

Improving Muslim Youth Participation in Physical Education and Physical Activity in San Diego County



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promotes health equity in the community through education, research, service, and training. As such, we engage community residents, youth, and other community stakeholders in a collaborative process to address health disparities at multiple levels. Health equity means all people have the opportunity to achieve optimal health and well-being, regardless of their background, where they live, or their financial means. We work in partnership with the Muslim community in San Diego County and have recognized a need to help youth-serving institutions make physical activity more accessible for Muslim youth, particularly girls. We hope our commitment and partnership with diverse communities in San Diego inspires other practitioners and advocates to work towards ensuring policies and practices that support the health of all young people.

www.ucsdcommunityhealth.org

Acknowledgments

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“This practical guide does an excellent job in presenting the proper understanding of Islamic practices, identifying barriers for Muslim girls with physical activity, providing realistic solutions to help relieve these obstacles, and thereby, giving Muslim American girls the opportunity to be just as active as their peers!”

—TASNIM EL MEZAIN, RDN

“This document provides an exciting opportunity for organizations to intentionally practice inclusivity and increase cultural competence in order for people, regardless of their race, class, gender or religion, to have access to the resources they need to thrive and have a healthy, robust life.”

—BECKY MODESTO, POINT LOMA NAZARENE UNIVERSITY ADJUNCT FACULTY

Introduction

San Diego County is home to a large and growing Muslim population. Its members are diverse, coming from a variety of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, and include immigrants, refugees, and native-born Americans. Between 2000 and 2010, the Muslim community was the fastest growing religious group in San Diego County; during the decade, the county's Muslim population grew by 179 percent.* It is becoming increasingly important to ensure the Muslim community has full access to the many opportunities available to San Diego County residents. This guide addresses one specific aspect of those inclusion efforts: improving and encouraging participation of Muslim youth in physical activity.

Physical activity providers in San Diego County include school districts, community-based nonprofits, and government or municipal departments. The activities range from youth sports leagues to extracurricular athletics. Many of these providers have already developed their own approaches to supporting the inclusion of Muslim youth, but each provider's needs, resources, and solutions are unique. This guide therefore frames considerations and strategies broadly, so different groups can tailor the approaches to the specific populations they serve.

An inclusive physical activity environment has key foundational elements. To promote full participation by all members, an organization embraces the values of inclusion and respect for diversity. Leadership often promotes a culture of personalized learning, high expectations, and high self-esteem. Positive relationships with coaches and other mentor figures enhance trust between youth and the organization, and ensure all physical activity participants have equal opportunities to achieve their potential. These organizations may also adopt policies to formalize their commitment to inclusivity, and may regularly monitor and evaluate the success of their policies.

The guidelines presented here expand on that foundation to help organizations build physical activity programs that are sensitive to Islamic requirements, particularly for youth. While geared toward the inclusion of Muslim youth, these recommendations may also have a positive impact on other populations.

* Clark M. Survey: Islam is San Diego County's fastest growing religion. *San Diego Union Tribune*. www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/2012/jul/07/islam-san-diego-county-fastest-growing-religion/. Accessed October 22, 2015.

Purpose

This guide is intended to help improve the participation of Muslim youth in school and community physical activity opportunities. It describes some strategies physical activity providers can use to improve religious and cultural sensitivity and create inclusive spaces for physical activity. In particular, this guide encourages the adoption of organizational-level policies that ensure Muslim girls can fully enjoy the benefits of physical activities in public settings.

This guide may be most beneficial to school districts, community-based nonprofits, and government or municipal departments that offer youth sports and extracurricular athletics.



Understanding Religious and Cultural Influences

The modern practice of Islam is rich and diverse. Muslims worldwide find their own ways to express themselves and live their lives to meet Islamic requirements. As physical activity providers, it helps to be familiar with some facets of Islam that may affect the structure and practice of physical activity. When designing programs or policies to be inclusive of Muslim youth, providers may wish to consider the following:

Importance of physical health

Many Muslims believe that Islam encourages attention to physical health alongside spiritual health. In creating inclusive physical activity spaces, it is helpful to draw upon these shared values.

Gender equity

When planning or executing physical activity for youth, providers should emphasize the importance of exercise and good health for both girls and boys. This is especially important because some forms of Islamic practice, such as modesty in dress, may affect girls and boys differently.

Modesty

Attention to modesty in dress can be relevant to girls and boys of all ages. In Islam, modesty often becomes important following puberty, although it is a cultural preference in some communities to introduce stricter modesty in dress with younger children. For example, some parents may prefer that their daughter wear a hijab (headscarf) before puberty, or a girl whose family does not prefer that she wear a hijab may still experience peer pressure to wear one. It is important to note the different interpretations of modesty, which are dependent on an individual's religious and cultural background. However, one common interpretation that may affect involvement in physical activity is for women to cover their hair, arms, and legs, and for men to cover themselves waist to knees. Whatever a youth's preferred expression of modesty, it need not preclude his or her participation in physical activity or physical education. If an organization offers physical activity with a dress code, such as a sports team uniform, that group can adapt the dress code to accommodate both Islamic requirements and safety.

Nurturing the body is part of nurturing the soul, according to Imam Taha Hassane, Director of Public/Interfaith Relations & Youth Programs at the Islamic Center of San Diego. He explained that it is important “to keep [as] healthy as possible, and it’s a duty for both men and women in Islam to treat our body well.”



“Muslim girls should be able to exercise modestly and comfortably just as much as anybody else because living a healthy lifestyle is essential for all.”

—MIRIAM ADAM, STUDENT AT UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO

Mixed-sex physical activity

Mixed-sex participation is often acceptable in non-contact activities, such as badminton, tennis, and track and field, especially if the participants are appropriately dressed for their expression of modesty. As with modesty in dress, there are different interpretations of appropriate mixed-sex interaction. Some Muslims see no need to cover themselves or seek same-sex spaces; others, if appropriately covered, feel comfortable participating in physical activity in mixed-sex groups.

With a little flexibility and an eye toward equity, physical activity providers can encourage participation by accommodating different forms of Islamic expression, and without compromising the health and safety of participants. In addition, providers should note that more serious tensions may arise among participants or families who view physical activity as inappropriate for girls and women.

“Playing soccer reduces stress, builds creativity and provides a sense of accomplishment. We see firsthand how girls learn to be part of a team, have the opportunity to be together, and gain confidence that can have a transformative effect on their lives.”

—TASHA GRIFFITHS, DEVELOPMENT
MANAGER AT YOUTH AND LEADERS
LIVING ACTIVELY (YALLA)



Recommendations for Physical Activity Providers

Providers should accommodate Muslim participants' needs wherever possible, within health and safety boundaries, to maximize participation. Often, relatively simple policy or program modifications can produce a marked improvement in access and participation.

Communication with Parents

As with any youth activity, good communication with participants' parents is essential. Activity organizers should ensure all parents understand the activity's content, structure, and participation requirements. They should make it clear that the activity is supportive and inclusive of all of its participants.

Informed participation

It is important to inform parents of all relevant policies and program activities before their child participates in physical activity.

Staff training

Activity organizers who are unsure about how best to communicate with families in a culturally competent way may want to provide appropriate staff training.

Making expectations clear

Providers can clarify what is expected and required of participants.

Diversifying outreach

Ideally, those who engage with the community would employ different strategies to maximize outreach effectiveness. For example, if participants' parents do not speak or read English, consider conducting bilingual outreach efforts in appropriate languages.

Regular communication

It is important to maintain ongoing communication with parents to keep them fully informed, especially when there are any changes to the activity program.





Discussing Appropriate Clothing at San Diego's East African Community and Cultural Center

Clothing can be a sensitive topic. Muslim parents interviewed at the East African Community and Cultural Center expressed concerns about appearance-based intolerance. They worried that teachers might view their children differently from how they view non-Muslim students, or that other youth might bully their children because of what they wear.

Muslim girls interviewed at the Center spoke about wanting to honor their beliefs and religion by dressing modestly. Some girls mentioned that certain sports are difficult to participate in because they need to wear clothing with more coverage. Poor communication with coaches exacerbated this feeling. One girl reported having to quit track because of the skin-baring uniform, while another quit cheerleading for similar reasons.

Athletic Dress Code

If a physical activity program requires a dress code, such as a physical education uniform or a sports team jersey, it is best practice to develop the dress code in consultation with participants and their families. This consultation can identify opportunities to modify the dress code, empower local youth, and make physical activity spaces more equitable and enjoyable for participants.* Throughout the process, the principles of flexibility and equity are key to maximizing participation for indoor and outdoor physical activity.

Suitable dress code options

Providers should allow participants a suitable range of clothing options to encourage Muslim participants to join the activity without concern for bare arms or legs. For example, if a physical education uniform consists of shorts and a T-shirt, instructors can permit students to wear long-sleeve tops, tracksuits, or leggings under their shorts.

Flexibility in all environments

Providers should apply the same flexibility in dress code to both indoor and outdoor physical activity.

Equitable application

It is important to offer all participants the same choices as equitable practice. Instructors and coaches should be mindful not to single out Muslim participants in offering a suitable range of clothing options. For example, allow all participants to choose between a T-shirt and long-sleeved shirt, and shorts and long pants.

Sensitivity to participant preferences

Providers should be sensitive to participants' different levels of comfort with typical sportswear. For example, some participants who have reached puberty might consider the tighter fit of Lycra, Spandex, or nylon garments inappropriate.

Open communication

An environment of trust and open communication between participants and coaches or other mentor figures is key. It is important for each participant to understand that activity organizers respect – and will do their best to accommodate – the participant's preferences. Open communication provides opportunities for participants to express their levels of comfort with clothing.

* Radwany S. Muslim Lady Warriors Balance Modest Dress, Performance And Fashion. *Only A Game*. <http://onlyagame.wbur.org/2015/10/17/lady-warriors-uniform-modest-muslim>. Published 2015. Accessed October 22, 2015.

Sports hijabs

Providers can encourage girls who wear hijabs to wear modern, sports-appropriate designs. Sports clothing manufacturers are increasingly creating sportswear that conforms to Islamic standards. Modern sports hijabs are designed in flexible, breathable fabrics. They do not require tying, and are much less prone to slipping. These hijabs have the advantage of being safer and more comfortable while still allowing the wearer to dress modestly.

Safety clothing recommendations

If girls are unable or unwilling to use the sports hijabs, providers can permit them to wear their regular hijabs. Instructors may request that their hijabs be safely secured (i.e., tied, rather than pinned) and tight fitting, and have the ends tucked in. A properly secured hijab is as safe as properly secured long hair. It is also recommended that girls wear close fitted clothes for the same reason and lighter colors and fabrics for overheating prevention.

Changing Facilities

Upholding the principles of dignity and respect for all participants is paramount. It is imperative that participants feel comfortable both preparing for physical activity, such as in locker rooms and changing rooms, and taking part in the activity itself.

Sports-appropriate clothing

It is appropriate to request that participants change into clothing suitable for physical activity, especially if that request incorporates some of the above equity considerations regarding dress code. Sports-appropriate clothing promotes hygiene and safety for all participants.

Privacy

People have different privacy sensitivities. If changing rooms lack privacy in showering facilities, it may make participants uncomfortable. This is less of a concern if showering is optional after physical activity.

Gender-segregated changing

If participants are changing out of their regular clothes, it is ideal to provide separate-sex changing rooms. It may be necessary to be creative in approaches to separate-sex changing rooms, especially with maturing youth. Where there is adequate room and adult supervision, providers should allow girls to change in spaces where boys are not permitted. Innovative solutions may include the use of screens, spare classrooms or offices, and towel-changing covers.

New facilities

The development or redesign of school and community sports facilities presents a good opportunity to implement more creative uses of space in communal changing rooms, which would afford greater individual privacy.



Inclusive Swimming Environments

Swimming teams and water sport programs are an enriching activity for youth, offering opportunities to improve health, coordination, and team building, in addition to having potential life-saving benefits. That said, some aspects of swimming, such as swimwear, changing, and showering, may require particular sensitivity.

Consulting with stakeholders

Providers should involve stakeholders in problem-solving, especially parents, community leaders, and pool staff, in order to share challenges and seek solutions.

Flexibility in swimwear

Instructors can allow participants to wear swim-appropriate attire that covers the body more fully. Sportswear manufacturers are increasingly producing more modest swimwear that may appeal to some participants.

Swim cap

Instructors should encourage participants to wear a swim cap. Swim caps have hygienic benefits and enhance participants' swimming effectiveness. They also cover the hair, and may be an appealing option to participants who normally wear a hijab.

All-female environments

Parents and schools may request all-female physical activity environments, and organizers should do their best to accommodate those requests.

Gender equity in pool staff

Recruitment, training, and retention of pool staff should be gender equitable. This increases the likelihood that the appropriate female staff are on hand for participants who prefer same-sex swimming environments.

Same-sex swim opportunities

It is important to improve policy and practice on same-sex swimming times where there is demand. If appropriate, staff should publicize these opportunities to facilitate community-wide participation

“It is hard to join in sports. I know how to swim and I would want to, but I can’t because I have to be covered up.”

—GIRL SCOUT, CITY HEIGHTS



Legal Considerations and Same-Sex Swim

Gender-specific swim times at public facilities may raise legal concerns. Anti-discrimination employment laws prohibit employers from giving jobs only to women in order to staff gender-specific swim hours. And accommodating religious customs could violate the First Amendment if it appears a locality endorses a particular religion. Many cities and counties across the country have offered gender-specific swim sessions at public pools. Public facilities considering gender-specific swim sessions should consult with their city or county attorney to determine the best approach.

Dance and Creative Movement

Dance is recognized worldwide as a valuable facet of human experience, as demonstrated through its many cultural forms of expression. Physical activity providers may encounter different attitudes toward dance in Muslim communities. Some Muslim parents may have no concerns about their children enjoying full participation. Others may be comfortable with their children's participation in certain dance forms, and yet others may prefer their children not participate in the activity at all.

The strongest opposition may be rooted in views about whether dance is a Muslim- or youth-appropriate activity. If parents or participants consider dance inappropriate, it may be due to social dance forms associated with popular culture. Some popular dance forms may appear sexualized or otherwise inappropriate for Muslim youth. To reassure parents with such concerns, providers should explain that the dance activity offered will not include sexualized movements or youth-inappropriate music.

Consulting with community members

Providers should consult with local Muslim leaders and parents about their views on dance as a physical activity for youth in a school or community setting.

Community outreach

It is important to increase shared understanding among physical activity providers and Muslim community members about the purpose and benefits of dance as a physical activity for youth.

Same-sex dance environments

When appropriate and desired, providers can work to provide dance in all-female environments.

Variety in dance styles

Teachers should have the flexibility to choose from a variety of types and styles of dance.

Variety in accompaniment

The teaching of dance is not dependent on the use of music. Depending on teachers' and participants' preferences, teachers can use a variety of forms of accompaniment, such as poetry, words, and stories. Each can add enjoyment and atmosphere to lessons.

Creative approaches

Providers should consider creative ways to secure participant interest and confidence in dance. Some teachers introduce youth to "creative movement" as a starting point, and then transition to dance.



Appropriate Foods

Similar to other major religions, many Muslims observe a specific set of dietary restrictions. Food items acceptable for Muslims to eat are called halal, which means that the food was prepared in accordance with Islamic law. If a physical activity involves feeding participants or providing them with drinks, providers should remember that some participants may prefer or require halal food which is associated with specific actions for animal food preparation as well as avoidance of any pork or associated products (e.g., gelatin, porcine enzyme).

Halal snacks and meals

If the activity is structured, such that physical activity providers or parents supply participants with snacks or meals, it is important to ensure there is halal food available for Muslim participants. Non-Muslims can also choose to eat halal foods if it doesn't conflict with their own dietary requirements.

Food on short and extended trips

Concerns about the availability of appropriate food can be a major barrier to Muslim participation in short or extended trips, such as "away" sports matches or overnight summer camps. Providers should work to ensure there is an adequate supply of halal food for participants, and that this is made clear to current and potential participants and their parents.

"On a weekly basis, we have to make sure that there is something during dinner that all of our students can eat. Many of our students are Latino, who often bring pork to share for dinner. As this is not permissible for our Muslim and vegetarian students, we make special accommodations for them."

—JONATHAN VILLAFUERTE,
ACHIEVEMENT COACH AT REALITY
CHANGERS, SAN DIEGO





Ramadan

Muslims consider Ramadan the holiest month of the year. Ramadan is characterized by a period of prayer, charity, and fasting. The predominant fasting practice during Ramadan is abstaining from food or drink from dawn to sunset. Frequently, children, among others with special dietary needs, are exempt from fasting. However, if participants are fasting in observance of Ramadan, providers should consider strategies to keep them engaged and included in physical activity.

Maintaining engagement

If participants are fasting, this need not preclude them from being physically active. However, providers should help modify physical activity to an appropriate intensity for participants. For example, a physical education class could focus on flexibility and stretching rather than strenuous cardiovascular drills.

Consulting with participants

Instructors can develop appropriate activity adaptations in consultation with affected participants. Physical activity providers, especially those without Muslims on their staff, can gather valuable insight from this, in addition to strengthening relationships with participants.

Flexibility in timing

Since the fasting period is from sunrise to sunset, providers should consider whether the program has flexibility in when the activity occurs. For example, a soccer team using a well-lit field may be able to practice after sunset, after Muslim participants have broken their fast.

Emphasizing strategy or technique

Teachers can place emphasis on valuable learning experiences to hone participants' strategy or technique in physical activity. For example, a baseball team can receive lessons on mechanics and developing good form in throwing and batting.

Conclusion

No single resource can cover all possible issues that could emerge in creating an inclusive environment for Muslim youth to participate in physical activity. However, it is the goal of this guide to support physical activity providers in fostering more inclusive environments by providing strategies rooted in equity and respect for diversity. While the recommendations here address common concerns for Muslim youth, many of these suggestions are also beneficial to non-Muslim youth. As youths' bodies and minds grow during important developmental years, teachers' and coaches' sensitivity to key aspects of physical activity environments - from clothing to privacy concerns - will benefit all participants. The ultimate objective is to build healthy, supportive environments and facilitate all youths' ability to participate in physical activity opportunities.

“We have not found any challenges working with Muslim girls and their families. They participate like any other player but covered according to their preferences.”

—TASHA GRIFFITHS, DEVELOPMENT
MANAGER AT YALLA, YOUTH SOCCER AND
ACADEMIC COACH

