

More Than Just Exercise: Media and Organizational Discourse on Physical Activity

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Introduction

Despite numerous public health efforts, few Americans live the kind of active lifestyles that are necessary to promote health and wellbeing. As experts note, creating a physically active society requires fundamental changes to the places where we live, work, and play.¹ These systemic solutions, such as creating playgrounds, walkable communities, and more school time for physical education, are needed to increase the uptake of active lifestyles for individuals, families, and communities.

If people recognize the importance of active lifestyles and the policies that enable them, then they are more likely to demand change.

In order to create this wide-scale change, members of the public need to be engaged as knowledgeable participants in discussions around physical activity. If people recognize the importance of active lifestyles and the policies that enable them, then they are more likely to demand change. To effectively strategize about how to foster these changes in attitudes and understanding, experts and advocates need to understand the current discourse

around physical activity. By understanding the state of our current public conversation, these stakeholders can more effectively shift the conversation in productive directions and foster change.

Media coverage plays an important role in shaping the public's attitudes about and understanding of physical activity. The news media act as gatekeepers, amplifying certain kinds of messages, and muting others. By repeating certain stories and frames, news media can shape people's beliefs, attitudes, and even policy preferences—a phenomenon referred to as the “drip drip” effect.² Over time, this steady drip of information shapes public thinking and action.

The news media, however, are not the public's only source of information about physical activity. Advocacy organizations, research organizations, direct service providers, and key funders also communicate with members of the public directly and indirectly via other communication channels. This organizational “field” captures a range of relevant and influential groups that actively shape communications about physical activity. And

while field communications platforms are not as powerful or as popular as the media, they nevertheless frame information for the public about what physical activity is, why it is important, and how it can be promoted.

This report addresses two core goals: (1) to document and analyze the frames and storytelling approaches that shape media and organizational discourse around physical activity and (2) to identify the likely implications of this discourse on public thinking. This report provides experts and advocates with a detailed understanding of the communication landscape in which they operate and offers initial recommendations about how to move it in more productive directions.

The FrameWorks Institute, in collaboration with Michelle Segar, PhD, Director of the University of Michigan's Sports, Health, and Activity Research and Policy Center, conducted this research as part of a larger, multi-method project, sponsored by the National Physical Activity Plan Alliance (NPAP Alliance) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), to develop an evidence-based strategy for communicating more effectively about physical activity. The goals of the larger project are to design and test framing strategies that can expand public understanding of what physical activity is, the ways that it can benefit health and wellbeing, and how levels of physical activity among the public can be increased through structural-level change.

Methods and Data

This research explores two key questions:

1. What storytelling and framing strategies do the news media and organizations in the field use to communicate about physical activity?
2. What are the implications of these stories for public thinking?

Media Sample

The media sample includes articles from the US newspapers with the highest circulation, including: the *Arizona Republic*; the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*; the *Boston Globe*; the *Chicago Tribune*; the *Dallas Morning News*; the *Denver Post*; the *Detroit News*; the *Houston Chronicle*; the *Los Angeles Times*; the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*; the *Star-Ledger* (Newark); the *Daily News* (New York); the *New York Post*; the *New York Times*; the *Philadelphia Inquirer*; the *San Francisco Chronicle*; *USA Today*; the *Washington Post*; and the *Wall Street Journal*.³

Using LexisNexis, FrameWorks researchers searched and downloaded articles from these sources using a search strategy designed to capture a broad range of topics related to physical activity.⁴ Searches were limited to articles that appeared between January 1, 2019, and December 31, 2019. All articles were carefully reviewed by researchers, who removed those that did not deal substantively with physical activity or duplicated other articles (i.e., the same article appearing in multiple news outlets). This process resulted in a final sample of 117 articles, each of which was coded and analyzed.

Field Sample

The organizational sample was constructed via a multistage process. In collaboration with the project partners, FrameWorks researchers compiled a list of advocacy organizations, research organizations, direct service providers, and key funders working on and communicating about topics related to physical activity.

Researchers then sampled public-facing communications materials from each organization (e.g., press releases, reports, “About Us” webpages, and other communications). These materials were selected because they contained content about how each organization describes its work and orientation to physical activity. In total, researchers sampled 99 articles from 20 organizations’ websites, each of which was coded and analyzed. A full list of organizations in the field sample is available in the endnotes.⁵

Analysis of Media and Organizational Materials

The analysis was designed to identify the dominant narratives circulating about physical activity. FrameWorks’ researchers used the codebook below to perform quantitative coding that enumerated important narrative components of each document. This codebook included standard coding categories used in prior FrameWorks research and framing literature more generally,⁶ and was informed by research conducted as part of previous phases of this project.⁷

Table 1. Examples of codes

Narrative component	Brief description	Examples of codes ⁸
Demographics	What kinds of individuals and/or groups are discussed in relation to physical activity (i.e., whose levels of physical activity are being discussed)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children • Older adults • Women • Men • Families
Geography/location	Does the content mention physical activity in terms of where individuals live?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural • Suburban • Urban
Primary issue	On what kind(s) of issues or topics does the content primarily focus (i.e., what aspect of physical activity is the majority of the content about)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food and diet-related topics • Economics • Child development • Healthcare • Technology • The built environment
Causes of physical activity	What factors explain why people may engage in physical activity or inactivity?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual factors (e.g., individual motivation, time, convenience, mental health, physical health) • Societal factors (e.g., transportation, built environment, natural environment, inequality, safety, technology)

Narrative component	Brief description	Examples of codes ⁸
Effects of physical activity	Does the content mention that physical activity or inactivity has effects on any of the following types of outcomes, or the kind of effect it has?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual outcomes (e.g., mental health, physical fitness, overall well-being, social connection) • Societal outcomes (e.g., economic, healthcare)
Solutions and policies	What is—or should be—done to increase levels of physical activity?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education and awareness • School-based solutions • Healthcare-system solutions • Technology-based solutions • Employer-based solutions
Terminology	Does the content use or mention other terms to discuss physical activity?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active living • Active lifestyle • Active play • Play • Exercise • Physical fitness • Movement • Sport

After coding the data, the analysis proceeded in three stages:

Frequency Analysis. To begin, researchers examined how often each code appeared in media and organizational documents and calculated the percentage of materials within each sample that contained each individual code.

Qualitative frame analysis. Next, researchers identified themes, trends, and patterns of meaning in the data. Informed by the frequency analysis, FrameWorks researchers identified codes of interest for qualitative analysis (e.g., researchers explored the role of individual motivation in physical activity). A random subsample of 50 percent of articles was selected for each code or code category and analyzed to identify dominant narratives. This analysis discerned patterns in what was *said* (documents’ explicit language or content) and what was *implied* (ideas derived via interpretation and inference).

Cognitive analysis. Finally, the findings from the steps above were interpreted against the backdrop of the public’s deep assumptions and implicit understandings about physical activity. This analysis explores how media and organizational frames (1) cue and reinforce existing ways of thinking among the public; (2) conflict with or challenge existing ways of thinking or (3) fail to address a topic, leaving people to “fill in the blanks” with existing patterns in thinking. This final analysis enables us to identify how frames embedded within materials are likely to affect public understanding of physical activity.

Findings

This section of the report identifies the dominant framing strategies used by the media and the field to speak about physical activity. Following each finding is a discussion of the implications of these strategies for public thinking.

Finding #1: The media narrowly focus on strenuous forms of exercise and exclude other forms of physical activity.

While public health experts understand the term “physical activity” to encompass a wide range of different activities and behaviors that involve movement, the media promote a much narrower understanding of what constitutes physical activity—often focusing on strenuous activities intended to elevate one’s heart rate, build muscle, or produce sweat. Media articles about physical activity specifically used the term “exercise” in the context of playing group sports, attending workout classes, or other forms of vigorous activity. In our sample, media articles almost never discussed lower-intensity activities such as going for walks, housework, or taking children to play in the park.

Media articles often suggest that forms of exercise that are *not* vigorous or challenging are unlikely to yield many (if any) health benefits. This “no pain, no gain” mentality is shown in the following excerpt, where the author speaks about her recommendations for staying healthy:

If a workout is too easy, you won’t see results, and you won’t feel anything. Except maybe bored. I suggest leaning toward harder workouts, then modify as needed. Feeling challenged means you’re on the right track. Sweating does, too.⁹

Implications

The media's narrow focus on exercise is unproductive and is likely to constrain people's understanding of the many different ways that people can stay physically active. As prior research has shown, the public already assumes that physical activity needs to be strenuous and rarely thinks beyond running, biking, fitness classes, or team sports—and the media's framing is only likely to reinforce this way of thinking. The assumption that exercise needs to be strenuous is counterproductive and makes it harder to see the ways in which physical activity can be an enjoyable and satisfying experience.

Finding #2: In the media, explanations for why people are physically active tend to be highly individualized.

Media articles tend to locate the causes of physical activity entirely in people's choices, behaviors, and other individual-level characteristics. In our sample, over 70 percent of news stories focus on these individual-level factors, which include things like having sufficient time, motivation, willpower, or whether physical activity is personally convenient.

Media coverage of physical activity is dominated by episodic storytelling¹⁰—that is, it tends to “zoom in” to profile specific individuals. These episodic stories tend to focus on people's choices and motivations around physical activity, but neglect the broad social contexts and structural realities that shape people's lived experiences, choices, and behaviors.

Qualitative analysis of these individualistic stories revealed a set of frequently appearing story types:

A “rational actor” narrative. In this story type, the decision to be physically active or not is based on a rational calculus of its perceived benefits and costs. On one side of the ledger, people weigh what they stand to gain in terms of physical or mental health, or aesthetics; on the other, they consider the costs or drawbacks (e.g., the need for vigorous physical exertion, the time associated with being active, and so on). These stories assume, often implicitly, that the more people are convinced of the health benefits of physical activity, the more likely they will be to incorporate it into their lives:

What if you had a medicine that could make your heart stronger, while improving your blood sugar and cholesterol, with no side effects except a better mood and smaller gut? “You’d call it a wonder drug,” Dr. Theodore Shybut said. “Really, it’s just staying active.”¹¹

The “change your life” narrative. These stories profile individuals who have made dramatic changes to their habits around physical activity, often resulting in significant weight loss or some other kind of physical transformation. These stories often center around an individual’s decision to “change their life”—an epiphany brought about by dissatisfaction with their health or their physical appearance. Framed this way, being physically active is about having the right amount of individual drive and willpower.

After retiring from a desk job, Nancy Burnham was diagnosed with heart disease and asthma. She was overweight and, for her whole life, had gotten little to no exercise. Then, one day, she went to a shopping plaza and instead of steering the car left to buy groceries, she turned right, toward a gym. That turn of the wheel changed everything. At the age of 61, Burnham began her first workout routine. Little by little, she lost weight, strengthened her core muscles and felt like a new person.¹²

A “super athlete” narrative. A final set of stories describe ordinary individuals with an extraordinary commitment to physical activity and athleticism. These stories profile individuals for whom “exercise” is a major part of their life, such as fitness enthusiasts or competitive marathon runners. They position physical fitness as an unattainable ideal that is only possible for those who are willing to sacrifice huge amounts of time and energy in its pursuit.

Monday through Friday, pension-fund consultant Chris Solarz wakes up and runs 10 to 12 miles in Central Park—before walking 50 blocks to his Midtown office. In the evenings, he picks the pace back up for a 25-minute jog home. It’s a lot of cardio—but it beats the underground alternative, Solarz says. “If you take the subway, it takes 25 minutes nine out of 10 days,” says the 40-year-old, who runs 15 marathons annually.¹³

Implications

The preponderance of individualistic stories further ingrains the public’s assumption that individual factors—such as inner drive and willpower—are the primary drivers of physical activity. Media coverage of super-athletes and extreme weight loss makes it easy to celebrate these individual achievements, but harder to appreciate how contexts, systems, and resources enable these positive outcomes to begin with. In addition, these stories are also implicitly stigmatizing to individuals who are *not* (or are unable to be) physically active, because they are assumed to lack the appropriate levels of drive or determination. Finally, these stories invite the public to think fatalistically about structural or systemic solutions to the issue—because if physical activity is the consequence of individual choice, it is presumed to be impervious to policy change.

Finding #3: The field focuses on the role of environmental factors in shaping levels of physical activity.

In contrast to the media, materials from the field were much more likely to tell thematic stories that highlighted the role of contexts and environments in shaping levels of physical activity. In total, 72 percent of field materials discuss structural-level contributors to physical activity (e.g., the built environment, neighborhood safety, or employment conditions), compared with 41 percent in the media. The field tends to highlight how features of the built environment—such as parks, sidewalks, walking trails, and bike paths—impact people’s ability to be physically active.

The field, in particular, focuses on the ways in which environmental factors *inhibit*, rather than promote, active lifestyles. Field materials frequently discuss how safety concerns—such as neighborhood violence—serve as barriers to living active lifestyles outdoors.

Implications

The field’s focus on environmental factors like the built environment and safety is productive. A focus on environments and systems helps people see that environments matter and creates space for the public to consider how policies can reshape them. As a result, it is likely to shift people’s thinking away from explanations of physical activity that center on individuals making good choices and exerting willpower, and toward the shortcomings of community spaces and public policies that make it harder for people to stay physically active.

Finding #4: Both the media and the field focus on the impacts of physical activity on physical health.

Experts assert that regular physical activity has numerous and wide-ranging effects, including on physical health, mental health, cognitive function, happiness, social connectedness, and overall quality of life. However, in our analysis of field and media materials, communications tend to focus narrowly on physical activity’s impacts on physical health.

These materials emphasize the role of physical activity in reducing chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, and the risk of certain types of cancers, as well as promoting muscular health, bone health, and brain function.¹⁴ As shown in Table 2, other types of effects—such as on mental health, social connectedness, or overall wellbeing, are referenced much less frequently:

Table 2. Effects of physical activity discussed by the media and the field

Effects of physical activity	Percent of field articles	Percent of media articles
Physical health	69%	67%
Mental health	15%	31%
Overall wellbeing	34%	29%
Social connections	26%	17%

Implications

While the field and the media’s focus on physical health is productive, earlier stages of the research show that the public are already attuned to the benefits of activity on physical health. This pattern of storytelling fails to bring the public’s attention to physical activity’s effects on mental health, cognitive function, or relationships. Communicators need ways of highlighting other benefits, particularly those that are not top of mind for the public.

Finding #5: Both the media and the field lack an equity perspective.

As experts argue, people living in low-income or underserved communities are less likely to engage in regular physical activity as a result of broader inequities in land use, housing, transportation, and economic development. For example, people on low incomes are less likely to have discretionary time to walk or cycle, face disproportionate safety risks, and are exposed to increased levels of transport emissions and pollution.

However, this equity perspective was rarely present in either the field or the media. Only 7 percent of field materials and 3 percent of media articles discuss how underserved and underresourced communities have fewer opportunities to be physically active.

In those few occasions where terms like “disparities” or “equity” *were* used, they were rarely defined or explained in ways that build meaningful public understanding. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from an organizational document:

[A non-profit's] comprehensive approach to improving health, particularly in neighborhoods that historically have lacked access to financial investment and opportunities, helped Kansas City win a 2015 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Culture of Health Prize. The group partnered with local education officials, parents, and other advocacy organizations to craft a district-wide wellness policy that expands opportunities for healthy eating and physical activity throughout the school day. The new policy [...] will help expand healthy opportunities for all children, Hunter says. That, he adds, is essential for improving health equity across the city.¹⁵

Here, the authors gesture toward the role of underresourced environments in shaping disparate health outcomes (“... particularly in neighborhoods that historically have lacked access to financial investment and opportunities”) but do not explicitly identify the kinds of community investments and opportunities that matter and explain their impacts. The reference to “improving health equity” is similarly undefined, leaving readers without a clear sense of what this approach entails.

At other times, materials *do* note the role of neighborhood and community-level barriers to physical activity. However, as this excerpt from the media shows, these factors are sometimes introduced only to then suggest that they can be overcome if one has a pair of shoes and enough enthusiasm to get outside and run:

“There are still disparities of safe spaces and parks nearby, but in general if you have a pair of shoes it’s something you can participate in,” [a coach] said. “We’re just sort of passionate about running because it’s an equitable activity.”¹⁶

Implications

Earlier stages of the research show that the public does not generally recognize or fully appreciate the ways in which people living in low-income or underserved communities have fewer opportunities to live active lifestyles. Neither the media nor the field focus on this topic either, leaving it essentially out of the public view. As prior FrameWorks research has shown,¹⁷ without providing people with a way to make sense of health disparities, they will likely fall back on default assumptions that center around personal vice or negative stereotypes of disadvantaged groups.

Finding #6: The field talks about the physical activity needs of children but rarely explains the link to healthy development.

In prior stages of the research, experts explained that physical activity is especially beneficial for children and adolescents. They noted that regular physical activity can promote healthy brain development, improve cardiovascular fitness, enhance concentration and focus in school, instill healthy lifelong habits, and prevent chronic disease.

In total, 44 percent of field materials (compared with 11 percent of media stories) mention children and adolescents in some fashion. However, while the field often mention how important physical activity is for children, they rarely mention *why* this is the case. For example, in the excerpt below, the authors reference the CDC's physical activity guidelines for children, without explaining how following these guidelines supports a child's healthy development:

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends children get 60 minutes of physical activity a day. It may sound like a lot, but it's easy to break up into smaller chunks throughout the day. Girls on the Run practice, school sports, recess and a post-dinner walk or dance party count!¹⁸

The above excerpt illustrates the field's tendency to assert that physical activity is important in childhood but without adopting a developmental perspective to explain why this is important for a child's long-term health and wellbeing.

The field frequently ascribes responsibility for children's physical activity needs to specific individuals rather than the broader systems in which children and their families are embedded.

In addition, the field's communications are often explicitly geared toward adults in children's lives, such as parents, teachers, and coaches. These documents offer these groups of adults advice to get children to exercise, with titles such as "Try these 10 tips to raise a healthy kid" or "No matter the age, you can help children stay active." In so doing, the field frequently ascribes responsibility for children's physical activity needs to specific individuals rather than the broader systems in which children and their families are embedded. There is

little mention, for example, of the ways in which school-based policies can promote children's physical activity—such as regular recess or after-school programs that allow students to participate in sports.

Implications

The field's focus on children is productive in that it orients the public to the importance of their physical activity needs. However, the lack of a developmental perspective undermines communications' ability to cultivate a full appreciation of *why* this is such an important time of life in which to instill good habits around physical activity.

In addition, the field's tendency to speak directly to individual parents, teachers, or coaches is likely to undermine efforts to frame this as a public issue that warrants collective, systems-level action. It places responsibility on individuals, and obscures how policies within child-facing systems (e.g., mandatory recess) can promote physical activity on a wider scale.

Recommendations

Communicators must take specific steps to address the limitations and opportunities presented by current media coverage and field discourse. Shifting public discourse about physical activity is a challenging task. However, as FrameWorks’ work on similar issues has shown, an effective core story that is consistently disseminated by multiple stakeholders and backed by influential organizations can bring about significant changes in the public conversation. The following recommendations, informed by findings from this research and from earlier phases of the project, offer initial strategies for shifting communications practice.

Recommendation #1: Broaden the public’s understanding of all the ways that people can be physically active.

Members of the public need to understand that physical activity *isn’t* synonymous with exercise—and that there are ways to stay active beyond running, biking, attending fitness classes, or playing team sports. Communicators should make efforts to use a broad definition of physical activity and name activities that members of the public *don’t* typically think about as physical activity. This is especially true of forms of activity that are less vigorous in nature, such as gardening, housework, or play.

What would it look like to implement this advice?

Original text:	What we recommend:	With suggested updates:
People should find ways of incorporating physical activity into their lifestyles, such as finding opportunities to go to the gym, attend workout classes or take up a sport.	<i>Add concrete examples—things people may not think of as physical activity, like walking or household chores—that audiences might not automatically think of. The updated text (right-hand column) broadens the definition of physical activity.</i>	There are many ways of incorporating physical activity into your lifestyle. For example, gardening, taking a walk, playing outdoors, or doing household chores are all ways that people can be physically active.

Recommendation #2: Continue to talk about ways in which the built environment can enable or promote physical activity.

Promisingly, our analysis showed that the field *does* inform the public about the ways in which community spaces and the built environment can make it easier to remain physically active. Alongside this strategy, the field also informs the public about how the built environment or insufficient community spaces can be barriers to remaining physically active. Communicators should continue to explain how the places where we live, work, and play impact individuals' and communities' ability to take part in physical activity. Go beyond gyms and fitness facilities, and instead talk about community resources such as bike paths, walking trails, and access to parks, open spaces, and just taking a walk on the sidewalk outside your house.

What would it look like to implement this advice?

Original text:	What we recommend:	With suggested updates:
In order to be physically active on the way to and from school by biking or walking, environments need to be transportation friendly for young people.	<i>When focusing on community resources, point out how the built environment can make it possible to be more active. The updated text (right-hand column) focuses on what changes make biking and walking more accessible.</i>	A transportation-friendly environment includes having bike lanes and walkways that promote activity and allow young people to incorporate movement into their day-to-day lives.

Recommendation #3: Provide examples of effective programs and policies that promote physical activity among children.

Another promising finding was the extent to which field organizations talk about the physical activity needs of children. However, they often do so in a way that places responsibility for addressing those needs onto individual parents and teachers—rather than on communities, systems, and society. As a corrective, communicators should talk about the role that different sectors can play in promoting physical activity among children—including transportation, urban planning, and education. They should name and explain specific programs and policies that can promote active lifestyles (such as a mandatory active recess policy) and show how they lead to healthier child outcomes.

What would it look like to implement this advice?

Original text:	What we recommend:	With suggested updates:
Communities, schools, families, public spaces, systems, companies ... all have a role in supporting healthy kids ... MomsRising is supporting work around physical education and recess, wellness policies, marketing in schools, and access to safe drinking water.	<i>The original points out that MomsRising is an organization that successfully supports physical activity and wellbeing. The updated text (right-hand column) explains how their advocacy works: It creates more opportunities for physical activity, which will in turn improve children's overall health outcomes.</i>	Communities, schools, families, public spaces, systems, companies ... all have a role in supporting healthy kids ... MomsRising is advocating for changes to physical education and recess so that kids have more chances for movement, play, sports, and other activities. Increased physical activity, along with wellness policies, marketing in schools, and access to safe drinking water have lasting health benefits.

Recommendation #4: Emphasize the benefits of physical activity beyond physical health.

Our analysis of media and field communications, as well as earlier research on public thinking, suggest that people already understand and regularly hear about the benefits of active lifestyles on physical health. Advocates therefore need to broaden this understanding by showing how physical activity promotes other types of outcomes, including mental health, wellbeing, confidence, and the opportunity to make new friends and gain new social outlets.

What would it look like to implement this advice?

Original text:	What we recommend:	With suggested updates:
For inactive adults, replacing sedentary behavior with light-intensity physical activity is likely to produce physical health benefits. Among all adults, replacing sedentary behavior with moderate- or vigorous-intensity physical activity may produce even greater benefits.	<i>Find opportunities to connect physical health with less talked about benefits of physical activity like improved quality of life, social connection, and mental health benefits. The updated text (right-hand column) names social, physical, and mental benefits of physical activity.</i>	Becoming more physically active can improve quality of life and lead to social connection, along with keeping our bodies and brains healthy. For inactive adults, replacing sedentary behavior with light-intensity physical activity is likely to produce health benefits like disease prevention, improved memory, stress relief, improved brain health, and strong bones and muscles. Among all adults, replacing sedentary behavior with moderate- or vigorous-intensity physical activity may produce even greater benefits.

Recommendation #5: Highlight disparities in levels of physical activity and explain why they exist.

To build the public’s understanding of health disparities, advocates need to explain *why* they exist and *who* is impacted. This means explaining how some communities—especially those living in low-income or underserved areas—have less access to safe, accessible, and affordable spaces in which to be active. The public currently lacks a deep understanding of health inequalities and shifting public thinking will require steady exposure to this new information and explanation. This must start with ensuring that the field’s own communications tell the whole story.

What would it look like to implement this advice?

Original text:	What we recommend:	With suggested updates:
[Kids and teenagers] need care and attention for their physical and mental wellbeing, and they need the opportunity to participate in settings where they will receive that care and attention. And not all children get that opportunity.	<i>Pointing to “care and attention” misdirects thinking about disparities away from systemic causes or solutions. The original text connects disparities to children’s relationships with adults. The updated text (right-hand column) explicitly connects addressing disparities to changing the built environment.</i>	[Kids and teenagers] need, among other things, safe, accessible spaces for physical activity. Not having a safe space for activity, or reliable transportation to get there, are the kinds of barriers that make participating in sports challenging for families. Disparities in levels of participation go on to perpetuate inequities in overall health.

Conclusion

In order to increase levels of physical activity among the public, advocates and researchers need to build an understanding of physical activity that promotes systemic solutions—including creating playgrounds, walkable communities, and more school time for physical education. Shifting these opinions requires an understanding of the communication landscape in which advocates operate. In documenting frames and storytelling approaches used by the media and the field, this report takes an important step toward this goal.

Identifying the challenges and opportunities in current discourse around physical activity—including in the field’s own communications—clarifies where advocates must focus their efforts. For example, our analysis shows that advocates must find ways of shifting media stories away from a focus on individuals’ motivations for being physically active and toward the role of social factors, such as having access to safe, aesthetically pleasant environments for outdoor recreation. They must also deepen and broaden the discourse around health disparities, and explain the role that environmental factors play in inhibiting and promoting physical activity for many underserved communities.

There are also some promising aspects of existing discourse that advocates can build upon and amplify. The field’s focus on the physical activity needs of children is productive, but needs to be situated within a broader discussion of the policies, programs, and environments that promote physical activity across the lifespan. The media and the field also explain how physical activity has important benefits for health and disease prevention—but need to broaden this focus to include other benefits, such as benefits for wellbeing, mental health, and social connection.

This view of the discursive environment suggests the need for new frames that can reshape the public’s dominant ways of thinking about physical activity. In the next phase of this project, FrameWorks will develop and test narrative strategies that can help experts, advocates, and media communicators move the public discourse in productive directions. These new strategies will ensure that people understand the various types of physical activity and the solutions needed to create lasting cultural change around physical activity among the public.

Endnotes

1. President's Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition. (2017). *Facts & Statistics: Physical activity*. Retrieved from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services website www.hhs.gov/fitness/resource-center/facts-and-statistics/index.html; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. Healthy People 2020. Retrieved from Healthy People website www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/physical-activity
2. Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorielli, N. (1994). Growing up with television: The cultivation perspective. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
3. The list also includes the Long Island *Newsday*; however, that newspaper is not found in the LexisNexis database and is therefore excluded from the sample. The list of the top 20 US newspapers was taken from: www.us-newspapers-online.com/newspaper-top20.htm
4. In LexisNexis, the headline and lead paragraph of articles between 200 and 2,500 words were searched for the presence of at least one of the following terms: "physical activity," "physically active," "fitness," "active play," "physical fitness," "active lifestyle," "active lifestyles," "active living," and multiple versions of the term "exercise" (e.g., "exercise," "exercising," "exercised" and so on).
5. The following organizations were used in the field frame analysis: Active Schools U.S.; America Walks'; American Cancer Society; The American College of Sports Medicine; American Council on Exercise; American Heart Association; American Walks Collaborative; American Diabetes Association; American Public Health Association; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion Services; Girls on the Run; MomsRising; National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity; National Complete Streets Coalition; National Physical Activity Alliance; President's Council; Voices for Healthy Kids; Shape America; Safe Routes Partnership.

6. Iyengar, S. (1991). *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; Busso, D., Down, L., Gibbons, C., & Volmert, A. (2018). *Stuck in Crisis: Media and organizational discourse on foster care and transition age youth*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
7. Davis, C., L'Hôte, & E. Volmert, A. (2020). *Communicating about physical activity: Challenges, opportunities, and emerging recommendations*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
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More than Just Exercise: Media and Organizational Discourse on Physical Activity

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