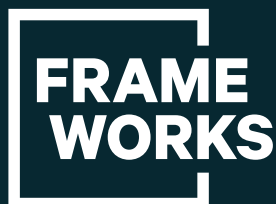


# Framing Guidance: Equitable Physical Activity

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A Strategic Brief in partnership with the Physical Activity Alliance.

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# Introduction

Every child and adult should have the opportunity to be physically active in everyday life, regardless of where they live, their current activity level, age, gender, race, ethnicity, ability, or income. But how do we, as researchers and advocates, communicate that foundational belief in ways that build support for policies and programs that can make it a reality?

Research tells us that when the American public thinks of physical activity, vigorous exercise in defined spaces usually comes to my mind, as well as the belief that individuals are almost solely responsible for engaging or not engaging in physical activity. While the public generally knows that being active can improve health, happiness, and overall wellbeing, our systems, spaces, and programs still struggle to provide safe, enjoyable opportunities to move more available to every person in our society.<sup>1</sup>

This resource contains a set of framing recommendations for voices in the physical activity sector to shift those dynamics and move toward a more fair and just society where everyone has access to opportunities to be active every day. The framing guidance presented here can help us all elevate and explain the barriers to being physically active encountered by social groups and communities that face injustice while also making the case for structural solutions that drive equitable access to opportunities to move more.

## Where do disparities exist?

Which groups of people in the US are disproportionately excluded from access to everyday physical activity?

- **Race/ethnicity.** Among adults, people who are Black, Hispanic, or Indigenous people are less likely to be physically active outside of work than people who are white or Asian.
- **Ability.** Among adults with a mobility disability, less than half report engaging in regular aerobic physical activity.
- **Region.** On average, adults in the US South are less physically active than adults in other regions of the country.
- **Income/wealth.** The prevalence of physical activity outside of work is generally greater at higher income levels.
- **Education level.** Among adults ages 25 and older with less than a high school education, the prevalence of leisure time physical inactivity is three times higher than college graduates.
- **Age.** The prevalence of physical inactivity is higher in adults ages 65 and older than adults younger than 65.
- **Sex/gender.** Males tend to be more physically active than females across the lifespan, starting as young as preschool.

*Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey<sup>2</sup>*

## How to Use This Document

The purpose of this resource is to equip people doing outreach and issue advocacy with elastic framing strategies for communicating about equity-focused policy and practice changes that can make it possible for people to move more in everyday life.

Proceeding as a field with a shared framing strategy means that we return, again and again, to effective frames for communicating our ideas. For these ideas to break through and take hold, we must commit to being consistent and creative, finding ways to refresh and adapt our enduring frames as we repeat them over time. We can express our values in unexpected ways, invite new voices to share their perspectives, look for new images to illustrate our issue, and find timely examples of a timeless theme.

This document provides our field with insights and guidance for sticking to key framing approaches related to equitable access to physical activity while leaving room for the necessary shifts in emphasis and language that we all rely on for communicating about our specific issues.

This resource has three parts. The first is a brief summary of the disparities that exist in physical activity access and outcomes. The second offers a set of framing recommendations in the form of “dos and don'ts.” The third section provides a set of narrative templates that build toward various solutions to inequities in physical activity.

## About This Research

This framing resource is part of a larger project led by the Physical Activity Alliance and the FrameWorks Institute to develop a comprehensive core story of physical activity. The recommendations build on previous research into the *attitudes, beliefs, and ideas that the American public holds around physical activity* and research on how the *media and organizations in the field communicate about the issue*. The framing guidance shared here was informed by leading experts and advocates in physical activity who generously shared their time and thoughts.

# Recommendations

## Dos and Don'ts

When talking about physical activity...

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### Do

Build the sense that with the right design, vital physical activity can be built into everyday life for everyone, regardless of where they live, their current activity level, age, gender, or income.

### Don't

Don't limit yourself to examples of physical activity as vigorous exercise during specific times of the day.

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**Why:** We need to expand the public's mental model of physical activity to include all the forms of movement that can occur throughout the day. This should include movement in school, home, and community settings where children and youth spend time, as being active supports their positive brain development and helps promote healthy lifestyle patterns.

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### Do

Emphasize the ideals of justice and fairness when talking about physical activity.

### Don't

Don't emphasize individual responsibility or individual benefits.  
Don't play into individual behavior narratives. (Be careful with words like "choices" and "lifestyle.")

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**Why :** To build support for approaches that eliminate underlying sources of disparities in physical activity, we need to orient people to the equity aspects of the issue.

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## Do

Explain how structural and environmental factors play a role in physical activity. (Use words like “options” and “opportunities.”)

## Don't

Don't simply assert that structural and environmental factors influence physical activity.

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**Why:** The public doesn't understand what causes disparities and tends to blame individuals for their outcomes. When we give concrete examples of how key social conditions shape physical activity, we help the public orient to differences in contexts that shape outcomes.

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## Do

Talk about social disparities. Use housing, transportation, and safety to anchor explanations of how context influences physical activity.

## Don't

Don't expect the term “social determinants” to be effective with the public—and don't expect data about disparities to build awareness on its own.

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**Why:** The public doesn't understand what causes disparities and tends to blame individuals for their outcomes. When we give concrete examples of how key social conditions shape physical activity, we help the public orient to differences in contexts that shape outcomes.

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## Do

Hold up diverse images of what fun physical activity can look like in different settings, for different bodies, at different points in the lifespan, including for people living with a disability.

## Don't

Don't assume that imagery that works for wellness industry advertising will work for equity-focused efforts.

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**Why:** Images are powerful—and so are social norms. By representing a diversity of body types engaged in a range of physical activity, we signal that movement can and should be for everyone.

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**Do**

Build on the public’s awareness of time constraints and unequal distribution of leisure time to argue for structural solutions.

**Don’t**

Don’t dwell on the difficulties of exercising or invoke the “challenges of modern life” repeatedly.

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**Why:** Access to leisure time influences health disparities. The public understands that the demands of modern life can limit people’s ability to be physically active and drive inequities. Invoking the challenges of modern life too frequently can make people fatalistic and diminish support for solutions.

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**Do**

Help people imagine collective solutions by explaining equity-focused policies and practices in clear, plain, concrete ways.

**Don’t**

Don’t leave out solutions—and don’t rely on lists.

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**Why:** If we fail to mention solutions—or if we fail to illustrate collective solutions—people will conclude that it’s up to individuals to solve the problem for themselves.

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**Do**

Connect equity issues to relevant and timely news events and top-of-mind issues (e.g., COVID-19, children’s mental health, community development meetings, new research studies).

**Don’t**

Don’t assume that the topic of physical activity on its own is enough of a story to get people’s attention and move them to action.

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**Why:** Decision-makers tend to focus on immediate issues. Therefore, making the connection between equitable physical activity and whichever issue is most relevant to them at that time can help build a sense of urgency. (Make sure to balance it with a sense of optimism that the problem can be solved.)

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# Narrative Templates for Equitable Physical Activity Solutions

Reorganizing points makes a difference. A generic outline is provided to explain how to best frame a proposed solution, as well as six examples that apply the outline to high-frequency equitable physical activity topics.

The technique involves leading with an aspirational principle, explaining the process at work, introducing the problem, and concluding with a proposal for change. You can read more about the social science that supports this sequence in *Order Matters*.



# An Outline for Framing a Social or Scientific Issue

## 1. Principle

**Lead with an ideal that society should uphold.**

**Tap into a collective concern—ideally, using a tested message that speaks to shared values.**

## 2. Process

**Explain how the issue works.**

**Establish a mechanism or process at play, using explanatory techniques like examples or metaphors.**

## 3. Problem

**Put some tension in the plot.**

**Make social conditions or structures the “bad guys.” Paint these threats as important but not insurmountable.**

## 4. Proposal

**Point to solutions.**

**Highlight promising or proven collective approaches to addressing the problem.**

# Framing Equitable Physical Activity

## 1. Principle

### **Justice and fairness**

**A just and fair society values every person and their health. Our commitment to justice calls us to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to be physically active, because it's essential for all.**

## 2. Process

### **Explain how the issue works.**

**Physical environments, social contexts, and access to health advice can support or hinder physical activity.**

**For example, in areas with well-lit sidewalks that lead to everyday destinations, people tend to walk or roll more.**

## 3. Problem

### **Put some tension in the plot.**

**Right now, as a society, we accept that some communities benefit from active-friendly spaces and routes that make it safe, easy, and socially acceptable for people to be active outdoors, and others don't. Similarly, our systems offer some people medical guidance and programs that can encourage moving more, but not everyone.**

## 4. Proposal

### **Point to solutions.**

**We must partner with communities to redesign neighborhoods and communal spaces (e.g., parks, streets, sidewalks) to promote moving more. We should make changes to the health care system so that everyone has access to the care they need, and so that guidance on being more active is part of standard care.**

# Example: Support bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure

## 1. Principle

### Justice and fairness

All people, no matter where they live, should have the option to walk, roll, or ride a bike for short trips to essential destinations like stores, schools, and public transit stops — and everyone should feel safe doing so.

## 2. Process

### Explain how the issue works.

The way we build our environments can encourage or discourage people to walk, roll, or bike to common destinations. For example, if a community has more sidewalks, people are more likely to walk or roll. Infrastructure like sidewalks promote being active, which is necessary for good health.

## 3. Problem

### Put some tension in the plot.

Right now, as a society, we accept that some communities don't have environments that make it safe and easy to walk, roll, or bike for everyday needs. This limits some people's opportunities for regular physical activity and can contribute to poorer health.

## 4. Proposal

### Point to solutions.

As we make decisions about what to build and how to fund it, we should make it a priority to increase everyday active transportation. This can involve choosing designs that include sidewalks, bike paths, or other walking/rolling/biking infrastructure.

# Example: Ensure that conversations about physical activity happen between providers and patients

## 1. Principle

### Justice and fairness

A fair society ensures access to solid, essential medical advice and guidance for everyone, regardless of background.

## 2. Process

### Explain how the issue works.

When health care professionals ask and advise their patients about being more active (e.g., walking, rolling, biking), patients are more likely to move more. This matters because regular physical activity is essential to good health

## 3. Problem

### Put some tension in the plot.

But not all health care providers are prepared and supported to assess and advise all patients on being more active. This means that patients who are more likely to have sedentary lifestyles aren't consistently getting medical guidance and supports that can help them to move more.

## 4. Proposal

### Point to solutions.

Health care systems should ensure that practitioners are trained and supported to discuss physical activity. This means making sure they have the time and knowledge and are prompted to have conversations about moving more with every patient, at every visit.

# Example: Connect clinical patients to community resources

## 1. Principle

### Justice and fairness

Health care providers should be equipped and prepared to connect their patients to community resources like parks, trails, and exercise programs that can help them meet their health needs — regardless of the patient's background.

## 2. Process

### Explain how the issue works.

When people know about places and programs to help them move more and sit less, they are more likely to be physically active. Hearing about these options from trusted health care providers can reinforce the point that moving more is essential for good health.

## 3. Problem

### Put some tension in the plot.

Not all health care providers are prepared and empowered to connect patients with places and ways to move more. This means that people in communities with more barriers to being physically active are missing an important way of learning about programs and supports.

## 4. Proposal

### Point to solutions.

To improve access to physical activity for people who most need it, health care providers should be supported to become familiar with active-friendly resources in the community, and health care systems should make it a standard practice to let patients know about them.

# Example: Employer-sponsored wellness programs

## 1. Principle

### **Justice and fairness**

**Because businesses depend on healthy workers to be successful, it's only fair that businesses help increase access to opportunities for physical activity for every employee.**

## 2. Process

### **Explain how the issue works.**

**Being physically active supports physical and mental health, which in turn helps people live happy, healthy, productive lives. This impacts businesses because they depend on healthy, productive employees to be successful.**

## 3. Problem

### **Put some tension in the plot.**

**Some people face barriers to being active that impact their health and make it harder to thrive at work and in life. For example, people who live in low-income neighborhoods may not have access to spaces where physical activity feels safe and easy.**

## 4. Proposal

### **Point to solutions.**

**Businesses can help! To support their employees to move more, they can create wellness programs that provide health resources to their employees (e.g., fitness programs, medical screenings, social support). Businesses can also be advocates for community resources and programs that help people be more active.**

# Example: Expanded access to sports programs

## 1. Principle

### **Justice and fairness**

**Every person, regardless of ability, race, gender, income, or age should have opportunities to learn and play sports.**

## 2. Process

### **Explain how the issue works.**

**Experiencing sports has many benefits. In addition to helping people be more active, which improves physical health, sports can improve mental health, reduce stress, and support child development.**

## 3. Problem

### **Put some tension in the plot.**

**Not everyone has the opportunity to play sports due to barriers that exist for both adults and young people. For example, sports programs in schools may not have necessary resources to include youth with disabilities. The cost of sports participation is another barrier that exists.**

## 4. Proposal

### **Point to solutions.**

**Policymakers should increase funding to create, maintain, and expand access to sports programs to everyone who wants to participate, regardless of ability, race, gender, age, or sexual orientation.**



# Conclusion

Public thinking and discourse about physical activity won't change overnight. The cultural barriers to change are deep. Americans too often take inequalities as inevitable and see sedentary lifestyles as an inextricable part of modern life. While people readily recognize that physical activity is important, they lack an understanding of how physical and policy environments influence it, which leads them to imagine solutions that are too simple to address the problems at hand.

The good news is that we have frames that can shift this thinking. The framing strategies described in this resource can help build deeper understanding of physical activity as part of efforts to build a nation that is not only healthier and happier, but also more fair, just, and inclusive.

# Endnotes

1. Davis, C., L'Hôte, E., Volmert, A., Busso, D., & Segar, M. (2020). *Communicating about physical activity: Challenges, opportunities, and emerging recommendations*. FrameWorks Institute.
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2022). Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey Data. Atlanta, Georgia: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

## About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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