

***Inspiring Children's Physical Activity:  
Exploratory Research with Parents***

Prepared for:  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
VERB™ Campaign

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*Note: This research was conducted by SpencerHall, a strategic marketing and research firm, to inform the development of campaign advertising. This research was exploratory in nature; that is, it was used to stimulate dialogue, elicit a range of responses, and generate ideas. These research findings should not be considered conclusive or generalizable.*

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## RESEARCH OVERVIEW

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A total of six focus groups and four in-home interviews were conducted in Los Angeles, CA and Edison, NJ. The Los Angeles research was conducted on April 14-15 and the Edison research on April 21-22, 2003. The objectives of the research were:

1. Determine the most compelling factors that will motivate parents to facilitate the incorporation of physical activity into their kids' everyday lives, with an emphasis on understanding how parents get their information and key triggers for action.
2. Understand attitudes about VERB, including gaining insight into parents' impressions and expectations of VERB. What are they getting/not getting from VERB? What, if any impact has VERB had? Do they understand the importance of physical activity in their kids' lives? What does that mean to them currently (e.g. how much is enough)?
3. Evaluate a range of concepts/positionings with parents based on the three communication platforms, to determine the most compelling approach to inspire parents to engage their child in physical activity.

Respondents were mothers of girls and boys, ages 9-13, with household incomes of \$35,000 - \$100,000. The groups included a mix of working and stay-at-home mothers and a mix of ethnicities including Caucasian, African American, Asian, Hispanic and Native Americans. The respondents were grouped by the self-reported activity levels of their children, ages 9-13 who were living in the household. Low activity was defined as participating in a physical activity 0-1 day per week. Moderate and high activity was defined as participation in a physical activity 2+ days per week. Respondents were grouped as follows:

### *LOS ANGELES*

- Group 1 – Mothers of GIRLS, ages 9-13, who are low-activity
- Group 2 – Mothers of GIRLS, ages 9-13, who are moderate- to high-activity
- Group 3 – Mothers of BOYS, ages 9-13, who are low-activity

### *NEW JERSEY*

- Group 1 – Mothers of BOYS, ages 9-13, who are low-activity
- Group 2 – Mothers of BOYS, ages 9-13, who are moderate- to high-activity
- Group 3 – Mothers of GIRLS, ages 9-13, who are low-activity

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## MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

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In general, respondents felt that their communities provided adequate activities and easy access to the activities. There were sports teams of all types available all year and there were also non-sports activities such as art classes, and drama classes.

Many mothers only considered 'organized' sports teams for getting their children more active. Based on that, there appears to be an opportunity to re-define "Free Play" time and make it an important chance to increase children's activity.

Safety is a major concern for all mothers that affected how much and what types of activities their children could participate in. Most found it a challenge just letting their children play freely in the neighborhood, as they feared kidnapping. Others felt that their neighborhoods had a lot of traffic and potentially bad influences making it unsafe to be outside.

In general, the parents of low activity children were not thinking of activity for their children; it was not top of mind. Many felt activity was a good thing, they just were not thinking about it, nor was it viewed a priority and they seemed to be most focused on the present, getting through each day. These mothers were extremely busy and many found it exhausting and difficult to stay on top of all of the demands and schedules of their family. Many of these mothers felt torn and guilty. They knew they should get their children more active, but they did not know how to do it and were so busy, it was not a priority.

Girls appear to be at risk of declining activity levels, especially as they reach the tween and teen years. This seemed to be acceptable to mothers as they expected their daughters to become less interested in sports and playing and more interested in other things.

Education is a priority among the mothers of low activity children. Most pushed their children to do homework and do well in school. They felt that education was the primary road to success. Exercise and activity were secondary to schoolwork.

It was surprising that parents, especially of the low activity children, gave the children a great deal of choice of what they wanted to do with their time. If the children chose to play the piano, watch television or play on the computer, it was okay. They felt it was important their children do things they liked to do.

Mothers of high activity children tended to be active themselves and valued activity as part of their children's holistic development. They felt that their children should be well-rounded and that activity and sports were important to their development of teamwork, self-esteem, winning and losing, physical skills, and sharing. Instead of seeing their children's activities as a burden, the high activity parents got a lot of personal satisfaction out of their children's activities. They even had their own social lives within the context of their children's activities. They also seemed to have stronger boundaries for their children regarding the amount of time they were permitted to watch television and use the computer.

Using SpencerHall's *Storytelling*<sup>TM</sup> technique we uncovered valuable insights about consumers' deepest emotions, attitudes, and moods about:

## HOW YOU FEEL ABOUT YOUR INVOLVEMENT IN YOUR CHILDREN'S PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES.

Several differences emerged in the tone and themes among mothers of high/moderate activity children and low activity children.

### *Low Activity*

- Mothers of low activity children seemed to have a significant amount of guilt, sadness around the fact that their children are not as active as they would like them to be and are uncertain how they can change that.
- Mothers of low activity children also have stories that focus on the 'fights' and battles they have with their children, trying to get them to be more active and to turn off the computer or television.
- Finding the time to fit activity into the family's schedule is a challenge for low activity mothers.
- Many mothers of low activity children are proud of the other things their children are doing and focus on their strengths, not their weaknesses.

### *High Activity*

- Mothers of high activity children had stories that focused a great deal on how they directly facilitate their child's participation in, and excelling in, activities.
- These mothers found activity to be important because of the benefits for their children, physical as well as spiritual and mental.

A number of key barriers to activity emerged:

- Television and the computer take up huge amounts of children's time and mothers of low activity children 'battle' with them to spend less time in these sedentary activities.
- Time appears to be the greatest barrier to increasing children's activity levels as parents do not have time to play with the children, parents do not have time to drive multiple children to multiple activities, and children have a great deal of homework each evening and it is the priority.
- It is much easier for many parents to have sedentary children, as the parent were often exhausted at the end of a day and it was hard to put the effort into more activities.
- Education takes priority over activity.
- The family is not active and thus does not integrate activity into family time.
- Some children are seen to be less 'sports-oriented' and not encouraged to be active.
- Many parents were protective of their 'low activity' children, fearing they would be hurt physically or emotionally if they joined a sports team.
- Many parents of older children felt it was 'too late' for them to join a sports team.

- Schools do not support the importance of activity in children's lives.

Three concepts were shown to respondents in New Jersey, developed from top flashcards that were explored in Los Angeles. Respondents were asked to rate each concept on a scale of 1-5 based on how motivating it was; 1=not at all motivating, 5=very motivating. Respondents then circled words, phrases and ideas that were appealing and crossed out words, phrases or ideas that were not appealing.

One concept, *Concept F*, emerged as the most motivating as it focused on the future success of respondents' children. Many were only focusing on grades and academics and it was somewhat surprising to them to see the importance of activity in their children's future success. They had never put together all of the skills that went along with mastering physical activities. This statement helped to make those links.

The most appealing statement was '*...physical activity can help kids develop the social, moral and leadership skills they will need to succeed in college and beyond.*' This gave parents the specific impact that activity could have on their children's lives in the future.

Respondents were intrigued by the fact that activity could have an impact on academics. They liked the mention of the study linking activity to improved math scores. However, some with low activity children felt their children were already high achievers and that statement was not as impactful.

The following opportunities were identified in the research:

1. Develop communications around Concept F, which focuses on the importance of activity on children's future.
2. Explore development of activity programs that redefine 'organized activity' to encompass more non-competitive, non-team physical activities and free play.
3. Reinforce the health benefits associated with activity and the health risks associated with inactivity via secondary communications such as the website.
4. Explore the school programs as a primary avenue for communications beyond traditional media of print and television.
5. There appears to be a need to target mothers and children younger than 9 years of age.

Based on these learnings, the advertising agency will develop a creative brief based on Concept F, linking in the present benefits of activity to reinforce its relevance.

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## SUMMARY & OBSERVATIONS

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### ***OVERALL LEARNINGS***

In general, respondents felt that their communities provided adequate activities and easy access to the activities. There were sports teams of all types available all year and there were also non-sports activities such as art classes, and drama classes. A few who had low activity children did admit that they felt that the activities, memberships and equipment were cost prohibitive. One respondent said, *“There’s a lot out there to do, but it’s really expensive to get your kids involved. You have membership and team fees, uniforms, equipment. It can get really expensive, especially if you just have one income.”*

Many mothers only considered ‘organized’ sports teams for getting their children more active. They did not think as readily about sending their children outside to run around or ride bikes. However, some felt that if their children were outside, even if they were just sitting around, it was adequate activity. Based on that, there appears to be an opportunity to re-define “Free Play” time and make it an important chance to increase children’s activity.

Safety is a major concern for all mothers that affected how much and what types of activities their children could participate in. Most found it a challenge just letting their children play freely in the neighborhood, as they feared kidnapping. Others felt that their neighborhoods had a lot of traffic and potentially bad influences making it unsafe to be outside.

As expected, there was very little awareness of VERB. Most respondents had never heard about the program. A few who regularly watched stations such as Nickelodeon with their children remembered seeing the spots. They were memorable as the respondents remembered specific activities shown in the spots and the corresponding ‘verb.’ *“I remember kids riding bikes and doing tricks...they were bouncing around and the word ‘bounce’ was involved.”*

When interviewing respondents in their homes, the team observed that the high activity respondents had pictures, trophies and memorabilia everywhere ‘celebrating’ the various achievements of their children. The lower activity families had much less of this around the home. This reinforced the VERB ideas celebrating kids’ activities. The high activity children were very proud of their achievements and continued to bring items out of their rooms to show off their achievements.

There were televisions and computers in a number of the ‘low activity’ children’s rooms. They were watching television and playing on the computer for a great deal of time, unsupervised. A number of moms said they were embarrassed that they were not sure exactly how much time their children were actually spending on these sedentary activities. *“They may actually spend more time on that than I think. Sometimes I’m so busy doing other things, that I’m just glad they’re safe in the house and quiet.”*

## ***LOW ACTIVITY INSIGHTS***

In general, the parents of low activity children were not thinking of activity for their children; it was not top of mind. Many felt activity was a good thing, they just were not thinking about it, nor was it viewed a priority. Many seemed to have very busy and chaotic lives and found it difficult to ‘stay on top of’ all of the things they had to do in their day. Things that were not an immediate priority did not get attention. As one respondent said, *“We have to make sure they get good grades, and they make it to school, the state says so. And of course the kids have to be fed and all of the errands run. But they don’t have to exercise every day...I just don’t think about it among all of the other things that have to be done.”*

Mothers of low activity children seemed to be most focused on the present, getting through each day. These mothers felt they were extremely busy and many found it exhausting and difficult to stay on top of all of the demands and schedules of their family. When discussing topics such as the future health of their children, they felt that they cared, but were more focused on the present. One respondent said, *“I have a hard enough time just getting them to turn off the television or to eat a good dinner. I think if I had to worry about the ‘future’ all of the time, I’d go crazy!”* These mothers seemed frazzled, disorganized and running in all directions. Many admitted they did not know where the time went; they always felt frazzled but never seemed to get anything done. Many of these mothers felt torn and guilty. They knew they should get their children more active, but they did not know how to do it and were so busy, it was not a priority.

Activity tended to occur on the weekends only, when the family had time to be together and parents had time to encourage activity. As one respondent said, *“My kids have a heavy homework schedule during the week and my husband and I are busy with work. We really don’t have time during the week to do much in the way of activity. We do that sort of thing on the weekends.”*

For low activity families, family time was often centered around relaxation and children were allowed a great deal of personal ‘down time.’ Many of these mothers did not want to ‘push’ activity as they felt that ‘down time’ was important in the lives of their children. Unlike the mothers of more active children, when these children said they were tired and wanted to nap or watch television, these mothers allowed it. They felt their children needed the rest and relaxation.

In Los Angeles, many of the mothers of low activity children felt that their children were excelling in some other area; academics, drama, art, etc. In New Jersey, more of these mothers admitted that they felt their children were just ‘lazy.’ Many in LA spoke a great deal about how talented and gifted their children were academically. They did not feel the need to push athletics, as for their child it was ‘not their thing:’ *“They are very good at other things. They’re just not athletic.”* The mothers in New Jersey seemed to have a less forgiving perception of their children’s unwillingness to be active. One mother said, *“I just think he’s lazy. Plain and simple, lazy.”* Another mother said, *“If it requires her to get a little out of breath and maybe sweaty, no way. That’s not going to happen with her. She’s too girly and too lazy.”*

Only-children seemed somewhat disadvantaged, as there was ‘no one else to play with.’ Having others around in the same age seemed to be important for providing spontaneous play. An only child with no one their age living in the neighborhood does not have the kids close by to play with. Consequently, they tended to spend more time alone, watching television, talking with friends on the phone and playing on the computer.

Younger children and multiple child homes were also disadvantaged as their mothers did not have as much time to drive them around and keep them busy. Many of the mothers admitted they were less involved in keeping these children active, as it was a lot of work. Some had older children that tended to take a lot of their time. They admitted that they did not push the younger children to be more active. One mother said, *“I’ll admit it. It’s easier for me if he’s not that active. This year he decided not to play soccer and I was like “fine!” I’m always driving his older brother around and it’s less running around for me.”*

Girls appear to be at risk of declining activity levels, especially as they reach the tween and teen years. This seemed to be acceptable to mothers as they expected their daughters to become less interested in sports and playing and more interested in other things. As one mother put it, *“She’s starting to get into boys and clothes and makeup. She talks on the phone and spends more time at the mall. I think that’s just what happens to girls this age. Their friends are more important. It’s normal.”* Interestingly, most mothers recognized this as the age when their daughters were gaining weight and worried about it.

Many of the mothers of low activity children were tired of fighting with their children to be more active. Many said that they were constantly trying to get the child to play outside or get involved in other things, but the children were not interested. The ‘fighting’ seemed to center on the television and the computer. One respondent said, *“I yell at him to turn off that computer and get outside, but he yells and whines. I just get tired of it!”*

A number of the respondents with low activity children had other children they felt had a high activity level. In these families, the mothers felt the low activity child ‘just wasn’t competitive,’ or was not that athletic. They did not want to push these children in to sports they did not like or that they were not good at. Some were also younger children in multiple child families and the moms were very busy with the other children’s schedules.

Mothers of low activity children seemed to worry more about their children getting mad at them if they pushed them to be more active. They tended to be nurturers more than authoritarians or disciplinarians in their child-rearing styles. They strove to have peace in the household and thus did not push their children to do things they did not want to do. There may be an opportunity to link in to this need to please their children in messaging. Their children may not appreciate the ‘pushing’ now, but will thank them later, a concept understood by the mothers of high activity families.

Education is a priority among the mothers of low activity children. Most pushed their children to do homework and do well in school. They felt that education was the primary road to success. Exercise and activity were secondary to schoolwork. Interestingly, many



felt that the time some of their children were spending on the computer was time well spent at they were mastering this technology. One mother said, *"I want to be able to provide them with the tools to succeed in life. He's a whiz at the computer. We live in such a technological age. It might be what he does for a living. I let him play on the computer and develop this interest."*

It was surprising that parents, especially of the low activity children, gave the children a great deal of choice of what they wanted to do with their time. If the children chose to play the piano, watch television or play on the computer, it was okay. They felt it was important their children do things they liked to do. One mother said, *"I let her choose what she likes and wants to do. It's important she develop her own interests. And if it's sedentary, well, it's easier on me...Not so much running around and scheduling activities."*

### ***HIGH ACTIVITY INSIGHTS***

The parents of high activity children tended to have a high activity level themselves. Many of these moms worked out or played a sport themselves. If the moms themselves were not active, their husbands were very active and encouraged activity for the children. Their lives were often centered on the activities of their children. Most seemed have a great deal of confidence and were organized, able to juggle the workloads and schedules of their families.

They valued activity as part of their children's holistic development. They felt that their children should be well-rounded and that activity and sports were important to their development of teamwork, self-esteem, winning and losing, physical skills, and sharing. They saw this holistic development at the road to success, and that academics alone was not 'enough.' One respondent said, *"You know, good grades aren't good enough anymore for getting in to college. You need sports, activities...all sorts of things. They are looking for well-rounded kids."* Another mother said, *"Being involved in activities and sports just makes someone more interesting. They know how to do things and know how to get along on a team. I want my child to have an appreciation for a lot of things and for what they can do."*

Instead of seeing their children's activities as a burden, the high activity parents got a lot of personal satisfaction out of their children's activities. They got a sense of pride in themselves and their children as they saw their children accomplish new things. They understood their role in this development and blossoming of their child. They also had their own social lives within the context of their children's activities. They knew the parents of teammates and they enjoyed going to the games to see friends. One respondent said, *"I really look forward to my son's games and tournaments. All of the parents know each others and we have the team in common. It's fun."* Some also said they got a lot of their 'personal' things done during games, *"I bring books or magazines and use that time to catch up on reading or even talking to friends on the phone."*

The mothers of high activity children seemed to have stronger boundaries for their children regarding television and the computer. High activity children enjoyed watching television and playing on the computer, as did the lower activity children. However, the mothers of these children seemed to have stronger limits on the amount of time allowed for these

sedentary activities. One mother said, *"We do not allow any TV during the week. We just don't. It's not a fight or a discussion, it just doesn't come on until some specific shows on the weekend."* They did not 'give up' when the children grumbled, and theirs was the last word.

### ***PRIORITIES***

Respondents were given a chart and asked to plot their own typical activities on the following axes: Not At All Important to Very Important and Too Much Time to Too Little Time. Respondents discussed their personal priorities of activities based on the chart.

Virtually all respondents felt they were spending too much time watching television and playing on the computer. Although the mothers of high activity children may be spending fewer hours on these activities, they still felt it was too much. As one respondent said, *"The computer just sucks up so much time. And I really don't get anything done on it."*

All respondents felt they were not spending enough time on personal things that were important to them. These included activities such as working out at the gym, meditating and prayer, reading, going out with their friends. One respondent said, *"I know you need to take care of yourself to take care of others, but there just aren't enough hours in the day."*

Mothers of lower activity children had a number of activities in the quadrant "Not At All Important/Too Much Time" indicating that they may not be focused on their priorities. This may be what gives them the feeling of being scattered as much of their time is spent on things they do not consider to be important to them. Mothers of high activity children seemed to have less in this quadrant and in general seemed more focused on their priorities.

All mothers felt that driving children around to their activities was taking a great deal of their time. Interestingly, many mothers of low activity children felt that this was 'Not Important' making it seem like a burden. *"I waste so much time in the car. I just won't have my children involved in so much that I become their chauffeur."* On the other hand, the mothers of high activity children felt these were important activities and were therefore less negative about how much time was spent driving the kids around. *"It's part of raising children these days. They can't just take off on their bike for the day like we used to, so we have to do what we can to allow them to play with friends and be healthy and active."*

## ***STORYTELLING™***

Using SpencerHall's *Storytelling™* technique we uncovered valuable insights about consumers' deepest emotions, attitudes, and moods surrounding their children's activities. With this technique, respondents created a picture collage about their feelings, allowing us to break through emotional barriers to reveal the true feelings they have about:

### HOW YOU FEEL ABOUT YOUR INVOLVEMENT IN YOUR CHILDREN'S PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES.

Several differences emerged in the tone and themes among mothers of high/moderate activity children and low activity children.

Mothers of low activity children seemed to have a significant amount of guilt, sadness around the fact that their children are not as active as they would like them to be and are uncertain how they can change that.

- *I try to tell him to 'go,' go outside and do something. But he's stubborn and just stands there.*
- *I have to live with the fact that he's not that active. I would like him to be outside, and moving and healthy, but he just doesn't enjoy it. I worry about his future health.*
- *I try to encourage him, but he enjoys sulking. This is his face when I turn off Cartoon Network.*
- *There have been a lot of changes in his life. I had a new baby and that takes a lot of my time. And we moved. He's very solitary now, away from his friends and cousins.*
- *I feel sort of sad about it. I'm sitting with my head on my hands. I just don't know what to do.*
- *I am sad and guilty. I know he's lonely. He sits in front of the computer or TV or Gameboy and they are more important than friends or his family. I feel bad because I just can't seem to figure out what to do to get him more active and to make him happier.*
- *I'd like my son to be more active. But I feel it's really out of my reach. I feel like my hands are tied behind my back...I can't push him out the door and make him run around. So I just sit back and hope he'll change before he's too old.*

Mothers of low activity children also have stories that focus on the 'fights' and battles they have with their children, trying to get them to be more active and to turn off the computer or television. Stories from mothers of low activity girls seemed to center around the sense that their daughters were growing more distant from them and their relationships were more strained at this point.

- *It's really sad. I'm concerned about her being so inactive. But there's a real barrier growing between us. Like this ice wall. I'm just shut out and feel like there's not much I can do.*
- *The TV and computer are more important than us.*
- *This is my son when I try to turn off the TV or his music. He's not getting his way and it just becomes a battle.*

Finding the time to fit activity into the family's schedule IS another challenge for low activity mothers.

- *I work third shift, the late shift. My husband is a pastor of our church, so I have many obligations for church. I'm so tired, I feel old, too old to be more active with my son. I feel like I'm barely there. I could probably organize things a little better to fit it all in.*
- *I feel like my daughter would be more active if I were. But there doesn't seem to be enough time in the day to fit it all in. Maybe if I spent less time cleaning up the house and more time playing with them, they would be more active.*
- *Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda...that's the story of my life. I know I should be doing more to get my children active. But there's no time. I never have time to just play some basketball with my daughter.*

Many mothers of low activity children are proud of the other things their children are doing and focus on their strengths, not their weaknesses. They feel that giving their children the support they need was the best way of staying involved in their lives and encouraging activity.

- *I support his way of thinking. It's very different from many children, but he's very creative and curious. He can be diverted by an interesting bug which he'll spend an hour watching. I think that's important for his creativity.*
- *He's the 'brain child.' He's very gifted. He'll just follow his own path and I'll help him bloom in his own talents.*
- *I'm there for them. I drive them where they need to go. I'm the cheerleader. I watch all of the concerts and activities and I'm there for them when they feel down.*

Mothers of high activity children had stories that focused a great deal on how they directly facilitate their child's participation in, and excelling in, activities. Much of this support focused on the driving they did to get children from one activity to the next. Instead of feeling burdened as the mothers of low activity children did, they seemed to get the satisfaction that they were directly enhancing their children's lives by supporting their activities.

- *This is a map of all the places I drive to take them from activity to activity. I do this for both daughters. It's an expression of my love for them because they are able to do the things they love.*
- *It's a lot of driving but it's to get to do something fun and exciting.*
- *I feel blown every which way, but I'm the mom and they're like these puppies. They depend on me to set examples and tell them what's important. Activity is important.*

These mothers focused found activity to be important because of the benefits for their children, both physical as well as spiritual and mental.

- *I feel really good about her being very physically active. She's fit and healthy and feels good. And this is life! You should make the most out of it. Being active is a really important part of enjoying life.*
- *I'm willing to take her to her activities because she has time with her friends and she gets the experience of working as a team.*
- *It's makes them feel so much more confident knowing they've worked towards something and have gotten better at it.*

### ***Key Barriers to Activity***

Television and the computer take up huge amounts of children's time. Mothers of low activity children 'battle' with them to spend less time in front of the television and computer, but they get tired of fighting with them. Some also feel that technology is one of their children's strengths and they do not want to pull them away from something they're good at.

Time appears to be the greatest barrier to increasing children's activity levels:

- Parents do not have time to play with the children
- Parents do not have time to drive multiple children to multiple activities
- Children have a great deal of homework each evening and it is the priority.

It is much easier for many parents to have sedentary children, as the parent were often exhausted at the end of a day and it was hard to put the effort into more activities. A number of the low activity parents worked, had a number of children or simply felt they had full schedules. One respondent said, *"I want to crash on the couch and rest when I get home. I really don't want to get in the car and drive to a game, or even go to the park to run around with my son. I really need a break."*

Education takes priority over activity. The low activity mothers want their children to focus on school, which can take a great deal of time each day during the school year. Grades are a top priority, as respondents felt they were critical for the future success of their children. Activity did not seem to have the same impact on future success in the minds of these mothers.

The family is not active and thus does not integrate activity into family time. Some were very involved in family activities, but they tended to be more sedentary, such as movies, museums, games, etc. One respondent said, *"We're just not a sports family. We like to go to movies and play games."*

The children are perceived to be less 'sports-oriented' and even a little clumsy. Many of these children are seen to be more academically 'gifted' or talented, or are more artistic. Their mothers want them to cultivate the things they are good at and they often do not get worried if their children are less active. They do not encourage increasing activity for these children.

Many parents were protective of their 'low activity' children, fearing they would be hurt physically or emotionally if they joined a sport team. One mother said, *"I guess I really baby him. I don't want him to get hurt out on the field. He's just not as good as the other kids, he's just not that athletic. So he's probably more likely to get hurt."*

Many parents of older children felt it was 'too late' for them to join a sports team. Most teams included children who had been playing that sport for a number of years (since 5 years of age for some) and had mastered a certain skill level by this time. The lower activity children were just not as good at the sport at this point. Some had been asked off of the teams. One mother said, *"My son was asked not to come back next year. Can you imagine how he felt? I wouldn't push him back in to a situation like that. There just aren't any teams for kids who start later."*

Schools do not support the importance of activity in children's lives. The mothers seemed to know that most schools are not providing adequate levels of activity for their children during school hours. The fact that schools have cut out activity is sending a message to families that it is not as important as other academics, further reducing its perceived importance.

### ***Potential Motivators***

All mothers were motivated by their children's health and well-being. They knew they had a great deal to do with their children's health and saw it as a great responsibility to care for. One respondent said, *"Giving my child good health is one of the most important things I can do for them. They need healthy habits for the future."*

Future success for their children was motivating. Most think of education as having the greatest impact on future success, not activity. However, many of the mothers of low activity children see the future as far off and it may be difficult to keep them motivated by future goals. This type of message will need to be linked to a more present or immediate payoff such as immediate health benefits, fewer health problems now, and even better grades.

Parents of low activity children may be motivated by a sense that activity is as mandatory as schoolwork and good grades. Mothers know there are certain things they have to do, such as send their children to school and push them to pass. One mother said, *“There are things I have to do...the school board makes me send my kids to school. And they have to get a certain amount of sleep every night to function. I don’t see activity like that.”* Making activity more mandatory could increase its priority and importance in these low-activity families lives. Recommendations from pediatricians and schools as well as strong school programs requiring a certain level of physical fitness would fit the definition of mandatory requirements.

Increase schools’ involvement in encouraging activity outside school hours. Respondents look to their children’s schools to provide information on the health and well-being of their children. They were considered to be an expert resource for information. Communications from schools reinforcing the importance of activity in children’s lives would likely be read and considered more closely than communications outside of the school.

### ***Communications Channels***

The following were key communications channels for a message encouraging increasing activity levels among children:

- Pediatrician’s office - Respondents looked to their pediatrician to give them guidance on nutrition, activity, and other health issues for their children. However, most seemed to be passive in this setting, waiting for the physician to tell them their child was not getting proper nutrition or exercise, rather than asking about what was adequate or necessary. There may be an opportunity to make physicians more proactive in suggesting activity for their young patients.
- School – Respondents said that they reviewed virtually all communications from the school. They felt that if the school sent it home, it must be important. They also did not see the school as ‘commercial’ or having alternative motives for messages.
- The “Mommy Network” – A great deal of information, tips and advice is shared, word of mouth, via the “Mommy Network,” the network of friends with children of similar ages going through the same problems and stages. This was all word-of-mouth sharing, and not via an Internet community.

- Television – Respondents seemed to get a great deal of information from the ‘Magazine’ programs such as 20/20, Nightline, etc. These were seen as credible and often had impactful stories. Oprah was also seen as a credible resource, and respondents felt that this type of information would be appropriate for the show. Many cited the health segment of their Local Newscasts as a regular resource for keeping up to date on the latest health issues. This might represent an opportunity to continually keep the activity message in front of the public, especially low activity families.
- Print – Respondents were reading general women’s magazines, such as Good Housekeeping, for information on caring for their family. They felt that nutrition and general exercise information would be appropriate for this type of publication. Respondents, especially the mothers of high activity children, were reading publications such as Fitness and Healthy Living and felt that a lot of the information about exercise would be relevant for their children.
- One respondents mentioned the American Girls Books as a resource for health and hygiene for their daughters, ages 9-10. This may represent an opportunity to establish a specific resource for children that is appealing to this age of girls and that can involve mothers in the reading. These mothers said that offering their children reading material often provided a forum for discussion of a topic.
- Website – Although respondents do look to the internet for information, they did not know of specific sites for activity related information. Most said that if they became aware of a site offering advice, information, tips and resources for getting their children more active, they would be likely to check it out. Importantly, they said they would have to be impressed and educated with good information the first time they were on the site, or else they would never return. One respondent said, *“If I’m disappointed and see things I already know on the site, they’d never get me back.”*

### ***FLASHCARD CONJOINT***

Respondents in Los Angeles were shown three sets of ‘flashcards’ with Insights, Benefits and VERB Program Ideas. They were asked to sort each set into “Keep” and “Throw” piles based on how relatable, motivating and interesting each statement was. After sorting the sets, they ranked the top three statements in each set. It is important to note that the statements were developed primarily to target low activity families and some were not relevant to mothers of high activity children.

#### ***Insight Statements***

Four statements were seen as most appealing:



*We make grades and homework a priority over playtime because these are things that help my child succeed in school and prepare them for their future education.*

This was the top statement in all three groups. Respondents agreed that school and homework were priorities and key to their future success. Although respondents all agreed that homework was a priority over playing, mothers of high activity children still highly valued their children's activities. As one respondent said, *"She definitely has to get her homework done first. But she really learns a lot from her sports too. She learns teamwork and to be committed; when you start something you finish it."* These mothers saw activities as important not only for the skills their children developed but also for getting into good colleges.

*I would like my child to be more active but with all the increased pressure on kids in school and homework it's hard to make time for sports and play.*

Respondents agreed that their children were pressured to perform academically and complained about the amount of homework children had. Many of the mothers of low activity children agreed with this statement saying that once all of the homework was done during the school year, it was too dark to play outside.

*I would like my child to be more active, but it's hard when all they want to do is play videogames and watch TV.*

Mothers of lower activity children felt this was true of their children. This was a situation they dealt with daily. Most agreed they would like to see their kids be more interested in activity, but the children were more interested in TV. They battled to get them to turn off the television or computer. Interestingly, the mothers of high activity children 'Threw' this statement as it did not reflect their experience. One mother said, *"I have a harder time making her come inside and sit down for awhile. It's not a problem to keep her active and away from the TV. She can't wait to get outside as soon as she gets home."*

*My child is not into sports but they are involved in other activities that help build their confidence and self esteem.*

This was a 'Keep' in all groups. Most respondents felt that their children were involved in something that helped to build them up and increase their confidence. Even those whose children were playing a great deal on the computer felt that this was a talent for their children and that they were developing a skill. Developing confidence and self-esteem was very important for all mothers.

A number of statements were less appealing or not relevant to respondents:

*I would like my child to be more active but there aren't many safe opportunities for kids to play in my neighborhood.*

Although the perceived safety of neighborhoods varied by respondent, most felt that safety was an issue for their children. They were fearful of kidnappers taking their children.

However, most felt that their communities provided opportunities to be active, making this a statement difficult to assess. *"I don't want my child running around unsupervised in my neighborhood. But my community does provide opportunities to play sports and be active."*

*Today's world places too much emphasis on school work, but kids need more time to play.*

All groups chose this as a 'Keep'. Almost all respondents felt that children were getting too much homework and they felt their children were somewhat burdened by the pressure of the homework. All agreed that children needed to play, but the level of importance varied among respondents.

*I would like my child to be more active but they're not that athletic so I don't want to push them.*

Respondents in the lower activity groups felt this was relevant to them. Although not a top idea, many agreed that their children were not that athletic and were not interested in pushing them to do something that; they did not like, they were not good at and that cost a fair amount of money. The mothers of high activity children did not relate to this idea.

*My child gets enough exercise in school and in his free time. I focus on encouraging other activities such as school, culture or the arts.*

Most respondents did not feel that their children were getting enough activity in school or free time. Mothers of high activity children really felt the organized team sports were key to their child's activity levels. Although many, especially mothers of lower activity children did encourage activities such as the arts and culture, they did not agree with the first part of the statement and thus "Threw" this.

***Benefit Statements***

*Getting your kids active can help them feel better today and develop habits for a healthier, longer life.*

This was a favorite benefit. It delivered important immediate and future benefits. All moms understood the importance of developing healthy habits for their children.

*Getting your kid active can actually help them do better in school and improve test scores.*

Respondents were intrigued by this statement. They all felt school was important and were interested in anything that would help their children in this area. There was an interesting paradox among the low activity mothers; they focused very strongly on education (to the detriment of activity) however many felt their children were already so 'gifted' and did so well in school that this was not particularly relevant to them.

*Getting active with you child can help you share interests and strengthen your relationship.*

Respondents in the 'high activity' group chose this as their third place "Keep" as they really did see activity as a key part to their families relationships. However, the mothers of low activity children experienced fights and the silent treatment when they tried to encourage activity with their children. Additionally, they were somewhat offended that someone would try to tell them how to have a relationship with their children. As one respondent put it, *"I have a great relationship with my child. I'm very involved with them and talk with them all of the time. This makes me feel like I don't know how to talk to my kids."*

*Getting your kids active helps them build self esteem and confidence.*

Many mothers felt that this was saying that activity was the only way to build self esteem and confidence and they did not agree. They felt many things went in to building that in a child. They also felt that this could be built with good grades as well as musical and other artistic endeavors. Many of the mothers of low activity children felt that their child's esteem was actually lowered when they tried to participate in sports. One respondent said, *"He's not very good and the other kids make fun of him. He just got to the point he didn't want to go anymore. That was terrible for his self esteem."* They did not link the statement to the fact that mastering physical skills can make someone feel good. However, the idea of building self-esteem, confidence and other social skills was extremely important to mothers. This statement simply did not capture the idea in a motivating manner.

### ***VERB Program Ideas***

*Verb educates me on the importance of being active in relation to my child's future success.—*

- *There is new learning on the connection between mind and body and the impact on education: more activity = better scores (Stanford Study).*
- *It leads to greater social and leadership and team building skills*

Respondents were very interested in things that would increase their child's likelihood of success. They found the idea that activity could actually improve test scores interesting and believable. They also felt that the social and leadership skills were critical and felt that often sports were the best way to develop these skills at a young age.

*VERB teaches me about the implications of not being active today on my child's future:*

- *More kids are getting high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and Type 2 diabetes*
- *Getting 60 minutes a day of physical activity in any form can help reduce the risk of future health issues.*

This statement was somewhat less appealing as it focused on the negative aspects of not getting enough exercise and activity. *"It's depressing."* However, many felt it was a wake-up call and important for parents to be aware of. They also liked that the statement gave them a very specific goal of 60 minutes of any type of activity. Respondents felt this was appropriate, however some felt it would be hard to fit in a whole hour of exercise.

*VERB gives me advice on how to get my kid interested in activity and fit it into our everyday lives. This includes:*

- *Directory of local opportunities to get active and pursue a sport*
- *Activity starter kit with 'how to's' for starting a network of parents who share my interest in getting kids active in my community*
- *Carpooling connections.*

Mothers of low activity children found it appealing to fit activity into their everyday lives, as they did not feel that their children wanted to make a lot of changes to become more active. All respondents especially liked the idea of having carpool connections. Many would like a directory of local opportunities, however most said this was currently available. One mother said, *"They have lots of sports activities, but no physical activities my daughter would like. She's not in to sports."*

*Verb gives me ideas for simple things I can do to get my child active today:*

- *Talking to them about their interests*
- *Encouraging them with a note or words of praise*
- *Taking pictures and putting them up on the fridge*
- *Practicing with them and playing with them after school for 15-20 minutes*

Although respondents liked the idea of 'simple' things they can do to encourage activity in their children, the actual ideas were not impactful. One respondent said, *"This is nothing new. I knew this. I do these things. I would be disappointed if I went to this website and this was the advice they gave. We all know this."*

### **CONCEPT FOCUS**

Three concepts were shown to respondents in New Jersey, developed from top flashcards that were explored in Los Angeles. Respondents were asked to rate each concept on a scale of 1-5 based on how motivating it was; 1=not at all motivating, 5=very motivating. Respondents then circled words, phrases and ideas that were appealing and crossed out words, phrases or ideas that were not appealing. After reviewing all concepts, respondents ranked the ideas in order of how motivating they were. Discussion started with the most motivating concepts.

## Concept F

*We make grades and homework a priority over playtime because these are the things that help my child succeed and prepare them for their future success.*

*Verb is a program to get kids active that encourages parents to promote activity as an important part of preparing your child for future success. At VERBparents.com you'll find information on how and why you should make play part of your child's homework assignment.*

*This is important because in addition to its health benefits, physical activity can help kids develop the social, moral and leadership skills they will need to succeed in college and beyond. Additionally, recent studies confirm the relationship between the mind and the body, showing that moderate physical activity can actually improve children's math scores.*

Concept F was most motivating as it focused on the future success of respondents' children. Many were only focusing on grades and academics and it was somewhat surprising to them to see the importance of activity in their children's future success. They had never put together all of the skills that went along with mastering physical activities. This statement helped to make those links.

The most appealing statement was '...physical activity can help kids develop the social, moral and leadership skills they will need to succeed in college and beyond.' This gave parents the specific impact that activity could have on their children's lives in the future.

Respondents were intrigued by the fact that activity could have an impact on academics. They liked the mention of the study linking activity to improved math scores. However, some with low activity children felt their children were already high achievers and that statement was not as impactful.

## *Concept H*

While I think physical activity is good, I don't want to push my child to do something they are not interested in.

Verb is a program to get kids active that encourages all parents to help their kids get active for the recommended 60 minute a day. VERBparents.com provides information on how much physical activity kids are getting in PE class, how much they need and how you can fit physical activity into your daily lives.

Although genetics plays its part, today's sedentary lifestyles have led to an increase in health problems for children. 1 in 5 children have weight issues that will affect their health, leading to unprecedented increases in Type 2 Diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure in our children. This lifestyle also contributes to future health problems that may not show up until they are adults. This generation has the possibility of being the first generation not to live longer than their parents.

Concept H was highly polarizing with almost as many top votes as bottom votes. Respondents described it as 'scary' and 'a wake up call.' Those who were motivated by it seemed somewhat surprised about the facts.

Respondents who were motivated by this concept found the specific facts to be shocking and critically important; '...1 in 5 children have weight issues that will affect their health, leading to unprecedented increases in Type 2 Diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure in our children.' Additionally, they found the following statement to be powerful and frightening; 'This generation has the possibility of being the first generation not to live longer than their parents.'

Respondents who did not like this concept felt it was a scare tactic and that it was depressing. They were less motivated by it as it did not give good information about how to overcome their children's sedentary lifestyles. Many also did not believe the statements.

### *Concept S*

I know physical activity is important but with all the increased pressure on kids in school and with all of our schedules to manage, it's hard to find time for sports and play.

Verb is a program to get kids active that gives parents information and advice on how to fit activity into your child's everyday life. At VERBparents.com you'll find simple, easy ideas on how to talk to kids about their interests, how something simple as a note or team picture on the refrigerator can mean a lot to your children and ideas for taking 15 –20 minute activity breaks with your kids.

This is important because regular physical activity can help your kids feel better today and lead to healthy habits for a lifetime.

Concept S was, overall, the least motivating, primarily because much of this was something that respondents said they already knew, however there a number of appealing elements. Respondents liked the prescriptive, simple ideas that the concept offered and would like more simple tips that could be integrated into everyday life. They also liked the shorter time frames for activity (15-20 minute breaks) as they seemed realistic, especially for the busy, exhausted mothers of low activity children. Respondents also liked the link to creating healthy habits for their children.

## ***IMPLICATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES***

The following opportunities were identified in the research:

1. Develop communications around Concept F, which focuses on the importance of activity on children's future. However, it will be important to ground the future in the present for low activity mothers. There may be an opportunity to link into a more immediate payoff such as creating healthy habits and helping children feel better now to make this more relevant today.
2. Explore development of activity programs that redefine 'organized activity' to encompass more non-competitive, non-team physical activities and free play. Many respondents felt that their children were not competitive or could not 'keep up' with children their age on competitive teams. Organized activities such as bike-riding, hiking, walking, kickball, etc could interest these less competitive, less 'athletic' children.
3. Reinforce the health benefits associated with activity and the health risks associated with inactivity via secondary communications such as the website. This type of communication offers the opportunity to link health risks to specific solutions so that this type of 'scary' message does not leave mothers feeling panicked, scared and hopeless about their children's activity levels.
4. Explore the school programs as a primary avenue for communications beyond traditional media of print and television. This is a captive audience as respondents said they read virtually anything the school sends home. This is also a credible resource as schools would not be seen to have any other agenda than the well being of their students.
5. There appears to be a need to target mothers and children younger than 9 years of age. Many of the mothers of low activity children felt that it was almost too late to create healthier habits in their children. They were already behind in key sports skills, were heavy and did not find activity interesting.

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## **NEXT STEPS**

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Based on these learnings, the Agency will develop a creative brief based on Concept F, linking in the present benefits of activity to reinforce its relevance.