

Canada gets a failing grade for childhood fitness

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PUBLIC HEALTH REPORTER— From Tuesday's Globe and Mail

Published Tuesday, Apr. 26, 2011 6:00AM EDT



Canadian children spend a mere 14 minutes of their after-school hours being physically active, a new study shows.

“The days of biking home from school and putting the nets out for a game of road hockey are long gone,” said Mark Tremblay, chief scientific officer with Active Healthy Kids Canada.

In its annual report card on physical activity, published Tuesday, AHKC identifies a number of factors that contribute to the sedentary behaviour of kids in the key 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. time period, including:

- * After-school programs do not see activity as a priority;
- * Lack of supervised programs, particularly for older children;
- * Schoolyards that are devoid of play structures;
- * Transportation policies that result in kids being whisked away as soon as the bell rings;
- * Latch-key children who come home and plunk themselves down in front of the TV;
- * Parental fears about community safety that keep children inside.

“We need a fundamental rethink of how we deliver after-school programs,” said Elio Antunes, chief operating officer of ParticipACTION. “Getting kids outside needs to become a priority.”

While it is often argued that modern children are overwhelmed by homework and that the pressure to succeed takes precedence over activity, Mr. Antunes does not buy that argument.

“If they can find hours a day to watch screens for entertainment, they can find time to be active,” he said. “Besides, we know that kids who are physically active do much better in school.”

Canadian research shows that young people aged 5 to 19 who spend time outside after school take about 2,000 additional steps a day – the equivalent of walking two kilometres.

The new data reveal that that 72 per cent of children do not have access to after-school programs, which are geared principally to young kids. Further, less than half the after-school programs focus on physical activity.

“Essentially, it’s babysitting – sedentary babysitting,” Dr. Tremblay said.

The children who are on their own after class is dismissed seem to fair even worse.

“Screen-time is replacing after-school activity. We have to find a way to turn that around,” Dr. Tremblay said.

Active Healthy Kids Canada is a charitable organization that advocates the importance of physical activity for children and youth where they live, learn and play. It has published an annual report card for the past five years. The group now assigns 23 grades related to childhood physical activity.

This year’s grades include:

* F for overall physical activity: Only 9 per cent of boys and 4 per cent of girls meet guideline recommendations of 60 minutes daily of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity;

* F for active play: Only one in eight children engage in play every day after school;

* F for screen-related behaviour: Canadian kids spend, on average six hours daily in front of TV, computer and game screens;

* D for active transportation: One in four children get to and from school under their own steam, such as walking or biking;

* C- for physical education: One in four children get no gym classes; half get one to two gym periods a week and; one in four gets three to four periods;

* C for organized sport: 75 per cent of parents say their children participate in organized sport in the past year;

* A- for proximity and availability: 95 per cent of parents polled say that parks and outdoor spaces are available locally.

Dr. Tremblay noted that the grades have remained fairly consistent over the years - “consistently and uniformly grim” - but that will not change until there is a concerted effort to improve the situation.

“We talk a lot about all this stuff, about childhood obesity and lack of physical activity, but we don’t seem to do anything about it,” he said.