

Today's After School Special – Inactivity

Canadian children missing the mark on physical activity in the after-school period.

An alarming modern-day trend has emerged – Canadian kids are coming home from school and are parking their bodies.

According to the 2011 Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card on Physical Activity For Children and Youth, Canadian children are only getting a meager 14 minutes of moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity in the three hour period between school dismissal and the supper hour.

The Report Card tells us that the pattern of after-school inactivity is overwhelming with 92% of this time-period being spent by children and youth in sedentary pursuits or light physical activity.

The Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card, now in its seventh year, is the most comprehensive annual assessment of child and youth physical activity in Canada. The Report Card is the culmination of a years' worth of critical review by Active Healthy Kids Canada, a charitable organization dedicated to raising awareness about the importance of physical activity for all Canadian children and youth. Supporting the release of the Report Card are strategic partners, ParticipACTION, and the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) Research Institute – Healthy Active Living and Obesity Research Group (HALO).

This year, the Report Card is focused on the after-school period, and examines the influences in a child's life – such as school, family, community, or government policy - that might have an impact on his or her physical activity levels, as well as scrutinizing the sedentary behaviours of Canadian children and youth.

Screen time is stealing the after-school show

Many Canadian children have abandoned physical play after school for the bright lights of the computer. The Report Card confirms this; hitting the couch after school has become the norm, with 73% of parents reporting that their children are engaged in very sedentary activities like watching TV, reading, or playing video and computer games after school.

“Right now, kids are spending over 40 hours a week in front of screens,” says Dr. Mark Tremblay, Chief Scientific Officer, Active Healthy Kids Canada, and Director of HALO. “These alarming numbers equate to a very sedentary child, so we must transform the after-school hours into healthy, active living time.”

Getting outside can make a difference

Being told to go play outside after school may do more for kids than we realize. What we do know is this: the Report Card reveals that currently, kids who play outdoors after school get 2000 more steps - or the equivalent of walking an additional 2km a day - than those who do not play outside after school.

The irony of inactivity after school is this; kids are missing out on physical activity during the time in their day when they could probably be getting the most.

“The after-school period represents an underutilized opportunity for children and youth to gain emotional and physical health benefits through physical activity,” says Dr. Tremblay. “Time spent being active outdoors after school lowers levels of anxiety, anger, fatigue and sadness. The science and benefits are clear; we need to re-establish the healthy practice of after-school physical activity in our communities.”

Safety Concerns Curtail Kids’ Movement

Shifting attitudes and concerns about safety have also had a profound impact on physical activity levels. And in part, safety concerns have radically changed how children travel to and from school, activities or friends’ houses. These fears have also diminished how far afield children are allowed to roam after school without parental supervision.

What was once considered absolutely acceptable, like walking long distances to and from school unaccompanied (and uphill both ways, some might add), a majority of today’s children are not getting to school under their own steam. According to the Report Card, which assigned a “D” grade for Active Transportation, nearly 62% of parents report that their kids rely upon inactive modes of transportation to travel to and from school and, of those, most are being ferried by car.

Positive Change is Necessary

Although policy makers are starting to take note – the Public Health Agency of Canada, along with all of the provincial and territorial governments, has identified after school as a target for physical activity – a formal policy to address increasing physical activity in the after school has yet to be put in place.

Most telling is that spending at the federal level in real dollars per capita is half of what it was in 1986 – all adding up to an “F” for Federal Government Investments for the second year in a row.

“Important physical activity promotion organizations are really feeling the cuts to physical activity” says Yvette Munro, Vice-Chair, Active Healthy Kids Canada. “Considering the critical need for a resolution to the youth inactivity crisis in our nation and the importance of the overall, long-term health of our children and youth, there must be more advocacy programs in place to ensure the federal government is held accountable.”

On the home front, parents and caregivers can positively influence their child’s physical activity levels. “Parents and caregivers play an important role in helping to change our children’s after-school habits” says Kelly Murumets, President and CEO of ParticipACTION. “Support can be as simple as encouraging your child to try out for sports teams, using active transportation as much as possible, restricting television viewing, video and computer games during the after-school period, or making the playground, instead of the couch, an after-school destination.”

For our children the direction to go and play more after school should be a welcome prescription for a healthy active life.

For more information, or to download the 2011 Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card, visit www.activehealthykids.ca