

Enhancing Sense of Belonging through Physical Activity

“Active Community, Connected Community”
Community Report



Family and Child Health
INITIATIVE





Table of Contents

01

INTRODUCTION

Land Acknowledgement	5
Recognitions	6
Project Team	7
Background	8
Project Overview	9
Highlights & Insights	10

02

OUR PHOTOVoice PROJECT

Research Design & Approach	12
Study Setting	13
Recruitment	14
Photovoice Workshops	15
Participant Themes	22

03

COMMUNITY EVENT

Photovoice Exhibition	25
Community Brainstorming	26
Brainstorming Findings	27

04

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Acting On Findings	28
Strengths & Limitations	29
Final Thoughts & Next Steps	30

05

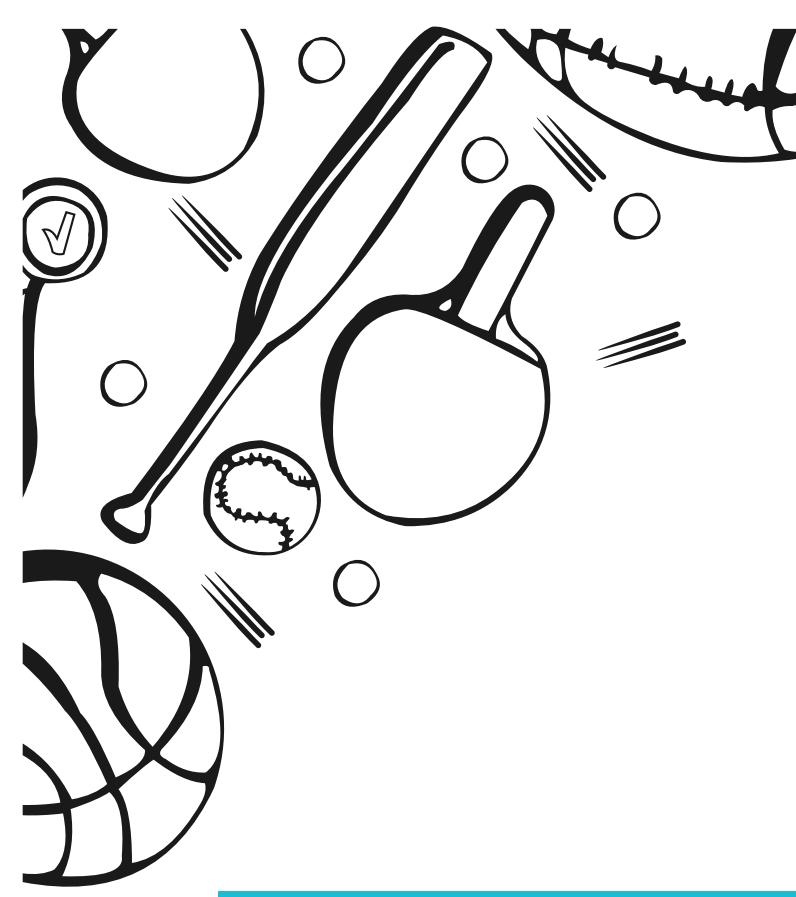
REFERENCES

References	31
------------	----

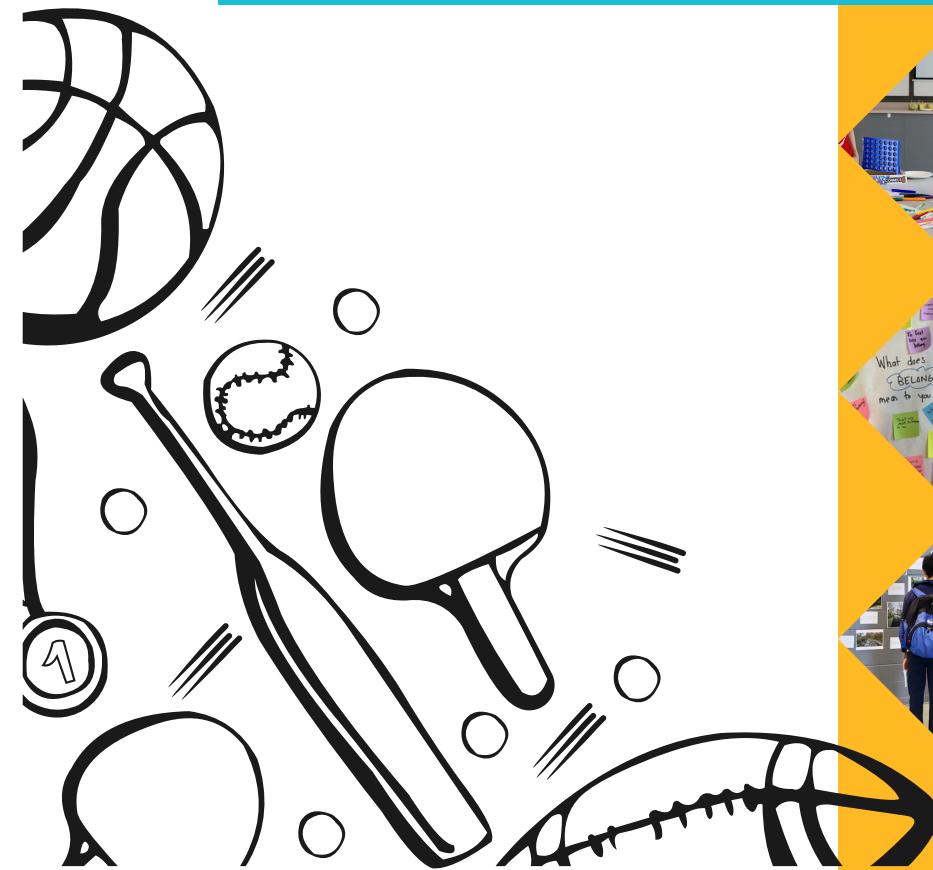
HOW TO CITE THIS REPORT

Gabrielle Griffith, Kristina Fuentes-Aiello, Sabrina Scarcello, Jessica Chiang, Delia Chan, Lisa Boyce-Gonsalves, Alyson Beben, Sara Abdullah, Serena Hong, Asli Nur, Ian Zenlea, Chris Marham, Tammy Shubat, Sylvie Atwill, Katerina Maximova, Diane Stewart, Barbara Patten, Chantalee Dunkley, Momina Mazhar, Dianne Fierheller. Enhancing Sense of Belonging through Physical Activity Institute for Better Health, September 2025





INTRODUCTION



Land Acknowledgement

The land on which THP operates has been the site of human activity for 15,000 years. It is the Treaty Lands and Territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. It is also the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat and the Haudenosaunee. The land and lakes in this region continue to be home to many First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities from across Turtle Island, which is currently known as North America. They continue to mobilize, live and care for these lands and its inhabitants.

People across Turtle Island have been confronted by the legacies of white supremacy. This includes the legacy of genocide, which Indigenous peoples have known all along, and whose demands for action were ignored. It is also on this land, that we are confronted by the legacies and current realities of anti-Black racism and slavery, the legacies of anti-Asian racism and indentured labour, the legacies of erasing sexual and gender diversity, and the legacies of religious violence.



Photovoice Participant of a trail in Mississauga

Recognitions

Community Advisory Board (CAB)

The project was guided by a community advisory board (CAB) that included youth, caregivers, service providers and researchers who work or live in the Valleys community.

Thank you to each member for sharing your experiences and knowledge throughout the project.



Youth and families in Peel

Thank you to all the youth and families who participated in our photovoice workshops and community event.

Thank you for sharing your experiences and insights on how we can enhance belonging in the Mississauga Valleys community.



This project was funded by the Novo Nordisk Network for Healthy Populations Catalyst Grant Fund at the University of Toronto

Project Team

Family and Child Health Initiative

Thank you to all the members of the Family and Child Health Initiative Team who contributed to this project.

Research team: Dianne Fierheller, Gabrielle Griffith, Kristina Fuentes-Aiello, Asli Nur, Serena Hong, Sara Abdullah, Ian Zenlea.



Ophea: Healthy Schools, Health Connections

Thank you to all the members of the Ophea Team who contributed to this project. Project members: Sabrina Scarcello, Sylvie Atwill, Tammy Shubat, Chris Markham, Jessica Chiang



Community Partners

We would like to thank our amazing community partners for their contributions to our project. They provided ongoing guidance and support through every phase of the project--from the co-design of the research plan, to recruitment, to guidance on the workshops, being part of our community event, and promoting meaningful and accessible processes and recommendations relevant to the community.



MOVEMENT, CONNECTION, AND BELONGING:

How Community Voices from Picturing Peel Inspired the Enhancing a Sense of Belonging Project

We all know it's good for youth to move their bodies, whether that's running around outside, playing sports, or dancing in the living room. Being active helps youth grow up strong and healthy, and it also helps prevent health issues later in life (1, 2).

When youth get into the habit of being active early on, they're more likely to keep it up as they get older (3). And it's not just about physical health — being active can help youth feel better mentally and emotionally too.

Taking part in sports or other activities helps youth build friendships and feel like they belong, both at school and in their neighbourhoods (4). It's a great way for them to connect with others and feel supported (5). When we talk about that kind of connection — the relationships, the trust, the support we give and get — some people call that "social capital" (6–9). Which is the value that comes from these networks and relationships, including the shared trust, norms, and connections that help people support one another, share information, and create opportunities for mutual benefit.

But here's the thing: not all youth get the same chance to be active. Some families might not be able to afford sports programs or might not have access to safe places for their youth to play or join activities (3).

That's why the voices from Picturing Peel stayed with us, reminding us that physical activity is about more than just movement — it's about relationships, routines, and feeling part of something. As we move forward with the *Enhancing a Sense of Belonging* project, we carry those lessons with us, centering youth' need for connection, access, and joy in the everyday spaces where they live, play, and grow.

Our study aimed to address the recommendations in Picturing Peel by creating and strengthening inclusive and sustainable community-based programs and spaces that are accessible, safe and support movement, mental health, and social connection for youth's and their families.



Project Overview



Study Goal

To understand how to support sustained and joyful physical activity participation among youth from diverse communities, by exploring their sense of belonging in the Mississauga Valleys community in the Peel Region.



Objectives



1 What are youth's experiences of belonging in relationship to physical activity?



2 How should experiences of belonging be considered when planning for physical activity opportunities?



3 What are the top actionable ideas for promoting belonging through physical activity before, during, and after school?



Key Findings

Youth experiences of belonging and physical activity in Mississauga Valleys

1

Belonging is Dynamic

Belonging can be found in many ways—through friendships, family, and peers, but also in moments of solitude, reflection, and connection with nature.

2

Belonging is shaped by personal paths and journeys

The physical spaces youth navigate and the life experiences they encounter together shape how connected and included they feel in their communities.

3

Belonging is tied to memory, identity and culture

Cultural roots, traditions, and connections to home countries, along with personal stories, cultural practices, and memories with friends, play a strong role in how youth connect to physical activity and develop a sense of identity and belonging.

4

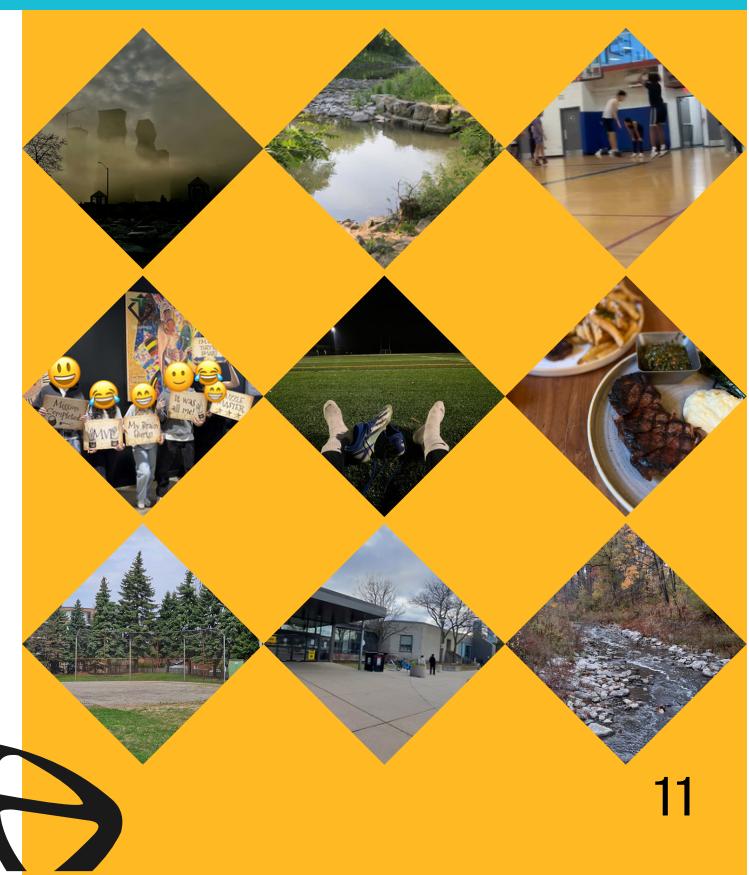
Belonging changes over time

As youth grow, their activities, spaces, and ways of connecting evolve. While the form of participation may change, the sense of connection and the importance of being recognized, included, and valued remains constant.

When youth feel they belong, physical activity becomes more than exercise, it strengthens mind, body, and community.



OUR PHOTVOICE PROJECT



Where We Listened & Learned

The Mississauga Valleys Neighbourhood

Our project took place in Mississauga Valleys, a small densely populated area in the heart of Mississauga, part of Peel Region, Ontario. “The Valleys” is a planned, suburban neighbourhood that features a mix of high-rise apartments, townhouses, and single-family homes, plus parks and the Mississauga Valley Community Centre.

Peel is home to about 1.38 million people and is known for its diversity—over 70% of residents are racialized, and many families are new to Canada. Peel also has one of the highest rates of type 2 diabetes in the province, and nearly 13% of families live on a low income (10-14).

Many children and youth that from the Valleys community, live in low-income housing, come from non-English-speaking households, and are adjusting to life in a new country. Around 15% of people in the neighbourhood are between the ages of 5 and 19, and almost half of households (47%) have children. We worked in partnership with the Mississauga Valley Community Centre (MVCC)—the largest community centre in Mississauga.

The MVCC offers a wide range of programs and has become a key gathering place for families. It's a place where youth feel welcome, safe, and connected.

“There's a lot of activities going on here and it's like very inclusive.

• youth participant

The area around the centre is also walkable and connected by paths, which makes it easier for youth to be active, explore, and feel part of their neighbourhood. The youth described the centre as a space where they can be themselves and try new things.

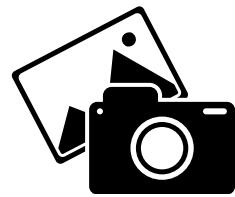
“There's a lot of space there's like places where you can just you know, play with yourself or play with friends you get to join with people and meet new people I love that about the valleys community.

• youth participant

These reflections remind us how much local spaces and relationships matter to youth's well-being, especially for those facing language, income, or cultural barriers. The Valleys community is a place where our youth reported feeling seen, supported, and proud to belong.



Our Approach



Listening to community voices through photos

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)

We used a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach, which means the project was carried out with the community, not just about the community. Children, youth, caregivers, parents, teachers, administrators, and community partners in Peel were involved in co-designing the project and making decisions at every stage, through a Community Advisory Board (CAB). A CBPR approach requires meaningful involvement and a flexible, iterative, cyclical process that integrates academic and community-based knowledge throughout the research (15). With the support of the CAB we were able to design the recruitment, photovoice workshops and community event in a way that connected with the folks who live, learn and play in the Valleys neighbourhood.

The Photovoice Method

Photovoice is a CBPR research method that “puts cameras in the hands of people with valuable lived experience so they can explore and share their perspectives on health, family, community, and their futures” (16). It also involves the youth actively sharing, discussing and identifying themes and ideas they feel capture their photos/captions and that can be used to advocate for change in their communities. It aims to support social change (17) and helps centre local knowledge and information of the community

Project Timeline:



Phase 1

Developing a Community Advisory Board (CAB) to support community engagement and co-design



Phase 2

Using Photovoice methodology to understand youth's experiences of belonging related to physical activity



Phase 3

Engaging the community in an event to generate actionable ideas to promote belonging through physical activity

Bringing Youth Voices In

Who Could Join

- Youth ages 10–18
- Live in Peel Region
- Lived, went to school, or played in the Valleys area
- Parent or guardian consent was required

How We Invited Youth In



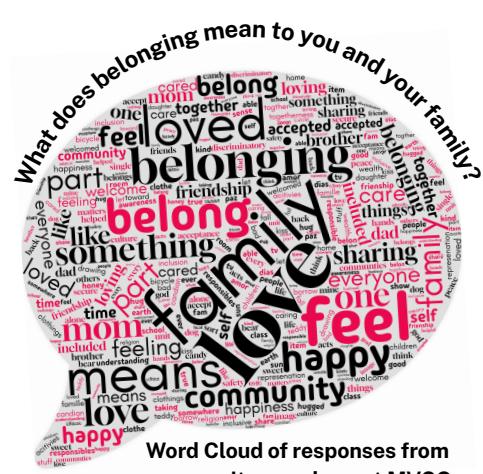
We worked with our partners and collaborators to reach out to youth from diverse communities—across different races, ethnicities, abilities, gender identities, and family structures. The Community Advisory Board (CAB) helped design posters that were shared through local partners and displayed around the community.

Connecting with youth in The Valleys

We hosted two in-person events at the MVCC. Team members from FCHI, Ophea, Peel Public Health, and Play In Peel attended to talk about the project with youth and families passing by and shared an expression of interest form. At these events our team had a table with various activities including colouring pages and games. We also engaged the community members (caregivers and youth visiting the MVCC by asking them, 'What does belonging mean to you and your family?' and inviting them to write their responses onto a sticky note and place it onto a piece of chart paper. Most applications came from these events, and we were able to listen and learn from the community what helps them feel like they belong.

Screening and Selection

Youth who showed interest by completing a digital form were invited to have a short interview to check if they were eligible to participate. We received a total of 37 completed forms from youth. Those who weren't eligible were thanked for their interest and invited to take part in future opportunities. After screening we ended up with a total of 18 youth that were between ages 10–15 in grades 4 – 10. There was continued excitement and desire to participate even after the workshops began. Participants shared the opportunity with their friends and we even had to turn some youth away at the door, but shared they could join future activities.



PhotoVoice Workshops

The photovoice (PV) workshops consisted of four one-hour sessions held at the Mississauga Valley Community Centre (MVCC), with snacks and drinks available to create a welcoming environment. All workshop activities were co-designed with guidance from the Community Advisory Board to ensure they reflected participants' needs, interests, and lived experiences. Across the four sessions participants were supported to build community, reflect on their connection to the MVCC, learn the foundations of photovoice, and collaboratively shape the stories behind their images.

Workshop 1: Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Icebreaker and introduction to all attendees• Group discussion about group principles• Introduction to photovoice and what to expect from the workshops
Workshop 2: Photo Taking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ice breaker and reflections about connection to the valleys community centre• Ethics, guidelines for photo taking and instructions• Time to take photos and encouragement to explore photos they already have in their devices
Workshop 3: Captioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ice breaker and reflections about how we found the photo taking activity• Guided activity related to creating captions using the PHOTO method• Sharing photos and captions in small groups
Workshop 4: Theming	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ice breaker and reflections from caption writing• Explanation & Activity of how to create themes• Guided activity to group pictures into themes

Workshop 1: Orientation

Getting to Know Each Other

At the start of the session, we invited all youth to gather in a circle. We passed a ball around as each person took a turn sharing their name and a bit about who they are. Some students spoke about the programs they attend at the Valleys, while others shared which schools they go to — many doing so with a clear sense of pride. Everyone also shared their favourite physical activity.

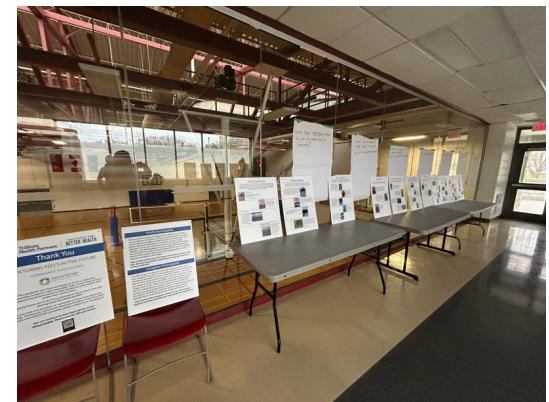
This interactive activity served as an easy icebreaker to help everyone feel more comfortable before beginning the workshop. The facilitators also took part in the activity, modeling openness and participation. We also invited MVCC staff into the space to provide context around why this project is important and how it can help shape future programming and offerings at the Valleys.

Photovoice Orientation

After the icebreaker activity, we had an open discussion about what photovoice is, is not, and how we will navigate sharing and talking about experiences. We introduced the “stoplight” tool as a guide for the youth to make informed decisions about what feels good to share with the group.

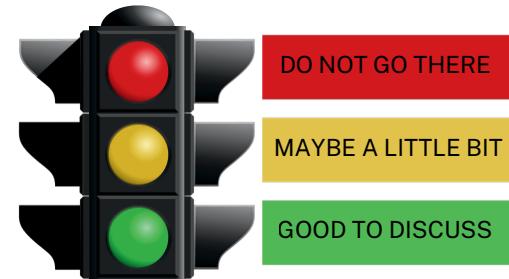
Creating, Sharing & Brainstorming

We incorporated ongoing, real-time feedback and idea-sharing using chart paper and sticky notes. Participants were encouraged to add to the chart paper at each workshop with different question prompts such as “What does belonging mean to me, my family and my community?”, “What are you unsure about?” “What excites you about the project?” See participant feedback on the next page.



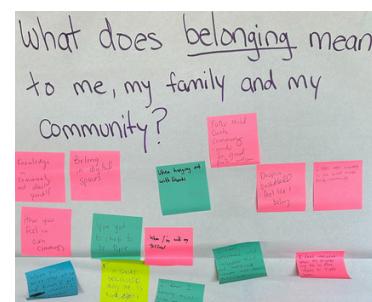
The workshop room. On display is the “Picturing Peel” photo exhibit to give participants a visual understanding of what we were creating together.

TALKING ABOUT EXPERIENCES



Credits: Dr. Ciann Wilson

“Stoplight” tool to support youth on how to navigate sharing their stories.



A photo of the chart paper with youth feedback from sticky note activity.

What does belonging mean to me, my family and my community?

Below is a snapshot of what belonging means to youth in the Valleys community, as shared during the photovoice workshops. Their reflections capture the everyday moments—at home, in digital spaces, with friends, and in places like the MVCC—where they feel seen, included, and connected. These statements offer a glimpse into how youth experience belonging within their families, their community, and within themselves.

I feel included when I play games with my friends

Belong in Digital Spaces

Knowledge in Community About Yourself

Someone inviting me to play a game or help me find my volleyball because i lost it

When people go play at turf and when i get chosen i feel included

In Soccer because everyone is kind

when I go out with my family and when i get food with them

when I go out with my family and when i get food with them

you got to choose to be here

Workshop 2: Photo Taking



The second workshop focused on exploring the community and capturing images. We began with an icebreaker, asking participants, *“What is your favorite thing about the valleys?”* Youth shared that they enjoyed the accessibility of the space, its proximity to home, and the availability of drop-in programs. Many highlighted that the valleys provided a space to play alone or with friends.

This session also prepared participants for photo-taking. Recognizing that most youth today are comfortable using phones for photography, we focused on the ethics and safety of taking photos, see the guideline below. Youth were invited to photograph spaces, activities, and moments that reflected their experiences of belonging in relation to physical activity. Some participants took new photos on-site, while others selected existing images from their phones.

Ethical and Safety Guideline

Make sure you are “safe” when you take pictures

Do not take photos from the internet due to copyright issues

Always ask permission before taking someone’s photo and before including pictures of someone else in an exhibit

Think of others’ safety and be respectful of their lives

Be ready to explain the project to others

Respect their right to refuse

Guided by the question, “What images reflect experiences of belonging in relation to physical activity?” youth explored the community centre and captured images that resonated with them. They were asked to submit their chosen photos before the next session, allowing time for printing and preparation. Participants also began reflecting on their images, considering why they took each photo and what it meant to them. Youth had an additional week to continue photographing spaces and activities that reflected their sense of belonging. They were asked to send three images prior to the next workshop so the research team could prepare prints for discussion.

“What I love About The Valleys”

The quotes below come directly from youth participants and reflect what they love and appreciate most about the Valleys Community Centre

“

There's a lot of activities going on here and it's like very inclusive. Also, there's a field if you don't like playing indoors there's outdoor fields you can play with.

”

“

The park is a walking distance from my house and I can just there are so many trails. I like to bike through them. I go swimming very often and I use the gym almost every day and that is what I love about the valleys is that you can just come by whenever you want and be able to do so many different types of things that make you feel good about yourself.

”

“

The thing I like about it is the basketball court and the soccer field and the swimming.

”

“

My favourite thing about the valleys is the drop in and that's close to my house.

”

“

And my favourite thing about the valleys is how inclusive it is. It has different programs and sports that you can do and it's willing to like offer people different opportunities to work there volunteer stuff like that.

”

“

The thing I really like about the valleys is that their really inclusive they'll let people try new things and I really like their swimming.

”

“

the thing I like about valleys is that there's a lot of stuff to do around here. You don't have to travel very far. You can just swim here. You can go to the library. You can go to the gym anything you want really and I like the community.

”

“

My favourite thing about the valley's is there's a lot of fields so you can play a lot of sports and have fun.

”

Workshop 3: Captioning

Moment of Reflection

The third workshop focused on adding captions to the images. This step ensures the youths message is clear to the viewer and in their own words. Before adding the captions all of the youths photos were printed and displayed on the tables upon the tables, where they could see everyone's photos and were asked to grab their own photos and sit with them for a moment of reflection as other youth arrived and settled into the space.

Adding Voice to Photos

After a few moments of reflection we invited participants to share in small groups to describe the picture, share what is happening in the photo, why they took the photo and what does the photo tell viewers about who they are/their life and how does this picture enhance belonging? After sharing the youth then worked independently to write out their captions. For flexibility, facilitators supported youth by writing the caption for some youth, allowing for voice to text and translation tools so youth felt comfortable to share their stories in their own voices and words.

This Picture OF a beach
counts I feel safe and
included because I set
to meet new People
and get away from my
problems



This is a picture of
the creek near my house
it makes me feel
belonged because
its my area and
reminds me of home
TITLE: Nature walk

This photo shows me, near exiting the Valleys
after completed my first week of volunteering
during March Break. I took it to keep a memory of
the first time I actually accomplished something
independent. It was kind of an awakening that
I was becoming an independent teenager, completing
my volunteering hours as a first experience before
even entered high school. I have had many memories
over about 3 years at the Valleys, so this was
kind of nostalgic for me to volunteer at a place I love



Handwritten captions from youth
from the third workshop



P

Describe your Picture

H

What is Happening in
your picture?

O

Why did you take a
picture Of this?

T

What does this picture
Tell us about your life?

O

How can this picture
provide Opportunities for
us to improve life?

Graziano, K. J. (2004)

We applied the “PHOTO” method (Graziano, K. J., 2004) adapting the opportunities question to explore ways to enhance belonging rather than general aspects of life.

Workshop 4: Theming

Understanding Theming

The fourth workshop was focused on group thematic analysis to explore the connection between the youths images and captions. We started by giving youth a selection of objects on a table. Each person picked one item, and in small groups, they talked about what connected their objects. People noticed things like similar colors, shapes, how the objects were used, or their function.

This exercise introduced the concept of “theming”—finding patterns and connections across different items. It prepared youth to apply the same approach to the photographs they had taken, helping them identify shared stories, ideas, or messages. This process supported the study’s goal of understanding youth’ perspectives and experiences through the visual materials they created.

Guided Group Analysis

After discussing all images, each participant selected two that stood out to them and assigned a theme that captured a shared meaning or emotional connection between the two photos.

This activity aimed to support youth in drawing connections between different images, identifying recurring patterns, and articulating the broader social or personal messages conveyed through visual storytelling. It also fostered dialogue, allowing youth to see how others interpreted similar content through different lenses.

In total, 18 unique themes were generated by the youth, reflecting a wide range of individual experiences, priorities, and values. These themes provided insight into what youth found most meaningful in their visual narratives. They also revealed common threads—such as connection, culture, and care—as well as the diversity of perspectives present within the group.

By centering youth' voices in the thematic analysis, this process upheld one of the core principles of Photovoice: that those closest to the issues are best positioned to interpret and give meaning to them.



The selection of objects for the theming exercise.



The table after the group analysis activity

Participant Themes

The 18 themes that were defined by the youth ages 10-15



Animals



Nature



Favourite Sports



Self Care



Hanging Out



Hobbies



Passions



Special Memories



Home Country



Country



Family Time



Religion



People Spending Time Together



Fun Times



Travel



Relaxed

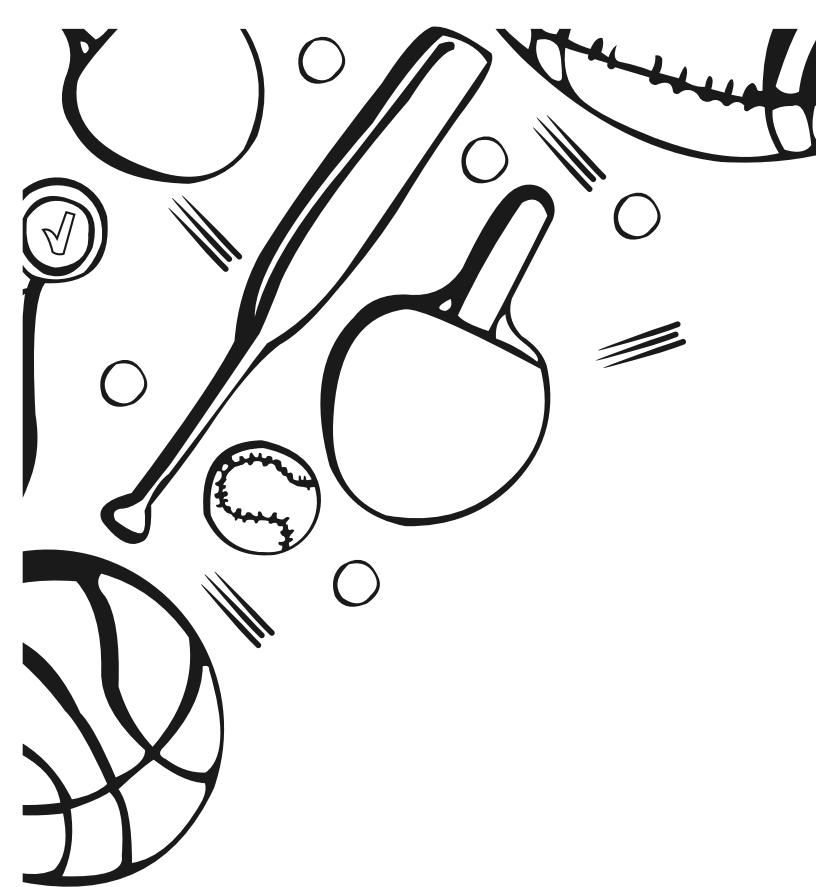


Feet



Food

While the youth themes may connect in unique ways to your own understanding of belonging, to find deeper meaning in the themes from the images and words of the youth participants we invite you to visit the virtual exhibit on [our website](#).



OUR COMMUNITY EVENT

ACTIVE COMMUNITY
CONNECTED COMMUNITY

Photovoice
Exhibition

Community
Brainstorming

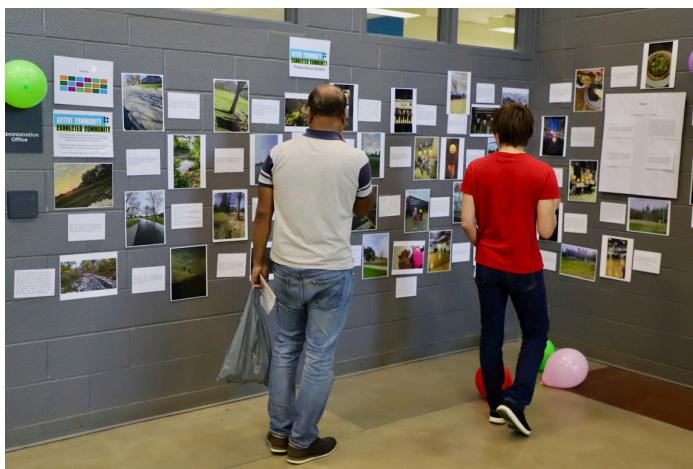


Photovoice Exhibition



ACTIVE COMMUNITY CONNECTED COMMUNITY

On June 14th, 2025, we celebrated with a community event at the Valleys Community Centre where we showcased the youth's photos/captions and themes. The event was open to everyone in the community including children, youth, caregivers, families, educators, community organization partners and researchers. The photovoice exhibit was organized as a gallery walk.



Images are of community members exploring the exhibit

Community Brainstorming

After reviewing the photovoice exhibit, community members were invited to reflect on their own experiences of belonging and what they learned from the exhibit. They responded to two questions on sticky notes:

- What bold idea would you suggest to help people feel a stronger sense of belonging through physical activity?
- What physical activity or program can we start to increase your sense of belonging?

After sharing their ideas, everyone voted for their favorite suggestions using a participatory decision-making method called “Dotmocracy” (19). In Dotmocracy, each participant is given a set number of dot stickers and places them next to the ideas they support.

This visual voting activity makes group preferences clear and helps prioritize the most popular suggestions. There was a total for 44 votes that were tallied, and the top three ideas were recognized as winners, with each receiving a gift card. Using a thematic analysis of the community’s submitted bold ideas our team identified key themes that reflect community priorities. These themes will shape the upcoming co-design and implementation phases.

Key Themes

Sports & Games
N=11

Dance & Movement
N=8

Creative & Arts-Based
N=5

Wellness & Inclusion
N=5

Nature & Outdoors
N=7



Community members sharing their ideas



people voting on the recommendations

Top Ideas:

1. Free cycle & free soccer, n=18
2. Video game tournament, n=13
3. Parent & child dance class, n=11
4. Inclusive/adapted activities for all abilities, n=7

More ideas on the next page

These findings reflect the community’s priorities for engaging, inclusive, and fun ways to promote belonging through physical activity.

What physical activity or program can we start to increase your sense of belonging?

A snap shot of ideas from the community “Dotmocracy Activity”

Game/trivia
Nights

Walk and
talk in parks
for parents/
caregivers

Dancing &
Music
Classes

Capture the
Flag

Picnic

Meditation
Room

Hiking

inclusive to
all abilities,
levels and
ages

Community
Mural

Introverted
gym (Quiet)

Resting
Comfy Area

Swimming
Classes and
Games

Tai Chi

Drawing
Classes

Escape
Room

Table
Tennis



THE PATH FORWARD



**Acting On
Findings &
Next Steps**

Acting on Findings

These community-informed recommendations were developed through a qualitative thematic analysis that incorporated photovoice themes, input from the dotmocracy co-design activity, and guidance from the community advisory board.

For Youth

- Explore a variety of activities, both organized and individual, to discover what resonates and supports your sense of belonging.
- Consider seasonal and environmental options: indoor vs. outdoor, summer vs. winter, and group vs. solo activities.
- Recognize that your interests may evolve as you grow and explore your identity.
- Engage in activities that bring joy and connection—these enhance both physical and mental health.

Caregivers/Families

- Support opportunities for both family-centered activities and independent time. Freedom and space for self-discovery are as important as shared moments.
- Incorporate family traditions, cultural practices, or experiences tied to your home country to deepen connections and a sense of belonging.

For Local Community Organizations

- Offer diverse activity options: group-based, independent, family-inclusive, and adaptable to different ages and abilities.
- Make activities accessible—financially, physically, and socially—including subsidies, equipment loans, or “try before you sign up” opportunities.
- Develop guided experiences like walking tours or community gardens that incorporate storytelling, cultural reflection, and shared moments of connection.
- Host special community events (fairs, outdoor celebrations) to bring people together in spaces that foster joy, memory, and belonging.

For Government and Larger Institutions

- Ensure programs are diverse, inclusive, and accessible through language, delivery methods, and co-design with youth and families with lived experience.
- Recognize belonging as a central goal of physical activity initiatives, not only participation or performance.
- Develop policy to push for more outdoor accessible spaces that encourage families to connect regardless of the season.

Strengths

What Worked

- Photovoice was an effective method for engaging youth in research mobilizing the voices of youth in the community.
- Meeting the youth where they already gather resulted in high engagement during recruitment and remained consistent throughout participation. One participant shared during a session that they appreciated how they got to choose to sign up for themselves.
- Building collaborative partnerships to support the work.
- Including CAB members into the facilitation of the workshops.

Limitations

What Did Not

- No youth identified as having a disability. Limitation in understanding of how belonging can be experienced.
- Photovoice workshops and theming are conducted in groups, and some youth may not feel comfortable sharing in a group setting compared to individually.
- Some youth had prior connections or relationships (e.g., friends, family, attending drop-in programs together), which may have further limited diversity and influenced the findings.

NEXT STEPS

This study looked at how youth in Mississauga Valleys experience a sense of belonging through physical activity, and what that means for creating opportunities that are meaningful and lasting. Through photovoice workshops, youth shared photos, captions, and stories that highlighted the people, places, and experiences that make them feel connected—whether that's friends, family, cultural traditions, or quiet spaces for reflection.

From these stories, 18 themes emerged, which were grouped into four key findings: belonging is dynamic, shaped by personal paths and journeys, tied to identity and culture, and changes over time. These insights show that **belonging isn't just a nice-to-have—it's what makes physical activity joyful, sustainable, and meaningful for youth.** For those designing programs, it means creating activities that celebrate different interests, provide both group and solo opportunities, honor cultural roots, and consider the whole person—not just the activity.

Looking ahead, our team will continue collaborating with partners, Play in Peel, Ophea, Mississauga Valleys Community Centre, and others to co-design a diverse, accessible, and culturally relevant physical activity program with youth in Peel Region that enhances their sense of belonging and connection. We will also co-implement and co-evaluate the program's feasibility, acceptability, and initial impact indicators among youth living in Peel Region. By deepening relationships with youth in Mississauga and strengthening the connection between belonging, community, and physical activity, the project aims to create ongoing opportunities for young people to engage, contribute, and feel empowered—ensuring that the sense of connection and well-being fostered through this study continues to grow.



References

1. Chang SH, Kim K. A review of factors limiting physical activity among young children from low-income families. *Journal of exercise rehabilitation*. 2017;13(4):375.
2. Curbing Childhood Obesity: A Federal, Provincial and Territorial Framework for Action to Promote Healthy Weights. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/healthy-living/curbing-childhood-obesity-federal-provincial-territorial-framework.html>, 2024.
3. Change the Game Research: A study focused on sport access, engagement, and equity factors in the wake of the pandemic,. https://assets.website-files.com/5eb9ca182f6df037590c28ea/60f5a049b617f857b0d14be4_Change%20The%20Game%20Research_FINAL.pdf: MLSE Foundation; 2021.
4. Won D, Bang H, Davis L, Park S. The role of adolescents' participation in physical education and leisure-time sport activity on their social connectedness, depression, and aggressive behaviour. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*. 2023;1-20.
5. Welsh JA, Berry HL. Social capital and mental health and well-being. presented at: Paper presented at the Biennial HILDA Survey Research Conference2009.
6. Chen W-L, Zhang C-G, Cui Z-Y, et al. The impact of social capital on physical activity and nutrition in China: the mediating effect of health literacy. *BMC public health*. 2019;19:1-10.
7. He Y, Zhou L, Li J, Wu J. An empirical analysis of the impact of income inequality and social capital on physical and mental health-take China's micro-database analysis as an example. *International journal for equity in health*. 2021;20:1-14.
8. Portes A. Social capital: Its origins and applications in modern sociology. *Knowledge and social capital*. 2009:43-67.
9. Welsh JA, Berry HL. Social capital and mental health and well-being. presented at: Paper presented at the Biennial HILDA Survey Research Conference2009.
10. The Changing Landscape of Health in Peel: A Comprehensive Health Status Report 2019. <https://www.peelregion.ca/health/resources/pdf/CHSR-changing-landscape-health-peel-full-report.pdf>: Region on Peel; 2019.
11. Peel Region. (2023, September 14). Ethnic diversity and religion 2021. Census Hub — Region of Peel. <https://census-regionofpeel.hub.arcgis.com/pages/ethnic-diversity-and-religion-2021>
12. Patel A, Regier K, Wilson K, Ghassemi E, Dean J. Beyond the cosmopolis: Sustaining hyper-diversity in the suburbs of Peel Region, Ontario. *Urban Planning*. 2018;3(4):38-49.
13. Canada S. Census Profile for Peel Region 2016.
14. Lipscombe LL, Ali FM, Lamb K, Rosella LC, Shah BR, Zenlea IS. Current State of Type 2 Diabetes in the Peel Region.
15. Caine V, Mill J. *Essentials of community-based research*: Routledge; 2016.
16. Photovoice Worldwide. <https://www.photovoiceworldwide.com/>.
17. Wang C, Burris MA. Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health education & behavior*. 1997;24(3):369-387.
18. Photovoice Facilitator's Guide. <https://rutgers.international/resources/photovoice-facilitators-guide/>: Rutgers.International.
19. Dotmocracy. Better Evaluation. (n.d.). <https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/methods/dotmocracy>