

# THE ROLE OF RECREATION AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES IN NEIGHBOURHOOD PROMOTION

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## INTRODUCTION

Inspired by the 1988–92 Model Province in Physical Activity project, the residents of a neighbourhood in Kainuu, Finland, initiated a joint planning physical activity project in their neighbourhood. The main aim of this activity was to promote togetherness with the help of sporting activities. The joint planning expanded the village committee's activities into a structured project. This research investigated the role of physical activity in this process during the years 1989-2006.

Physical activity has played a significant and, instrumental role in Finnish society. According to the current Sports Act (1054/1998), physical activity is a means to advance civic activity and the population's well-being and health, as well as to support the growth and development of children and youth. The act also aims to promote equality, tolerance, multiculturalism and sustainable development of the environment. In this research the role played by physical activity in community development is examined.

## METHODS

The development of civic activity and public administration related to this process is considered both theoretically and empirically, applying action research and case study methods. The frame of reference is an activity-system model for developmental research work (Engeström 1987), which is related to action research. The components of this model (subject, object, rules, instruments, division of labour and community) have been used in the data collection. The material consists of interviews, written reports, newspaper clippings, records and written material produced by residents, elected officials and authorities.

## RESULTS

The starting point of joint planning was to develop physical activities (object) in the area and in this way to also promote togetherness. Inhabitants soon noticed that sport and physical activities could not be isolated from other societal activities. Sport promotion requires cooperation between different sectors of society. For example, technical resources are needed in order to facilitate cycling paths. The social and health sectors are important in creating opportunities for physical activities in kindergartens and among elderly people. The instrumental significance of sport and physical activities gradually became to become increasingly essential. A larger cooperation also leads to a larger instrumental value of sport. This emphasizes the community component of the activity system model. As the joint planning progressed, physical activity changed from an object into an instrument.

The instrumental significance of physical activity in creating identity and constructing the tradition of cooperation in the research area can be investigated by applying the models of Eichberg (2004). Examples of identity integration include dance courses, youth game nights, group hikes and trips to fitness spas, all of which have strengthened regional togetherness. Various festive events brought the residents and cooperation partners together to meet one another. The importance of constructed meeting places and outdoor facilities must not be forgotten because they provide interesting opportunities for families to be active together.

In summary according to this research the role of physical activities in neighbourhood promotion was considered a good activity to promote togetherness. Subsequently, physical activity was understood to be linked to other

activities which contributed to the overall development of the area, not just physical activities. Finally, sport and physical activities were clearly identified as having instrumental significance for the other activities of the inhabitants of the area.

## **DISCUSSION**

Physical activity is not the most important aspect of life, but it is a significant form of social activity, which is necessary for a collective identity. The strong instrumental significance of physical activity, as presented in the Sports Act, came out in the activities and planning of the neighbourhood committee of this study. This became evident when joint planning expanded into the comprehensive development operations of the research area. It was illustrative of this change that physical activity was perceived as a seamlessly articulated part of the neighbourhood as a whole. It was an important starting point for the cooperation between joint planning, civic activity and public administration. Activities in the area of sport and leisure also serve as important reinforcements of a collective identity at the local level.

Jarvie (2003) has shown that physical activity can have a positive influence on the local community spirit. Physical activity does not solve social or community problems entirely, but it can offer a partial solution, for example by including people who have been marginalised within society. This was evident in this study: physical activity is not a separate sector that can be strictly separated from other activities in the area. The role of physical activity is also not unchanging. This research has shed light on the role of physical activity among different civic actors. Sports clubs are important actors in the physical activity field, but there are also other actors whose functions in the area of physical activity have societal significance.

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