seem to want the kids out the door as soon as classes are over” and these are usually the ones where the children wait outdoors. Obviously, waiting outside in the rain or cold can be problematic. In fact, one of the major concerns about the *tracking* program that parents express is in regards to the exposure of their children to the

¹ HIGH FIVE[®] Accreditation conferred by Parks and Recreations Ontario is the highest recognized level of quality and safety in children’s sport and recreation. Organizations that have achieved accreditation are distinguished by their focus on healthy child development in all aspects of their operation, from programming to policies and procedures.

It should be no surprise to anyone that young children have short attention spans and have a tendency to run around all over the place. Herding cats is an obvious metaphor. BGC staff are constantly dealing with this, by engaging with the children in a variety of ongoing games as they walk. They see to it that the kids are always doing something – singing songs, jumping up and down, playing games – and so staff members need to have a big collection of games in mind to keep the children’s attention. For example, some of those games might involve looking for birds, or colours or shapes, or playing the ‘yes-no’ game.

Also of no surprise is that the children are always moving: towards the front or back of the group; away from and back to the sidewalk; clustering in small groups or running off by themselves. On occasion, they get too rambunctious and staff members have to rein them in. According to Lillian, one way to keep them focused is by threatening to make them all walk in a straight line - something they all apparently hate to do. Another way, is by involving the older kids to help take responsibility for and to guide the younger ones.

The knowledge of what works with the kids and what doesn’t is an ongoing subject of discussion among staff. Coordinators share their experience with staff and older staff tell the younger trainees. Staff members are themselves constantly coming up with new and creative ideas all the time. So as part of the monthly staff reports prepared at the Club, there’s space for new games and ideas that have proved successful. One of the coordinators, Bridget, suggested that someone is developing a resource book from all this material.

Parents have an open invitation to track along with their kids, although few apparently ever do. The confidence of parents in tracking has developed largely by word of mouth and the BGC’s well regarded community reputation. Every day the kids can be seen marching off from school to the community centre. Amy, another BGC coordinator, said that “when parents initially register their child, they usually have a million questions but once enrolled they seem to rely on the day-to-day feedback they get from their child.”

Jason shared that a big part of *tracking* is the relationship that grows with the children. “When the kids are with their parents they behave one way; when they’re with their teachers it’s another way; but when they’re with us they can feel a certain independence because they are neither our kid nor our student. Over time we see a kind of independence growing in them.” Bridget quickly agreed, “the little ones often come in feeling very shy and clingy but as we walk together they become less clingy and more sure of themselves.” The coordinators shared a story of one little girl who used to cry all the time from her school to the Club and then all through the after school program until she was picked up by her mom at the end of the day. Now she runs about here and there, not only without tears but



Figure 4: Some of the children walking and talking with BGC staff member

often taking it upon herself to look after those that are even younger than she is. “Her mom came to us just the other day to see if we could work the same ‘miracle’ with the girl’s younger brother,” said Bridget.

“When you’re *tracking*, that is walking with the kids, they are all talking the whole time. They feel that they have a connection to you.” So they talk about their school, their friends, their brothers or sisters, their mom and dad, what’s bothering them and whatever is on their mind and making them happy or excited. “In the end,” said Lillian, “all of us staff people begin to build very strong relationships with them – almost as if we were their big brother or sister, without any of that sibling rivalry.”

According to staff this bond is how they are able to deliver effective after school programs to so many different kids with so many different needs. They’re able to tailor things for them because they know just what’s going on in their lives. Said Jason, “there’s this one kid that I came to know who just loved baseball because he talked about it all the time when we walked together. He came from a poor family so despite his love of baseball he’d never been to a real, live game. So one day we got some tickets and we took him and a few others to a Jays game. He was just so delighted.”



Figure 5: Students eager for after school

Once all the kids arrive at the Club, they spend some more time running about in the play yard behind the Centre. Then the formal after school program consists of 30 minutes of homework or small group work; then more group games and play for 30 minutes; then 30 minutes for snacks; and then 60 minutes for more organized sports.

The BGC team of coordinators and staff members that run both the *tracking* and AS program are exceptional and operate in a very mutually supportive way. Periodically BGC runs workshops so that staff can share their

stories and experiences with other teams and learn from them as well. They also host holiday parties for Toronto area (GTA) staff. BGC of Toronto also hosts an annual festival, called *Unity Day* in August that has all of Clubs of the Greater Toronto Area and involving as many as 1000 kids from across the region. On both occasions, BGC encourages peer-to-peer learning among staff.

Why is tracking useful?

There’s a lot of fear among parents in the neighbourhood that because of the rough nature of places like Teesdale they feel uncomfortable letting their children go out on their own. Just recently there was another shooting incident in the area. So just having an after school program isn’t enough. With parents locked in at work, *tracking* provides a trusted and safe

means to get kids from school to the AS program at the Club, which is regarded as a safe place for the kids to be.

As the trusted care provider, the BGC offers *tracking* and after school programs, but also gym access, field trips into the local Taylor creek park, nature walks, and ‘manhunts’ in the forest. Importantly, since these are all collective activities, the kids participating are not subject to bullying or other forms of personal attacks.



Figure 6: Taylor Creek Park

Because school policy dictates that that on rainy or inclement days the kids don't go out for recess, the 15-20 minutes involved in *tracking* provides a valuable outlet for the children to release some of their pent up energy before they become involved in the more formal AS programs.

According to the coordinators, there have been a lot of cutbacks in the local schools in recent years, resulting in many kids not having access to various sport fundamentals like soccer, basketball or volleyball. Many schools, they said, have also cut back the number of coaches so much that schools find it difficult to offer concurrent sport programs after school.

Bridget mentioned that in one neighbourhood school there is only one coach now for all the boys' and girls' sport activities, which means that only one sport can go one at a time. She also mentioned that cut backs operating under the guise of 'equal opportunity' have led to boys' and girls' teams being merged so that still fewer coaches are required. The AS program at Boys and Girls Club of West Scarborough helps to address this by providing the basics for many sport activities as part of their program.

Making a difference

The clearest indication of the success of the *tracking* program is the obvious level of affection demonstrated by the kids for the BGC coordinators and staff. The kids literally 'light up' when the staff and coordinators come by. Another quick indicator can be found with the three idle computers that are freely available to the children in the basement. What otherwise seems like a strong attractor, the computers are ignored by the children when more meaningful alternatives are offered.

According to both staff and coordinators, the *tracking* program makes a big difference in the quality of AS programming. "*Tracking* isn't just about adding a few more minutes of walking," said Jason. "It's about providing an opportunity for the kids to decompress after their school day. Remember that when it's rainy or too cold. the kids don't go out for recess so when BGC staff see them they're ready to bounce off the walls." More importantly however, all the staff seemed to agree that *tracking* is primarily about "creating an opportunity for the children to make an adult connection with someone who is willing to listen to them. It builds in them a sense of belonging and community."

According to the coordinators, the *tracking* program has helped them develop their connection with local schools which they felt was absolutely necessary in order for the BGC to do other things in the community. “The schools see us every day with the kids. They see us doing things that they [the schools] are no longer able to do and they begin to see us as an extension of the school. *Tracking* opens lots of doors as the schools begin to see us as community partners.” For instance, it led last summer to BGC staff being invited into the schools for an activity day where they organized face painting with the school kids. Over time, *tracking* has also helped to build relationships with teachers, who now come to help assemble the kids for the walk to the Centre, and they let staff know when some kids will be absent due to sickness or other extra-curricular activities. Often teachers can be seen waving the kids off at the end of the day.

One recent indication of community connection and satisfaction that is growing with the *tracking* program was the level of community participation in the BGC spring festival, the big *Spring Byng Fling*. “There was lots of participation from families and seniors this past year. You can even see some of the results in the many murals that are painted along the driveway to the Centre by some of our students who worked with local artists.”



Figure 7: Mural from Spring Byng Fling

Over the years the AS program has gotten a lot more structured says Laura, who has been involved with the Boys and Girls Club since she was in 6th grade. As the number of kids and staff has grown, she says, so has the program structure -- something which both the kids and the parents appreciate because it helps them be more comfortable with the program and with staff. In many respects, Laura exemplifies the powerful influence an after school program can have on some children as she credits it as the reason why she has pursued her degree in education and a diploma in child social work.

How could they be doing things better?

When asked, how could they be doing things better, the first response of the coordinators was to find a way to help the kids that come to the AS program by bus from a neighbouring catholic elementary school to join the *tracking* program. “We just have to keep working on the school principal” said Jason.

Interestingly, each of the coordinators downplayed the importance of the necessity for more funding to improve things. “For what we have”, said Jason, “we’re running excellent programs in a space that’s operating at full capacity.” Bridgette concurred saying that, “we use what we have and we use it as much as we can. We’re very efficient that way.” Another staff person referenced Glamorgan Public School where parents are being charged \$5 per term for AS programming and it has a huge demand despite the nominal fee. “They have a big waiting list.” It was suggested that the small cost helps to engage parents to take ownership of

the AS program and to take it more seriously. By contrast, at another location in Alton Towers, the AS program is offered for free but has only ever been able to enrol 10-12 kids suggesting that 'zero cost' doesn't always translate into higher participation.

The biggest challenge, according to the coordinators and staff, has to do with engaging area youth, whom they define as 12-17 year olds. "The AS program at BGC is clearly directed towards young, elementary school kids." While the BGC and the WSNCC do offer youth oriented programs in the 7-10 pm time slot, few of the so called 'tweens and teens', however, participate. Participation is often viewed by them as "not being a cool thing to do" with most youth preferring to hang out at the local malls or on the street. The popular perception among youth is that youth programs are 'boring'.

As one response, the the BGC team pointed out that WSNCC has developed a basketball league which is gaining popularity among the area's youth. In addition, the youth justice program operating out of WSNCC is teaching life skills in youth programs such as 'girls to women' and 'boys to men' that are showing some success. Despite this, the coordinators felt that a new approach to youth oriented programs is needed. The problem they said, has more to do with peer pressure, program ownership, and role models. "We need to think about the coolness factor and how to get them in the door. We're just not successful at that right now."

To underscore this point, Jason mentioned that while more community involvement might be helpful there was a recent instance when enrolment dropped dramatically for a semester when police started showing up on a regular basis. They didn't come in and stay or shoot hoops with the kids. They just came in to demonstrate their presence. "We lost a number of the older kids at that time." This type of community involvement was counter productive.

In contrast, BGC delivers a Youth Leadership Program that usually involves about 15-20 junior high school kids from the area, mostly girls, that takes them on field trips and encourages them to develop a mentoring attitude towards the younger children. In describing the Youth Leadership Program Denise Silverstone, Director of National Programs and Services at Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada said, "opportunities like these for young people to participate in Clubs and community organizations, in extracurricular activities that involve volunteering, in sports and the arts, these all support feelings of community belonging and engagement, self-worth, confidence and feelings of independence. The children learn how to participate in groups, build consensus, and listen to each others' ideas – leadership skills that will serve them for a lifetime." This is particularly important she said because "the young people most likely to be drawn into negative behaviour are those who tend to experience social isolation."

With the Leadership program, said Bridgette, "the teens are given the opportunity to take some ownership of the AS program, to feel like they are really part of something and that they are respected and taken seriously." In fact, several of the BGC team members are shining examples of the success of this type of program and the very positive influence it can have on the lives of young people.

In the end, although staff tended to minimize the importance of funding, there is a clear correlation between funding, space and the increased availability of staff. The BGC is at capacity now. To entertain more kids in after school programs the BGC would need more space and more staff. “More staff,” said Laura, “means more safety, more attention for the kids and a richer program.” And when it comes down to it, even to the casual observer, the caring, attentive, inspiring young people that deliver the after school programs at the Boys and Girls Club of West Scarborough are, in many ways, a testament to the validity of *tracking* and the BGC’s after school program approach.



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