



## Physical activity in Indian country

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### ABSTRACT

This is an invited commentary article, and so no abstract is required. By way of a brief description, this article shares promising efforts, strategies and approaches in effectively and culturally supporting Native communities in promoting the health of their children through movement, the connection to their land, language, culture and traditional knowledge.

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“In the Navajo culture, running is about pushing yourself physically and mentally to find out more about what lives inside you. Running is prayer, a form of moving meditation and an avenue to give back to the earth that gives us so much. It is a way to celebrate life. Recognizing this deep cultural connection with journey and purpose and the enthusiasm of the students, staff and parents who have participated in the running program, the school is committed to continuing the program.”

[The STAR School, AZ]

Movement is required for all people to not just live, but also to thrive. The amount, intensity and duration of movement will vary based on a number of individual, family, community or environmental barriers or opportunities. In most Native American communities the importance of movement and physical activity is bigger than personal health or fitness. It is greater than the often-measured benefits attributed to weight loss, bone health, body composition, and other health-related measures. It is, as the quote above from the Native-led charter elementary school, Service to All Relations (STAR) in Arizona, has so eloquently described, a way to celebrate life.

I will expand more on this critical view later in this commentary. However, first let me share a little about us. As a Native-led nonprofit working to improve the health of our Native American Children by reducing childhood obesity and type 2 diabetes in our communities, the Notah Begay III (NB3) Foundation is supporting Native-led strategies through our national grantmaking, technical assistance, research and advocacy efforts. As a nonprofit that seeks and provides grant funding, NB3 Foundation has gained valuable experience and knowledge working with community partners within the philanthropic field. Often we

get asked, what do we know and what do we not know about the role of physical activity in the promotion of healthy children in Indian Country? What is working and how can it be appropriately shared or scaled up?

For starters, I have a small stack of published journal and commentary articles on the broad topic of physical activity impacting the health of Native communities on my desk. It's an incredibly small stack when you think about the amount of published articles on the same topic for the broader community. I have spent some time rereading them in thinking about what to include in this commentary. While they have been helpful (some more than others), I would recommend reading [Hassin et al.'s \(2012\)](#) commentary and [Moore and Bell's \(2010\)](#) editorial as a broader perspective of challenges in Native communities. For my commentary, I found three prominent concerning themes. For one, the promotion of evidence-based successful physical activity models in Native communities is few and far between, and this is commonly listed as a huge challenge. Secondly, there are huge gaps in respecting, valuing and incorporating indigenous knowledge into evaluation and programming among Native communities, which can result in a top-down and/or western focused approach that directly impacts the lack of evidence-based models. Lastly, but certainly not least, place matters. Many rural Native Nations lack basic infrastructure, like adequate roads, sidewalks, community centers, safe playgrounds, trails, parks, etc. to effectively promote active living in their communities. As some may know by now, this can be directly attributed to hundreds of years of a complex history that systematically worked to colonize and oppress Native people across the US. I could spend this entire commentary on just this history, but instead I will direct you to a few resources you can read to learn more about this and the impact on the health of Native American people ([National Congress of American Indians, 2016](#); [U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2003](#); [Notah Begay III Foundation, 2015](#)). All of these issues are

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important context for understanding what is happening in Indian Country when it comes to the role of physical activity in the promotion of healthy children.

One of the first questions is always - are Native children currently meeting the Physical Activity Guidelines? Are they getting one-hour of physical activity daily - at school or at home? Unfortunately, nationally, regionally and for most states there are little to no data because monitoring or working in partnership with Native Nations to collect this type of information rarely happens. The reasons are complex and would require a much longer commentary. Rather, I will gladly adopt the efforts and work of the National Congress of American Indians Policy Research Center (*National Congress of American Indians, 2016. <http://www.ncai.org>*). They are appropriately encouraging and supporting Native Nations' efforts to collect their own relevant data to inform their communities while also recognizing the ways that government (i.e. federal, states, etc.) and private entities can work with Native Nations in sharing relevant data to inform the larger field. This is not a complete answer, but it does emphasize the importance of Native Nation's leading any data efforts and understanding the various approaches that are currently being implemented.

I won't spend too much space on the grim health statistics that plague our Native communities when it comes to the high rates of childhood obesity, but approximately 31% of 6–19-year-olds are obese (*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014*) and approximately 15.9% of Native American adults have type 2 diabetes (*Indian Health Service, 2011*). These numbers are important to know but do not fully explain how Native people view health or how they are choosing to culturally address it. Instead, I want to use my space to share promising efforts, strategies and approaches in effectively and culturally supporting Native communities in promoting the health of their children through movement, the connection to their land, language, culture and traditional knowledge.

So what do we know at the NB3 Foundation? Since launching our national grant making program in 2013, we have learned a great deal with and from our community partners (grantees). In fact, our soon to be published, "Native Strong: The First Two Years" outlines how the Foundation can continue to improve our grant making approaches and support the strengths, challenges and opportunities encountered by our community partners in implementing culturally promising physical activity strategies in Native communities across the US. The strategies are varied and unique to each of the communities, but each recognizes the need for indigenous approaches and values as the foundation of any effort. All of our community partners stress the importance of any program or strategy to be tribally developed and led. As a result, we worked closely with evaluators, Indigenous Methods, LLC to develop an evaluation framework that values and incorporates the importance of traditional knowledge, language and culture in supporting physical activity and healthy nutrition community efforts (*Sturm et al., 2016*). The evaluation framework has not been fully implemented with our community partners, but it has been introduced and continues to resonate with many of our partners. This allows for ongoing conversations to develop both culturally appropriate measures and balancing existing western measures in monitoring and evaluating physical activity approaches in Native communities. As a result, this approach will change the conversation about what is "evidence-based" for many Native communities working to incorporate Indigenous measures into their work. While we have many community partners working toward these efforts, I am providing brief examples from a few of our community partners:

#### **Native Expressions Drum and Dance Troupe, Lac Du Flambeau, WI**

— A Native-controlled nonprofit that works with the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. Native Expressions is incorporating physical activity, nutrition education and learning of the Ojibwe language through traditional dance and drumming as a way of engaging their children's body, mind and spirit. The Ojibwe language

is taught as part of dance sessions, such as counting during stretching. Native Expressions is helping to make physical activity an easy, fun and culturally significant choice for children at Red Cliff.

**Zuni Youth Enrichment Project, Zuni Pueblo, NM** — A Native-controlled nonprofit that provides the Zuni Pueblo youth four seasons of active play with each season's activity incorporating nutrition education into all programming. The Zuni Pueblo community and Zuni Tribal Council have been so impressed by the ongoing work of the ZYEP in service to local youth that they took the important step of granting, free of charge, several acres of land for the construction of youth sports fields, community gardens, and a youth center complex. These types of community health initiatives have also allowed ZYEP to create a 7-trail walking/hiking/running trail system (over 40 miles of marked trail). The creation of this trail has been a community-driven effort with their tribal cultural keeper naming each trail based on the tribal core values so that as people walk on the trails, they are reflecting on each of their core values.

**Santo Domingo Pueblo, NM** — Complimenting existing physical activity opportunities for their youth, the Kewa Health Outreach Program reintroduced two traditional outdoor games - hockey and stick ball - as well as regular hiking trips with elders to share traditional stories and gather wild plants and fruits along the way. The elders were also integral to helping the youth create the hockey and stickball equipment, explaining why they used certain materials and their significance to their community, their culture and to the games.

**Service to All Relations (STAR) School, Flagstaff, AZ** — A Native-led charter elementary school that predominantly serves children and families in the community of Leupp (the southwest corner of the Navajo Nation). The STAR school is nationally recognized for their Farm to School efforts and providing local, healthy and indigenous foods to their students, families, and staff. In addition to this work, they have effectively integrated physical activity and movement into their daily school curriculum and before and after school activities. Their promotion of running weaves in life lessons through the teaching of Navajo history, culture, language and traditions.

There are numerous promising programs and community-led strategies working to improve movement and physical activity among children in Indian Country. Many of the programming strategies consider a broader definition of health in their efforts and will often go beyond just addressing a disease or condition. Additionally, many strategies do not neatly fit into western evaluation approaches and as a result are rarely seen as effective or evidence-based. This must change. Indigenous evaluation approaches ARE evidence-based and must be a part of appropriate evaluation measures in physical activity programming. However, we, at the Foundation, recognize that existing research efforts, including our own, are in the early stages about how best to evaluate them. Some of the evaluation metrics may be unique to individual communities while others may be applied much more broadly across Native communities. We must also be sensitive to what is culturally appropriate that can be shared outside of each of the communities.

Moving forward, it is important to value and recognize the existing Indigenous research and evaluation approaches that can and should be used and expanded on. The NB3 Foundation is not alone in this approach. There are a number of important academic institutions,

researchers and organizations ((Thompson, 2014; Warne and Roanhorse, 2015; Roberts et al., 2016) and many more) that are leading in this approach. I would recommend that there be ongoing spaces for these critical conversations, first and foremost within Native Nation's and then with their stakeholders. When appropriate, include current and future funders (i.e. federal and private stakeholders) to learn about these evaluation strategies and why this approach must be valued and supported. Finally, it is very clear that this work requires establishing strong partnerships with Native communities built on the foundation for supporting and respecting and appreciating Indigenous knowledge, values, traditions, language and the connections to movement and physical activity.

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