

## Joint Use of Public Lands and Facilities

### What is joint use?

Joint use of public lands and facilities is a strategy to increase opportunities for children and adults to be more physically active. It refers to two or more entities — usually a school and a city or private organization — sharing indoor and outdoor spaces like gymnasiums, athletic fields and playgrounds. The concept is simple: maximize resources to keep costs down and communities healthy.

### Current Interest

Joint use is not a new idea but one that is currently gaining national attention. Along with several other strategies to combat childhood obesity, joint use is one of the recommendations of First Lady Michelle Obama's *Let's Move!* Initiative. In the *Let's Move! Cities & Towns* section of the initiative, mayors and community leaders are encouraged to promote increased physical activity in several ways. Joint use is one cited:

“Local governments should work with school officials to develop joint use agreements so that community residents can use school facilities for physical activity, and school officials and students can use community facilities for physical activity. “

An even more weighty endorsement of joint use is found in the Institute of Medicine's *Local Government Actions to Prevent Childhood Obesity*. Not only is joint use one of the strategies listed but it is highlighted as one of 12 overall steps judged to have the most promise in preventing childhood obesity.

“Collaborate with school districts and other organizations to establish joint use of facilities agreements allowing playing fields, playgrounds, and recreation centers to be used by community residents when schools are closed; if necessary, adopt regulatory and legislative policies to address liability issues that might block implementation.”

As with many initiatives addressing childhood obesity, the state of California has taken the lead in joint use. In May 2008 the joint use statewide task force (JUST) was established and includes organizations representing health, civil rights, community collaboratives, planners, local elected and appointed officials, park and recreation officials, school board administrators, academic researchers, and a growing list of groups interested in ensuring that all children have a safe place to play and be active within easy reach. Their website, <http://www.jointuse.org>, gives a good overview of joint use, how it can work and the many successes in California. Large urban cities, small rural cities and suburban cities have all had joint use successes in California.

### Why Joint Use Makes Sense in Missoula

From the recent Kaiser Family Foundation Study on screen time and youth, we know that the average teen spends seven-and-a-half hours every day in front of non-educational screens: TV, video games, computers, cell phones, etc. From the Body Mass Index surveillance study conducted by the Missoula City-County Health Department, we also know that 12% of Missoula county third graders are obese.

Lack of physical activity and too much sedentary activity contributes to a wide variety of problems including childhood obesity. Equally important, sedentary behavior robs people of physical activity's benefits including improved physical, emotional health as well as educational improvements. However, not all children have equal access or opportunity. Many Missoula families can offer great physical activity opportunities to their children including soccer, baseball, hiking, camping, skiing & a variety of water sports. Missoula offers both the proximity to outdoor activities and a well established framework of organized sports offered by a variety of programs. We also know that there are Missoula families that have barriers to offering their children the same opportunities. A recent survey conducted by the Missoula Youth Development Network of 112 parents informed us that parents need and want more physical activity programs that are either free or within their modest capabilities, and that are located close to where they live.

How can we as a community bridge this gap? Joint use of public facilities and lands is one reasonable, achievable solution. Missoula residents have made a substantial contribution to the building and maintenance of its many public places including parks, trails, and schools. Tax dollars support these properties and we must make certain they are used wisely and to their maximum capabilities. Joint use accomplishes that and more importantly provides more equity for children who cannot afford membership driven activities. Joint use is for the common good and would move Missoula to a new level of intergovernmental cooperation.

### **Missoula Active Kids Recommendation**

Missoula Active Kids fully supports the concept of joint use of public facilities and lands. We believe there are many ways for public agencies to work more efficiently together for the common good. We believe Missoula can achieve safe use, wise use and maximum use through joint use partnerships. Similar to other communities we are confident that Missoula can remove or reduce barriers and perceived barriers to open up our public lands and facilities for more equitable and creative use.

### **References**

Institute of Medicine *Local government Actions to Prevent Childhood Obesity*, Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, [www.iom.edu/obesitylocalgov](http://www.iom.edu/obesitylocalgov).

Joint Use Task Force <http://www.jointuse.org>

*Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8-to 18 Year-Olds*, A Kaiser Family Foundation Study

*Let's Move!* <http://www.letsmove.gov/>

### **Members of Missoula Active Kids**

**Founding members:** Missoula Parks and Recreation, Missoula Family YMCA, The University of Montana, Missoula Forum for Children & Youth, Missoula City-County Health Department

**Additional members:** Big Brothers Big Sisters of Missoula, Community Medical Center, Lolo School, Missoula Children and Nature, Missoula City-County Office of Public Grants, Missoula County Parks, Missoula County Public Schools, Missoula County Superintendent of Schools, Montana State University College of Nursing, Playground Enhancement Project, REI, Run Wild Missoula, Safe Routes to Schools, Summit Independent Living Center, St. Patrick Hospital and Health Services, Target Range School, and The Flagship Program.