

Including Indigenous youth helps guide better sport and recreation opportunities

August 8 2018, by Nicole Graham

Incorporating Indigenous cultures, traditions and connections to the land is one of four key recommendations policy makers and program planners should consider when developing sport and recreation opportunities for Indigenous youth, according to a University of Alberta study.

Led by associate professor Tara-Leigh McHugh, a recent systematic review of 20 Canadian-based sport and [recreation](#) studies have resulted in four key considerations that are embedded in the voices of over 400 Indigenous youth.

"Our main criteria when we started the review were that we wanted qualitative research that was grounded in the voices of Indigenous youth," says McHugh, a researcher in the Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation. "It's one thing for us to tell you the benefits of sport and recreation, but when you actually hear from Indigenous youth either their positive or negative [experiences](#) with sport and recreation, it really drives the research home."

From the analysis of the data—which saw McHugh and her team screen more than 400 studies before narrowing it down to the 20 used to pull the data—the following youth-led considerations were identified:

1. Incorporate Indigenous cultures, traditions and connections to the land

Participants in one of the 20 studies described how they were able to connect to activities that are more cultural and traditional, with one young woman stating access to traditional dances, practices, teaching and ceremonies helps her feel more spiritual. In another study, a young man stated that "sport means being outside," which echoed the voices of many youth who stated their desire to connect with the land during these activities.

2. Develop opportunities that build upon the strong relationships with family and other Indigenous community members

McHugh noted a constant theme throughout the testimonials: Indigenous youth described how relationships with family or community members made their sport and recreation experiences more enjoyable.

"When asked why their relationships with their family and community members were so important, one individual described that his father is very important to his sport and recreation experiences by saying 'He takes the time and money to put me into sports because he likes to keep me active,' she said.

McHugh added that Indigenous youth also described how sport and recreation opportunities can, and often are, used to promote and enhance family and community relationships.

3. Focus on opportunities that facilitate potential holistic benefits

Many of the youth quoted in McHugh's paper articulated a deep understanding of the potential emotional, physical, mental and spiritual benefits of sport and recreation. The communication and teamwork that is learned through sport was described by youth as mentally beneficial,

and words like "fun" and "happy" were commonly used when asked about the emotional benefits of these activities. Traditional activities like powwows were seen as providing both spiritual and physical benefits.

4. Address multiple levels of barriers

Despite the many potential benefits of sport and recreation, many of the youth noted various barriers that negatively impacted their experiences, most notably racism, financial constraints and access to facilities, spaces and programs. Some respondents explained the social challenges of pursuing sport where an Indigenous youth is the only Indigenous person participating in the programs. In some cases, they said it led them experience various levels of direct racism.

According to McHugh, the key considerations can play a vital role on sport and recreation policy and program planning.

"There seems to be an increased interest to ensure our programs in Canada are inclusive and welcoming for Indigenous youth," she said. "If [policy makers](#) and programmers take a closer look at the research supporting the considerations, they will see that these four points can be the first step in creating that inclusive, safe environment and, in turn, create a fulfilling and meaningful experience for Indigenous youth."

Working with the Alberta Centre for Active Living, they have created an infographic that they have been sharing with interested groups working with Indigenous [youth](#).

The paper, "A Meta-Study of Qualitative Research Examining Sport and Recreation Experiences of Indigenous Youth" is published online in *Qualitative Health Research*.

More information: Tara-Leigh F. McHugh et al. A Meta-Study of

Qualitative Research Examining Sport and Recreation Experiences of Indigenous Youth, *Qualitative Health Research* (2018). DOI: [10.1177/1049732318759668](https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732318759668)

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