



Dudes, Time to Close the Gender Gap

There is a gender gap when it comes to the amount of physical activity that women take part in compared to their male counterparts. Nationally¹, 9% fewer adult women (ages 20-34) take part in physical activity during leisure time. The Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport² reports that only 19% of Canadian women take part in sport (compared to 35% of men).

Additionally, we know that married men exercise more than married women. Kids, the great game changer, come along and decrease activity levels even further, but women are disproportionately affected by becoming parents. Fathers' activity levels are not really impacted by the arrival of the first child; however, their spouse's activity rates drop markedly. Women undoubtedly see an increase in light activity in the home after a child arrives. Don't get me wrong, having kids is hard work, but we're talking about physical activity in the clinical context

of moderate-vigorous physical activity here. The sweat inducing stuff for which there are demonstrable health gains.

Often when we chat with local women about what prevents them from being more physically active they say they just don't have the time. They cite that they are too busy juggling all of the demands they have, and so filling their leisure time with more activity just isn't practical. Everyone just needs a break. But given all the well-known benefits, both mental and physical, of an active lifestyle, wouldn't it be great if just a few more minutes could be found each day to help women, who need I say are usually the primary caregivers in any household, take care of themselves.

Here's a few ideas for the men in the household on how to support women and moms to be more active:

Make a plan together to be active. I recently heard of a couple in the Municipality who take turns playing the games they love. She plays soccer in the

summer. He plays hockey in the winter. And during each of their 'off-seasons' they are in charge of taking care of the kids while the other goes out to play.

Be active together. Find an activity that you both will enjoy and make space in your life to do it as a couple or as a family. Walking is the number one activity that people in the Municipality say they like to do. Find a place that offers an appropriate challenge for both of you and one that feels safe and pleasant.

Talk about the barriers. There are many valid reasons why women do not participate more, beyond the demands of parenting and a lack of time. Have a chat about what is really standing in the way, and work together to find options and solutions that will enable meaningful and enjoyable participation in recreation.

Get out of the way. Many women, not all of course, want to participate in sports in a supportive, non-competitive

environment. Allow women to participate on their own terms and don't impose your notion of what sports should be on her.

Take care of yourself. You are a big influence on your spouse's activity habits. If you participate in physical activity and sports, you are more likely to see this behavior mirrored by your spouse. Be both an inspiration and motivation for your partner to follow her own goals.

Create a supportive environment which encourages not only your spouse to be active, but for her to be a role model for your kids as they grow up following the lead set by the both of you.

If you are in a position of leadership in sports or recreation settings, create opportunities for women to take on leadership roles as well. Encourage them to become coaches and offer the training opportunities to help them gain the skills they need to be confident in the role.

Speak up and advocate for equal opportunities for women and girls, and encourage them to do the same on their own behalf.

Keep your eyes open for great recreation opportunities and be sure to share them when they come along. Psst, pass along this recreation guide.

Plan an active vacation. This does not mean saying "Hey Honey, why don't we go to Keji next week?" It means you booking a backcountry campsite, planning which trail to hike, assembling the gear and making sure the pegs are still in the tent bag. Consult, but you do the work. Set you and your family up for success and it will foster more enjoyable times in the future.

Encourage your wife to try new activities, especially those in women supportive environments. Some women prefer women-only classes to reduce their apprehension or

the intimidation they may feel in what could be perceived as judgmental environments.

Small, daily things count. There's no need to push your wife to run her first marathon. Instead, encourage her to take a fifteen-minute walk while you fold the laundry.

Support women to take on leadership roles. Youth sport needs more female leaders, coaches, and referees. Do what you can to encourage your partner to take on one of those roles, and create the space and time for her to pursue them.

Help make connections to other women who are being physically active. Build a supportive social network by introducing your wife to other women you may know who are also looking for physical activity opportunities.

Emphasize fun and fitness, over weight loss and competition. Check the language you use to make sure you are truly emphasizing the most important motivators for being physically active.

Encourage your partner to take lessons, or to join a class, to gain the skills and confidence she needs to be able to carry on an activity for years.

Invest in the right gear (don't expect a right-handed golfer to use left handed clubs) and clothing to support year-round participation.

Call on any available supportive resources ("Hello, Granny and Grandad") to help out with the kids, and dedicate the time you carve out to being active together.

Ask. Ask her what she wants to do. Don't presume that because she played basketball in high school that she wants to join a league now after having three kids. We all change through our lives, and our interests, priorities, and values shift with us. Look at what matters now, and look for activities that fit her current set of values. If she values time to reflect, maybe meditation is a good fit. If she values comradery, maybe a walking group is a good fit. Talk about it and look for activities that will be meaningful, enjoyable, and do-able.

Us guys have many important roles to play in supporting the women and girls in our lives. Encouraging an active and healthy lifestyle is just one of them, but one that can have a huge impact. And yes, I should follow some of my own advice.

Note: Although written from a heterocentric point of view, the ideas in this article are intended to apply to any type of relationship where there is an imbalance in responsibilities and time demands.

1 StatsCan, 2016. Physical activity during leisure time, by age group and sex .

2 Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport. <http://www.caaws.ca/facts-and-stats/>

3 BMC Public Health. 2014; 14:1127. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4232667/>

