

# Consider Teen Activity Options When Choosing Where to Live

May 27 2010, By Joan Vos MacDonald

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Choosing a neighborhood that has places to walk to and safe routes to get there can help your child maintain a healthy weight during adolescence.

A new [Journal of Adolescent Health](#) study correlated the incidence of obesity in students grades eight through ten with options for physical activity in their immediate environment.

The study coincides with a new [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) report that only 20 percent of homes have parks or recreation centers a half-mile or less away.

“Active-living neighborhoods are an essential part of reversing our nation’s [obesity epidemic](#),” said Sandy Slater, Ph.D., lead study author and a research assistant professor at the Institute for Health Research and Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago. “Young teens who can walk and bike safely near home and have access to physical activity settings are much more likely to be active and much less likely to be obese.”

The three-year study collected data from more than 12,000 students, with roughly a third each living in urban, suburban and rural neighborhoods. Environmental factors included the presence of parks and sports fields and whether teens could walk safely to reach such settings or just walk in general.

Being able to walk or bike to a nearby teen-friendly destination, such as a community arts center, a movie theater or coffee shop can also matter.

“These destinations themselves don’t involve physical activity, but being able to safely walk or bike to them increases your ability to engage in moderate physical activity on a regular basis,” said Heather Wooten, a senior planning and policy associate with Planning for Healthy Places at Public Health Law and Policy.

While settings such as playgrounds appealed to younger children, said Slater, the study found they did not motivate teens. Bike paths were most likely to be associated with lower incidence of obesity.

Safety was also important. “Perceptions of neighborhood safety were one of the strongest predictors of physical activity,” said Slater. “If kids don’t feel safe walking or biking in their neighborhood then they’re not likely to use outdoor [physical-activity](#) related settings or facilities.”

Wooten suggests that communities could reap some benefits from working with local teens in planning teen-specific recreational facilities. “They may find skate parks, community gardens, or bike trails are more teens’ speed,” she said.

When choosing a neighborhood to live in, parents might want to look beyond whether their school has a fancy new sports field.

“They should also look at whether their teens can walk or bike to school, and whether they can walk or bike to nearby destinations - whether those destinations are parks or a YMCA or even the local library,” said Wooten.

**More information:** Slater SJ, et al. The association between community physical activity settings and youth physical activity, obesity

and body mass index. J Adol Health online, 2010.

Provided by Health Behavior News Service

Citation: Consider Teen Activity Options When Choosing Where to Live (2010, May 27)  
retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-05-teen-options.html>

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