

Healthy levels of exercise missing in most families



SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

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For the past two years, Canada has received a “D” in physical activity on an annual report card looking at the exercise

habits of children and youth.

In fact, in the 2006 report some things are getting worse in terms of the activity of our young people. The results show an “unacceptable situation,” says Dr. Mark Tremblay, chairman of Active Healthy Kids Canada.

The biggest problem in the report is the amount of time Canadian kids spend sitting in front of a screen, be it a computer, hand-held game, or television. The numbers point out that only one in five Canadian kids limit their TV or computer time to two hours per day, the guideline set by the Canadian Paediatric Society.

More than 50 per cent watch two to four hours of TV per day and about one-third spend two or more hours on the computer. Too much time in front of the tube or the computer is only one piece of the puzzle: the other is getting kids to have consistent and healthy levels of exercise.

When asked, most parents felt their kids are getting adequate amounts of activity, but the data doesn't back it up! While 80 to 90 per cent of parents feel their kids are active enough, research shows fewer than half of kids are getting the amount they need.

This disconnect comes from many complex issues. In the case of hockey families, during the season, kids' activity levels can look adequate on the surface, as a few practices and games per week make it seem that there should be enough skating and sweating to go around. But the nature of hockey, and

the fact that not all kids receive equal or adequate ice time, show that levels of intensity and exercise can vary greatly from player to player.

In soccer, you often see tons of brothers, sisters and parents playing on the sidelines. In minor hockey, much time is spent commuting to and from rinks. Some rinks don't always have a place for hockey siblings and family members to make use of down time while waiting for practices and games to be over. Instead, they make visits to the rink canteen, where there are high salt, saturated fat and sugar selections, and few – if any – healthy snack and meal choices.

Parents are also working longer hours, and also don't have the energy to supervise the way they used to when there is down time at home. Television and computer games make a convenient escape, and don't require as much supervision as activity outside, for example.

And don't get me started on the lack of quality and positive messages in many of the so-called 'children's' shows these days, or lousy video game content.

Here's more food for thought in the form of suggestions from the activity study:

- Family activity times (skating on an outdoor rink, or at a public arena skate) instead of nightly family time in front of the tube;
- Eating meals in front of the television should be cut out completely;
- Children should not have televisions in their bedrooms; and,
- Parents should set time limits on screen time and encourage other activities, like board games, art, music or other more creative pursuits.

Also important is the idea of “modeling:” our kids get their eating, activity and other lifestyle habits from their parents. Sometimes the most powerful family changes come when mom and dad make changes in their own lifestyle, and the kids follow.

Before the season is over, give your family its own activity report card – bypass the canteen, grab your skates and have fun being active!

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