

## Active Parks – the Birmingham way

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With over 500 parks, Birmingham, the second largest city in England, is considered a park city and has more parks than any European city. Regardless of its beautiful 3,500 hectares (or 52,315 acres) of public open space, over six million trees, and 250 miles of urban brooks and streams, most residents are not active and 26% of its 1 million residents are obese, which causes the city at least £20 million a year. The “Active Parks” program was created to encourage more activity. The pilot program took place in summer 2013. With its success, the “Active Parks” program was formally established by the Birmingham City Council and expanded it to 50 parks in 2014 and continues to grow in terms of the number of participating parks as well as attendees.



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Scenes from Active Parks' Tai Chi classes  
*Active Parks*



### *Active Parks*

The citizens of Birmingham are encouraged to participate in a wide range of **free** physical activities to improve health and wellbeing while having fun. There are all sorts of activities that are suitable for people of all ages and levels of physical capabilities ranging from walking, dancing, boxing, running, cycling, Zumba, to [Tai Chi](#). Sports like rounders (similar to baseball), basketball, boules, badminton, tennis, rowing and canoeing are included. Even gardening, conservation and wildlife [bushcraft](#) are also among the selections. Currently, it offers 42 different activities.

Tai Chi and [Qigong](#) are ancient Chinese healing arts. They are medically proven to prevent all kinds of diseases and to help patients recover from sicknesses. They were chosen as part of the pilot program in 2013. Due to its popularity, Tai Chi has become an important part of the “Active Parks” program. Tai Chi in parks was actually established in 2011, before Active Parks started. Sifu Mark Peters of Birmingham is the founder of Paint the Rainbow and Kai Ming Association and the organizer of Tai Chi in parks. He stated that Tai Chi classes are well attended and some of the practitioners have been there since the inception of the program and many participate continuously.

Sifu Peters started his Tai Chi and Qigong journey in 1988 by studying Chen Man Ch’ing Style Yang Tai Chi in Malaysia. Later he broadened his study to include other Tai Chi and Qigong forms. He teaches Tai Chi Qigong 18 form, Standing Post, and Chen Man Ch’ing’s 37 Form in the parks.

Birmingham has a [temperate maritime climate](#), with average maximum temperatures in summer around 21.5 °C (or 70.7 °F) and in winter around 6.5 °C (43.7 °F). But Birmingham’s winter can get brutally cold and the temperature once dropped to –20.8 °C (–5.4 °F). Unlike other UK cities, Birmingham is a snowy city due to its inland location and relatively high elevation. In general, the “Active Parks” program

runs from April to October. However owing to the enthusiasm of students, most Tai Chi classes are offered year round. Currently, 16 parks have weekly Tai Chi classes all twelve months and five parks do not have classes from Oct to April. Mark has been touched by the passion that students have for Tai Chi. It does not matter that it rains or snows and some Tai Chi students will always show up. He recalled that Jan 14 this year was very cold with pouring rain. He called students to cancel the class but a few students still went out to practice.

In the attached video, you can see that Mark's classes are participated by males and females, all age groups, and people with various racial backgrounds, a reflection of the diverse demography of Birmingham. It is heartwarming to see a young mother carrying a kangaroo pouch in front of her chest with a baby in it while attending a Tai Chi class; it is sweet to hear about a young boy attending a Tai Chi class with his mother.

Exercises especially Tai Chi can improve people's health and help to prevent diabetes, stroke, cancer, and heart disease. Working out in parks provides the extra benefit of being in nature and breathing in fresh air. Tai Chi and other exercises can also enhance mental health to reduce stress, dementia, and depression. According to Mark Peters, students constantly mentioned the health benefits they have experienced from practicing Tai Chi and Qigong. In the video, one Tai Chi practitioner testified that he had all sorts of health issues three years ago and now even his doctor is wondering what turned his health around.

Mark is pleased to see the increasing demand for Tai Chi classes and is constantly adding participating parks to the list (you can click a [link](#) here to see it). Nevertheless, he is also facing a challenge to find and/or train qualified Tai Chi instructors fast enough as the program expands.

Globally, Birmingham's weight problem is not unique. [Obesity](#) is a worldwide epidemic. The United States had the highest rate of obesity for large countries, until surpassed by Mexico in 2013. Obesity percentages for the US population are climbing each year. Results from the 2011–2012 American National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) indicate that an estimated 33.9% of U.S. adults aged 20 and over are overweight, 35.1% are obese, and 6.4% are extremely obese. In other word, three out of four American adults are either overweight or obese. A similar survey done by NHANES from 2009-2010 indicates that 16.9% of children and adolescents were obese.

Birmingham's Active Parks has a user-friendly portal. It allows residents to find a location near them by entering their postcode, desired travel distance, and category of selected activity. Once the search is complete, it shows a few choices and how far the distance is, direction to a park, and the class schedule for each matching park. Active Parks serves as a great model to promote public health. We sincerely hope that American municipalities can learn a few lessons from it and invest in their citizens' health.

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**Violet Li**

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