

Communicating to the Public and Policy Makers

Language That Works for Physical Activity

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PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ALLIANCE

MOVE WITH US

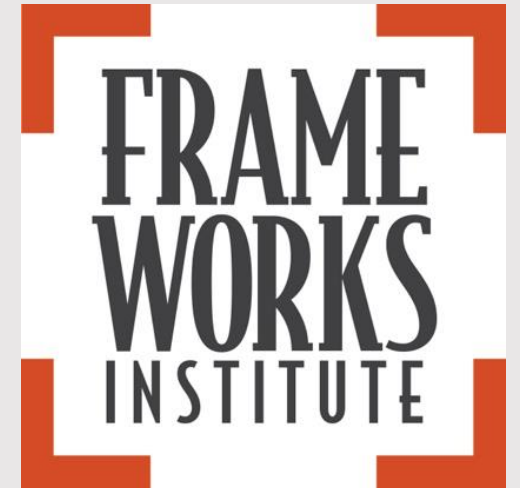
Context

- Funded by National Physical Activity Plan Alliance (NPAPA) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- Research conducted by FrameWorks Institute
- **To examine the public and field's thinking about physical activity. Examined media portrayals, too.**
- Phase 1 of larger project to develop a core story to communicate to policy makers and the public about physical activity



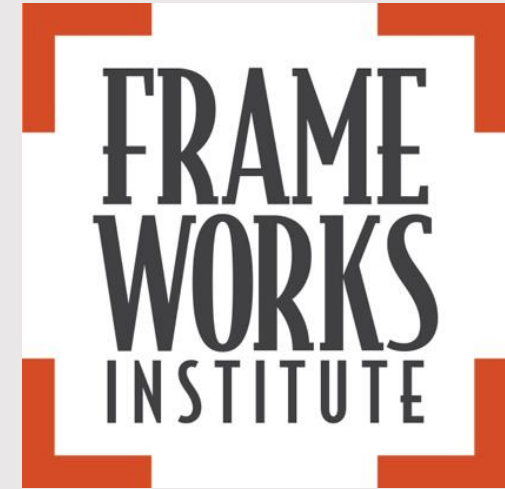
Relax!

- Reports: Frameworks Institute website
- Links to the reports at presentation end
- And slides available through America Walks



Research Methods

- Public's understanding: 20 in-person, in-depth interviews
- Field Experts: 8 interviews
- Organizations: Analyzed communications (press releases, webpages)
- Media: LexusNexus search of major US newspapers. Coded 117 articles



Findings

Communication Challenges

Challenge 1: Public thinks of physical activity as vigorous exercise.

The media reinforces this.



Recommend

- **Be explicit:** Physical activity includes many types of activities at *varying levels of intensity*, not just cardio workouts, and that it can be a part of people's daily routines.
- **Give examples** of activities like gardening, household chores, taking one's children to the park as forms of physical activity.



Communication Challenges

Challenge 2. Members of the public tend to adopt a “no pain, no gain” perspective on physical activity (i.e., exercise).



Recommend

Emphasize that physical activity can be pleasant and joyful. Give examples of what that looks like.

Avoid leading with the difficulties of exercising and working out.



Communication Challenges

Challenge 3: Public thinks willpower and inner drive shape whether people are physically active or not.

Plus, the media emphasizes individual choices and inner motivation. Neglects structural factors.



Recommend

Avoid leading with a discussion of individual responsibility.

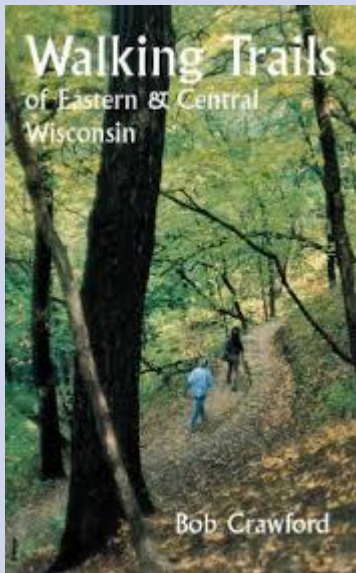
Lead with structural factors (e.g., safe parks and access to transportation) highlighting how environments can promote or inhibit physical activity.

Explain how systemic factors shape opportunities for physical activity, don't just assert that they do.

Use terms like "options" and "opportunities," instead of "choices" and "lifestyle."

But. . . Good news about that. . .

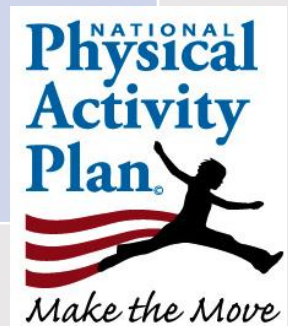
Researchers, practitioners, other experts in the field DO emphasize environmental factors.



Findings

72% of field materials discuss structural-level contributors to physical activity (e.g., the built environment, neighborhood safety, or employment conditions) compared with 41% in the media.

The field, in particular, focuses on the ways in which environmental factors *inhibit*, rather than promote, active lifestyles.



Communication Challenges

Challenge 4: The public thinks that physical activity mostly happens in dedicated workout spaces.



Recommend

Strike a balance: fitness spaces and other types of spaces in which physical activity can occur.

Again, give examples of activities that can happen in non-fitness spaces--playgrounds, cycling on bike paths, “walk and talk” meetings at work, line dancing, and of course neighborhood WALKS!



Communication Challenges

Recommend

Challenge 5: The public, media and the field lack an equity perspective.



Be explicit that physical activity should be a vital part of daily life for everyone, regardless of where they live, what job they have, or how much they make.

Provide a *step-by-step explanation* of how housing, access to reliable transportation, and safety can affect people's ability to be physically active, especially in underserved communities and places of employment. Don't just assert that they do.



Communication Challenges

Recommend

Challenge 6: Both the media and the field focus on physical health benefits of physical activity.

For children: Field and media specify that children need physical activity, but don't link physical activity to healthy development.

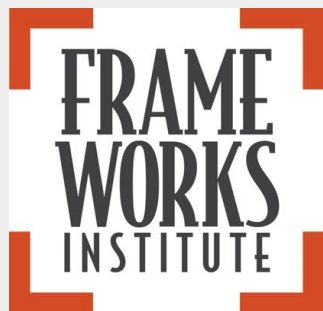
Emphasize the benefits of physical activity beyond physical health--mental health, cognitive function, or relationships.

Make the link between children's physical activity and overall development. Discuss responsibility for children's physical activity belonging to multiple sectors-- transportation, urban planning, and education.



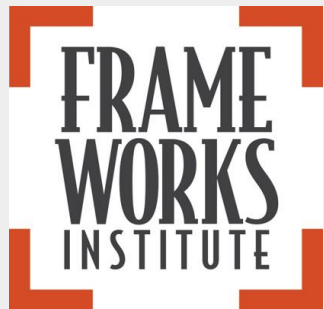
Our next steps, subject to additional funding

- Turn these findings into narrative strategies to be tested. Aimed at helping experts, advocates, and media communicators move the public discourse in productive directions.
- Final deliverables: ***strategic briefs and an on-line toolkit: a “Framing Playbook.”*** Products to help advocates, researchers, organizations and professionals understand communication challenges and specific framing tools and strategies.



Reports available at . . .

- <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/NPAPA-Strategic-Brief.pdf>
- <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/NPAPA-Physical-Activity-Report.pdf>



Thank you!

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National Physical Activity Plan Alliance
Communication Project

