

## More activity, less screen time urged for young kids

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A first-of-its-kind set of physical activity and sedentary behaviour guidelines suggests children up to four years of age get at least three hours of physical activity each day and sets strict limits on screen time.

“Our kids today, little ones under the age of four, need to move more, they need to sit less and they need to get off of screens,” says Kelly Murumets, president and CEO of ParticipACTION, which released the guidelines on Tuesday with the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology.

Some people might think that kids spend their days climbing trees or playing sports, but in fact children four and under spend 73 to 84 per cent of their waking hours being sedentary, Ms. Murumets says.

The guidelines are Canada’s first systematic, evidence-based [physical activity guidelines](#) for children in this age group.

According to the guidelines, infants should be physically active several times a day, whether it’s tummy time (reaching and grasping, pushing and pulling) or crawling around the house, while children one to four years old should get at least 180 minutes of physical activity at any intensity throughout the day, which could include climbing stairs, playing outside, walking or running. By the time they are five, children should progress towards at least 60 minutes of “energetic play,” such as hopping, skipping and bike riding.

A separate set of [sedentary behaviour guidelines](#) emphasizes the importance of getting young children up off the couch and away from computers: Children under two should not have any screen time, while children between 2 and 4 should spend no more than one hour each day in front of screens. That includes iPads and other interactive devices.

The guidelines were created by a steering committee that included researchers from the Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario Research Institute’s Healthy Active Living and Obesity Research Group, as well as academics and researchers from the United Kingdom, Australia and the U.S.

“There is not a shred of evidence that they found that supported [the idea that] screen time has any benefits at all for children,” Ms. Murumets says. “Even sometimes if you think about screens being somewhat supportive of academic endeavours or intellectually stimulating, there’s no evidence to support that.”

And with the health dangers to adults of sitting for too long now emerging, the new guidelines also suggest that parents and caregivers limit prolonged sitting for more than one hour at a time, whether it’s sitting in a car seat, a stroller or plunked down in front of a video game console.

It is important to turn off the television and have kids play outside at a young age because it will influence their behaviour as they get older, Ms. Murumets says.

“It will become part of who they are if they are active as young children,” she says.

Ensuring that children meet the new guidelines should be “high, high, high on the priority list for every parent,” Ms. Murumets says.

The World Health Organization calls childhood obesity “one of the most serious public health challenges of the 21st century” and adds on its website that overweight and obese children are more likely to develop diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular diseases at younger ages.

In Canada, approximately 26 per cent of children between the ages of two and 17 are overweight or obese. Obesity rates are rising at the same time that children are spending an alarming amount of time being sedentary.

On average, kids in Canada spent six hours a day on screens and only 7 per cent meet the daily physical activity guidelines.

“These pre-school age children are developing into these stats and we’d actually like them to help us reverse these trends,” Ms. Murumets says.

Any one who takes care of children knows how hard the job can be, but turning off the television and making sure kids play throughout the day for long enough to meet the new guidelines’ suggestions hardly counts as a major imposition, Ms. Murumets says.

“It’s truly our message to parents that this should not be difficult,” she says.