

# Enhancing Sense of Belonging through Physical Activity

**“Active Community, Connected Community”**  
**Community Report**

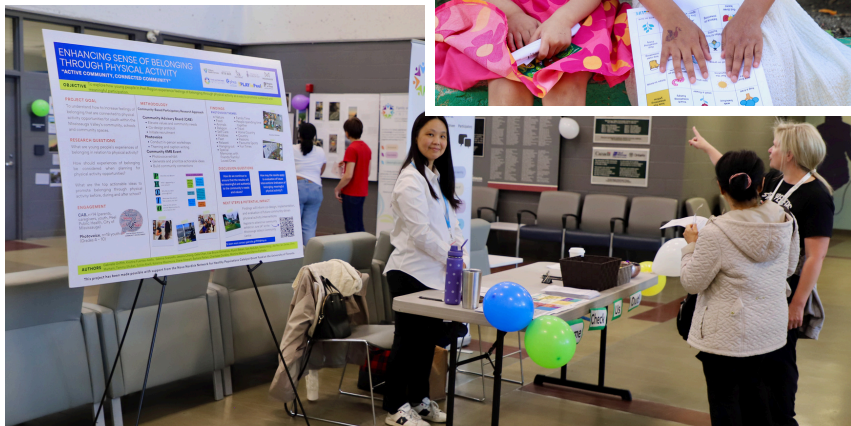


Family and Child Health  
INITIATIVE



Healthy Schools  
Healthy Communities







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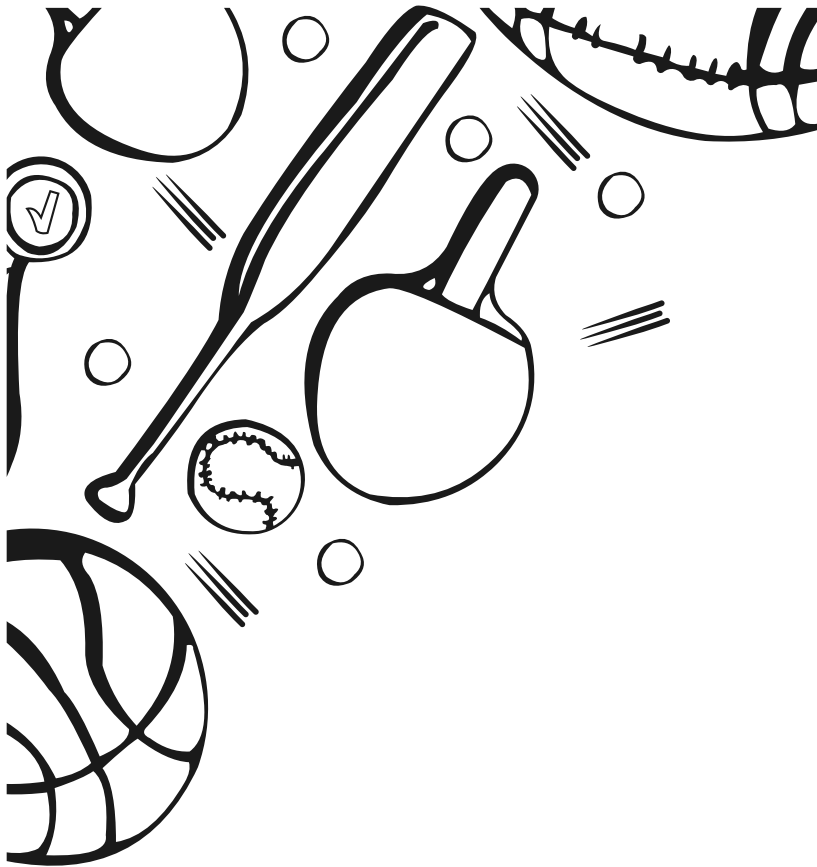
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### HOW TO CITE THIS REPORT

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# 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  
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# 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**

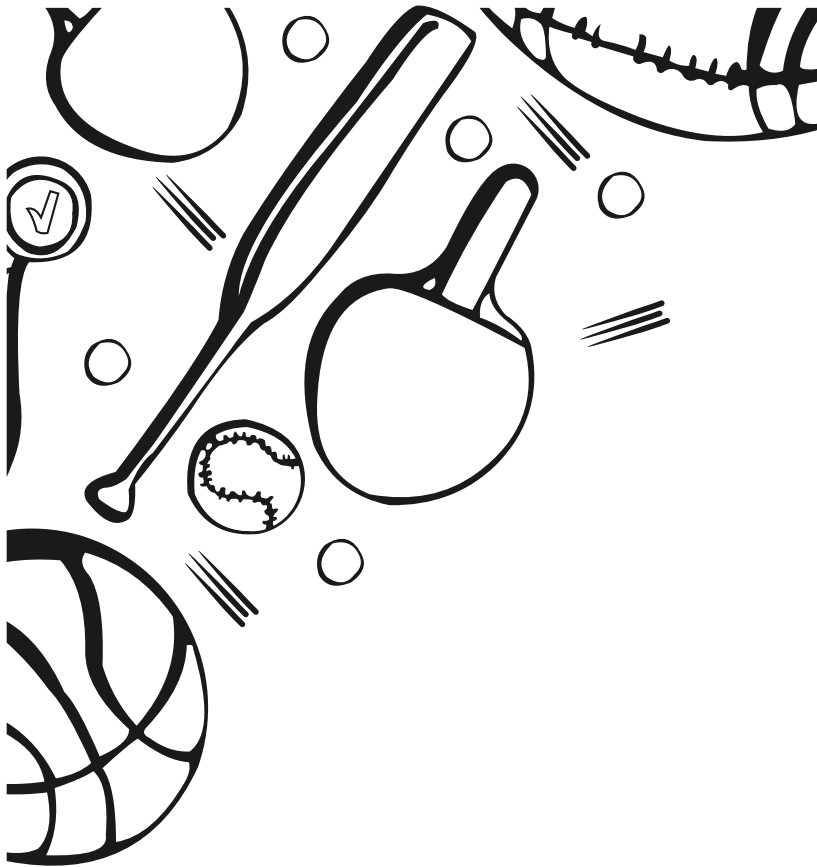
Cultural roots, traditions, and connections to home countries, along with personal stories, cultural practices, and memories with friends, play a strong role in how youth connect to physical activity and develop a sense of identity and belonging.

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 PHOTOVOICE 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.

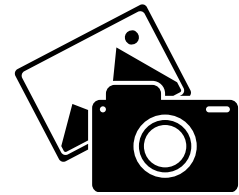
“There's a lot of space there's like places where you can just you know, play with yourself or play with friends you get to join with people and meet new people I love that about the valleys community.

• 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 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

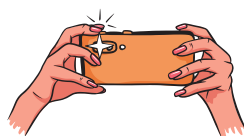
Photovoice is a CBPR research method that “puts cameras in the hands of people with valuable lived experience so they can explore and share their perspectives on health, family, community, and their futures” (16). It also involves the youth actively sharing, discussing and identifying themes and ideas 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

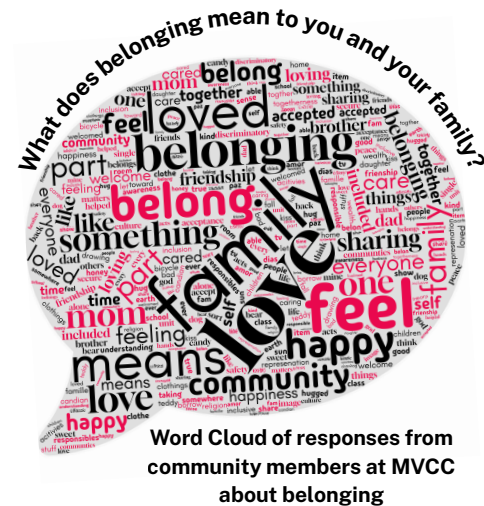
- Youth ages 10–18
- Live in Peel Region
- Lived, went to school, or played in the Valleys area
- Parent or guardian consent was required

## 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.

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

# 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.

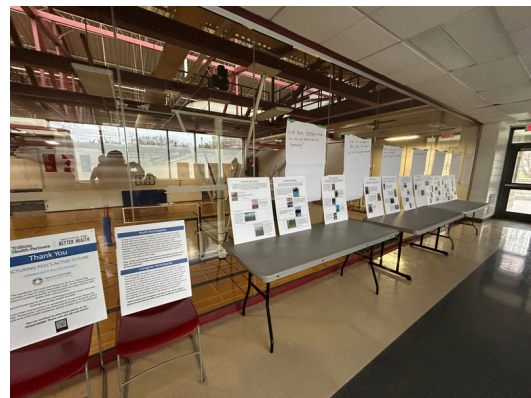
This interactive activity served as an easy icebreaker to help everyone feel more comfortable before beginning the workshop. The facilitators also took part in the activity, modeling openness and participation. We also invited MVCC staff into the space to provide context around why this project is important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

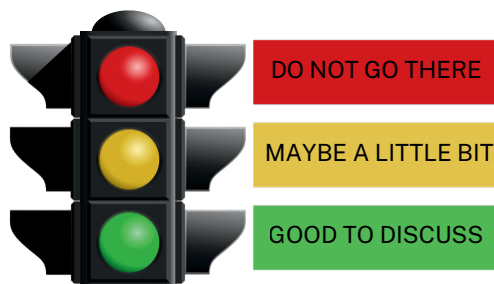
## Creating, Sharing & Brainstorming

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.



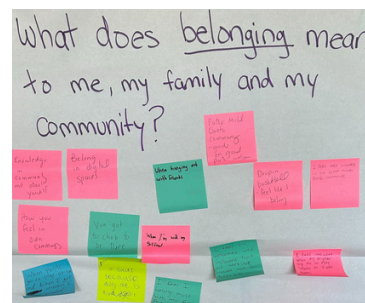
The workshop room. On display is the “Picturing Peel” photo exhibit to give participants a visual understanding of what we were creating together.

## 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.

”

“

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 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 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.

”

“

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

”

“

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.

”

“

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

”



# 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 basketball court I feel safe and included because I get to meet new people and get away from my problems

This photo shows me near exiting the Valley's after I 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 I even entered high school. I have had many memories over about 3 years at the Valley's, so this was kind of nostalgic for me to volunteer at a place I love.

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



**P**

Describe your **P**icture

**H**

What is **H**appening in your picture?

**O**

Why did you take a picture **O**f this?

**T**

What does this picture **T**ell us about your life?

**O**

How can this picture provide **O**pportunities 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.



Handwritten captions from youth  
from the third workshop

# 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.



**The selection of objects for the theming exercise.**

## 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.



**The table after the group analysis activity**

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.**



# Participant Themes

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



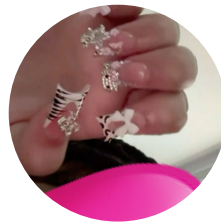
**Animals**



**Nature**



**Favourite  
Sports**



**Self Care**



**Hanging  
Out**



**Hobbies**



**Passions**



**Special  
Memories**



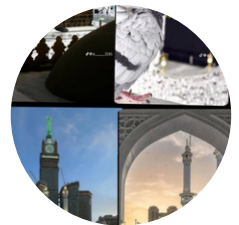
**Home  
Country**



**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**

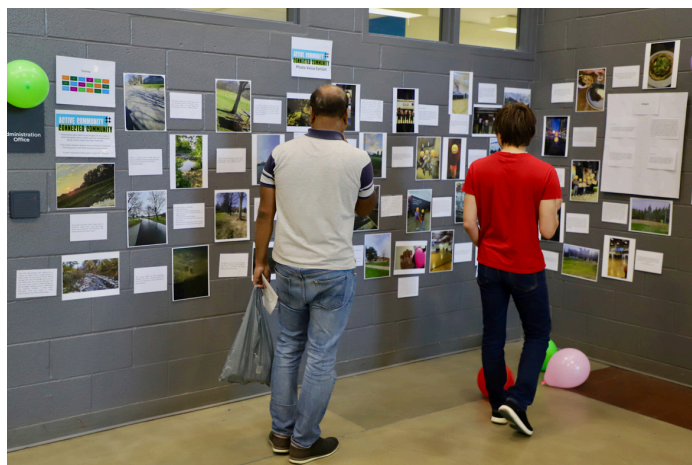
**Photovoice  
Exhibition**

**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.



Community members sharing their ideas

## Key Themes

**Sports  
& Games**  
N=11

**Dance  
& Movement**  
N=8

**Creative &  
Arts-Based**  
N=5

**Wellness &  
Inclusion**  
N=5

**Nature  
& Outdoors**  
N=7



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

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

More ideas on  
the next page



# 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.

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