

Active Living Research

Using Evidence to Prevent Childhood Obesity
and Create Active Communities

ARTICLE SUMMARY

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It Shouldn't Hurt: Creating Places for Injury-Free Active Living

Introduction

Being active is essential to the health and well-being of children, but physical activity can also lead to injuries. Very serious injuries can lead to permanent disability and even death, and injuries are the leading cause of childhood death and disability in the United States and around the world. Even minor injuries have negative effects, including reducing levels of health-benefiting physical activity. Effective injury prevention programs must accompany efforts to increase physical activity among youth, so that the health benefits from active living are not outweighed by a significant increase in injuries. This study reviews and summarizes scientific literature related to physical activity and injury prevention. It also identifies effective place-based policies and environmental design principles that can prevent injuries while promoting active lifestyles for children.

Key Findings

Since injury prevention and active living share a focus on making physical places appealing and safe for children to be active, place-focused interventions (including policy initiatives) can be very effective. Place-focused interventions that promote both activity and safety include requiring that playgrounds meet safety standards for the height of equipment and soft surfaces; implementing traffic calming measures and urban planning strategies that separate cars from pedestrians and bicyclists to promote safe active commuting; and passing and enforcing legislation requiring use of bicycle helmets and other protective equipment. Along with these changes, behavioral adaptation also is important. For example, even if a policy requires helmet use, a cyclist still must put one on in order for its preventive benefit to be realized.

Methodology

We reviewed scientific literature related to physical activity and injury prevention, and research on several causes of activity-related injuries, including walking, bicycling, swimming, sports and recreation, and play on playgrounds. We also identified effective place-based policies and design

SOURCE

Pollack, K.M., Kercher, C., Frattaroli, S., Peek-Asa, C., Sleet, D., Rivara, F.P. (2012). Toward environments and policies that promote *injury-free* active living – it wouldn't hurt. *Health & Place*, 18(1), 106-114.

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principles that can prevent injuries while promoting active lifestyles for children.

Other Findings

This study highlights several comprehensive efforts to create safe environments for activity. For example, in the mid-1950s, through the combined efforts of physicians and political leaders, Sweden embarked on an effort to reduce its child injury death rate. Over time, Sweden developed a comprehensive injury prevention program, which emphasizes child safety through environmental design modifications, combined with parent education and strategies to encourage behavioral changes. Interventions included city planning that emphasized the separation of vehicles from pedestrians and bicyclists, thereby reducing the risk of injuries to these vulnerable road users; mandatory swimming lessons for all school children to reduce the risk of drowning; and extended preschool services for the purpose of increasing supervision to reduce the risk of injury during play and school. These strategies contributed to the reduction in Sweden's child death rate from one of the highest in the Western hemisphere to now the lowest. By using policy to promote environmental and behavioral change to address pedestrian, play, cycling and swimming injuries, this national initiative offers a model for injury prevention, and an example of the significant overlap between the priorities of injury prevention and the promotion of active living.

Implications

Efforts to increase physical activity among youth can and should occur in partnership with injury prevention professionals. By working together to promote active lifestyles for youth, such collaborations promote optimal child health and low risk for injury.