



SHUTTERSTOCK IMAGE

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## **Are our toddlers becoming the new crop of couch potatoes?**

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Canada has created a nation of baby couch potatoes, where more than half of preschoolers are dangerously inactive, according to an annual report card on physical activity.

Children between ages 1 and 5 need at least two hours of exercise each day, whether it’s exploring the playground, playing games or walking to the grocery store, says the 2010 report card from Active Healthy Kids Canada, released Tuesday.

But less than half are getting the daily movement they need for healthy growth and development, putting them at risk for obesity and other health problems and on a slow-motion trajectory before they’ve finished kindergarten.

“Active play may be fun, but it’s not frivolous,” says Mark Tremblay, chief scientific officer of the research and advocacy organization. “Kids have a biological need to move.”

When they are plunked in front of the TV or strapped into strollers and car seats for the sake of adult convenience, “there are measurable cognitive, social, emotional and physical consequences,” he added.

“We’re messing with Mother Nature.”

Many parents assume that because toddlers and preschoolers appear to be in perpetual motion, they’re getting enough exercise.

But while chasing, jumping and climbing used to be a way of life for young children, research shows that modern lifestyles are conditioning them out of their instinct to move around.

In 1971, the average age kids started watching television was 4; today it's 5 months, even though groups like the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend no TV before age 2.

Last week four of the best-selling educational apps at the Canadian iTunes store were for children under 4.

National data shows 15 per cent of Canadian kids ages 2 to 5 are overweight and 6.3 per cent are obese, making them more likely to become overweight and obese adults.

And an international survey of children's activity levels in 96 child care facilities found sedentary behaviour was more common than active play.

The grim findings were part of Active Healthy Kids Canada's sixth annual report card, which draws on a range of data and is produced in partnership with the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario. The report has been sounding the alarm about declining levels of physical activity in children and youth since 2005.

Earlier this year, its message was underscored by a major Statistics Canada study that found children and youth are taller, heavier, fatter and weaker than in 1981. Other recent studies concluded that obesity has surpassed smoking as North America's biggest health risk and that this generation of children may not outlive their parents.

This year's report card assigned an F to physical activity levels, noting that only 12 per cent of Canadian children are meeting recommended guidelines of 90 minutes of exercise per day.

It also awarded a failing grade for screen time spent on TV, video games or surfing the Internet.

But the report's newest focus was on children in the early years, a group that has escaped attention and has no national guidelines for physical activity.

Tremblay said the country is facing major public health issue that demands the same level of response from leaders as a pandemic. Instead, government investments aimed at addressing the problem are half the level of a decade ago.

Under Ontario rules, licensed child care providers must include two hours a day of physical activity; babysitters and unlicensed home-care providers are not subject to those requirements.

Tremblay says parents should make physical activity a priority when choosing a caregiver.

Trying to balance screen time and exercise is also a challenge for parents at home with kids.

When mother Leigh Mitchell moved to a new neighbourhood in Etobicoke, she didn't see a lot of other families in the streets. So she turned to Facebook and her website, GTAparent.com, to lure them outside.

Mitchell, who has two sons ages 5 and 1 and works from home, launched a weekly outdoor playgroup as part of the Active Kids Club network.

Every Monday afternoon, parents meet get reacquainted and kids dive into active unstructured play.

"We go rain or shine," says Mitchell, 36. "It's really popular. The park is packed."