

Getting a good start: The early years must be active years

We think of very young children as being in perpetual motion, constantly exploring their environments. But according to recent findings in the 2010 Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card, they're not on the move enough.

"We assume that young children are full of energy and will just naturally be active, but that's not always the case," says Dr. Art Quinney, Chair of the Active Healthy Kids Canada Board of Directors. "The Report Card tells us that less than half of Canadian kids under five are getting regular physical activity as part of their daily routines."

Canadian data indicate that less than half of kids aged four to five—and just one third of two- to three-year-olds—participate in regular, unorganized sports and other physical activities each week. And in childcare facilities, where more and more kids are spending their days, physical activity levels are low, with as much as 89 per cent of kids' time spent sitting still.

The Report Card offers the most comprehensive assessment of child and youth physical activity opportunities in Canada. Active Healthy Kids Canada produces and delivers the Report Card in partnership with the Healthy Active Living and Obesity Research Group at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO-HALO) and ParticipACTION, as well as a national Research Work Group and network partner organizations that represent each province and territory in Canada.

"This year, we're shining a spotlight on the early years. Because unfortunately, we know that many young kids are on the path to inactivity and obesity before they even begin school," says Dr. Mark Tremblay, Chief Scientific Officer, Active Healthy Kids Canada and Director of HALO.

"Growing evidence shows that physical activity must be a fundamental part of the early-life experience, but Canada does not currently have physical activity guidelines for children five and under."

According to the Report Card, physical inactivity in the early years should be high on the public agenda given that lifestyle patterns set before the age of six can actually predict overall health and obesity outcomes later in life. Children who are obese before the age of six are likely to be obese later in childhood, and those who are overweight by the ages of two to five are already four times as likely to be overweight as adults.

"Active play may be lots of fun for youngsters, but it's certainly not frivolous," says Tremblay. "Children under the age of five actually require plenty of active play for healthy physical, social, emotional and cognitive development."

While international guidelines vary, the global consensus is that all children aged one to five should get at least two hours of physical activity spread out throughout each day, over recreational activities, active transportation and playtime.

It takes a village to raise an active child

According to the Report Card, the overall physical activity levels of a child are impacted by a variety of influencers, including family and peers, schools, community and the built environment, and policy.

At the societal level, our country must make a stronger commitment to its youngest citizens. In a 2008 UNICEF study, which assessed 25 economically advanced countries on 10 indicators ranging from the training provided to childcare staff, to national investments made to help children develop in their early years, Canada ranked in last place overall. The study's key criticism of Canada's efforts? A lack of "substantial public investment in education until children reach the age of five."

"Our youngest generation deserves a strong start in life," says Michelle Brownrigg, CEO of Active Healthy Kids Canada. "We have the opportunity to secure a healthier future for our young children by ensuring that policies mandate daily physical activities in schools and childcare facilities, investing in safe parks and play structures, and providing caregivers and educators with training and support to provide adequate physical activity opportunities to kids."

In homes across Canada, parents and caregivers can also make a commitment to the youngest generation by dialing down the screen time.

"We're still seeing time spent in front of television, computer and video game screens at unhealthy levels—even for kids as young as two," says Tremblay.

The Report Card tells us that 90 per cent of kids start watching TV before they've reached their second birthday—even though experts recommend that children of this age group should get zero screen time.

It all adds up to a healthier, more active lifestyle

Parents, educators, health professionals and community programmers might feel overwhelmed at the thought of trying to keep little ones active for two or more hours each day. What they need to remember is that the activity can be built into a child's regular routine, and should be spread out in blocks of time throughout the day.

"Parents must know that smaller, incremental routine changes can have major benefits in the health and wellbeing of their children," says Kelly Murumets, President and CEO of ParticipACTION. "Families can make the local playground a regular destination, and encourage their toddler to climb, swing and simply explore the park with them. Or, they can rake the lawn, bike to the store or go for regular walks after dinner."

Healthy household habits, including reduced screen time, regular physical activity and lots of healthy role modeling, can set young kids on the path to physical activity for life.

For more information, or to download the 2010 Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card, visit www.activehealthykids.ca.