



## Engagement Step #2: Relationship Building

Relationship building is the foundation of engagement. By building relationships with socially isolated groups, one can build trust with these groups and learn how to engage them respectfully. Building connections with socially isolated groups can only be done when staff go into neighbourhood spaces and introduce themselves to community members and seek out their concerns.

There are several ways to begin building relationships:

- Hanging out
- Group discussions
- Attending regular meetings

### Hanging out

A staff person would go into community spaces on a regular basis to meet and talk with people. The idea is simple, but the purpose is to develop relationships with community members who are not participating by having conversations with them about their lives, their community and their experiences or perceptions of active living. Because this method is passive, community members have a choice in whether to engage in discussion or not. As the “regulars” become accustomed to your presence, this opens opportunities to discuss a broad range of topics that may not be possible in a focus group setting.

### Things to remember

- Go where community members feel most comfortable. See if community service providers have meeting spaces or scheduled activities.
- Sometimes a more formal approach is desired, so try to get on a meeting agenda to introduce yourself.
- Sometimes community members are more isolated and are not connected with a service provider. Check out a park, a coffee shop, a Laundromat, a common room in a housing complex or place of worship. Be creative.
- How do you break the ice? This will vary, but let community members take the lead, as they need to feel comfortable. Remember that your goal is to listen and learn.
- Bring food, physical activity related items or brochures (such as walking handbooks or local trail maps). People are more relaxed when they have things to do.



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- Be alert for opportunities for you to join in to activities, such as a smudging ceremony, card game or group conversation.
- Do not pretend to be from their economic class background, if you are not. Do not suggest that you understand their circumstances, remember this is not about you; it is about the community member.
- Although you need to be friendly and approachable, be clear that you are not there to develop a personal connection. Rather, you are there to represent your organization and want to learn about their physical activity needs.
- If a community member asks personal questions about you, try asking them a question in response, to keep the focus on them.

### **Group Discussions**

Group discussions in neighbourhood spaces may be planned with the help of a service provider. Sometimes an informal discussion group may form while you are hanging out. The first purpose is to hear the issues, concerns and needs of the community, and secondly, it can be a way to meet new people. Group discussions offer an opportunity for those more comfortable engaging in a group situation rather than individually. Sometimes people hold back from expressing their thoughts until they hear someone else mention a related idea first.

### **Things to remember**

- You may get better input at group discussions once you have developed trust and rapport with the community members. Otherwise, they may just tell you what they think you want to hear.
- Let the group lead the discussion and introduce the topics whenever possible, as this reinforces that you are there to listen and learn from them.
- Sometimes the discussion may jump from topic to topic even though you would have liked to learn more. Learn what you can and use that topic as a conversation starter for next time.
- Pay attention to specific concerns and try to follow up with them individually. This will help build the relationship and acknowledge their concern.
- Sometimes community members may discuss things that are seemingly outside of your control. Before responding automatically that you cannot change things, consider what their request may reveal. For example, if community members suggest advertising opportunities on buses and television, it may reveal that they are not currently receiving information about your programs. This may be a topic worth exploring.

### **Attending Regular Meetings and Events**

Attending regular community meetings and events can be a good place to meet community members who are not connected with service providers. It may require asking around to find out about them.



### Things to remember

- Stay focused on relationship building. You are there to meet community members, not officials, leaders or other service providers.
- From time to time, examine whether you should still attend regular meetings. What new information have you gathered? Is this engaging more people in active living?
- If you are feeling isolated at the meetings, ask to be included on the agenda. You can introduce yourself, your purpose and invite people to talk to you about their concerns.
- Be clear that you are there to represent your organization. You are not there as an individual who will take on fundraising or volunteering.

**Adapted from the Community-Led Libraries Toolkit:** A toolkit developed through the national Working Together Project, initiated by the Vancouver Public Library to explore methods for libraries develop programs and services by and for low-income community members through a community development approach. The techniques and advice in this book are transferrable to the active living sector. The full toolkit is available for download from [www.librariesincommunities.ca](http://www.librariesincommunities.ca). The project was funded from 2004 to 2008 by Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC) and co-led by the Vancouver Public Library, Regina Public Library, Halifax Public Libraries and Toronto Public Library.

