

Children's activity levels get failing grade:

2005

TORONTO (CP) - Canada gets an overall D on a new report card that assesses physical activity among children and youth.

In fact, the report card, released Thursday, says that less than half of Canadian kids are active enough for basic healthy development. "Canada gets a failing grade when it comes to ensuring that our kids get enough activity every day for optimal growth and development," Dr. Mark Tremblay, chairman of Active Healthy Kids Canada, said at a news conference.

"When it comes to keeping kids physically active, Canada is dropping the ball."

On the Net:

- [How to get kids moving: improving school phys-ed \(CBC\)](#)

While there have been other studies looking at activity levels in children, this appears to be the first comprehensive look at the influences of family, school, government policies and community. Shaniece Thomas, a Grade 7 student at Market Lane Public School in Toronto, said that a report card with a D on it would not go over very well in her house.

"My parents would not accept a D from me on my report card - they expect more from me," said Thomas, who was one of a handful of students at the recreation centre where the report was released. "All kids should have a chance to be active so we should expect more too."

When parents look at a child's poor report card, they immediately try to figure out where the problem is and then come up with a solution in the hope that a better report card will soon show up, said Tremblay. He said he thinks the Active Kids report will show Canadians where parents, schools and governments need to concentrate efforts.

While the overall grade was a D, Canada received an F for daily physical education because in 2000, only 14 per cent of elementary schools and four per cent of secondary schools provided daily physical education - despite a 1998 Gallup poll that found 74 per cent of Canadians favour instituting 30 minutes of daily physical education in schools.

Canada also received an F for obesity as its prevalence in children has increased from two per cent in 1981 to 10 per cent in 2001.

"We are very concerned about our young people," said Sally Brown, CEO of the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, one of the financial supporters of the 2005 Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth.

"Obesity is a risk factor for heart disease and stroke ... and we are seeing Type 2 diabetes at an age where this was never seen before."

Caring for people with chronic diseases, such as heart disease and diabetes, ends up costing money and if these diseases aren't prevented, there will be huge, long-term costs to the health-care system, said Brown.

Tremblay said it isn't as complicated as making sure children's timetables are filled with organized sports and fitness classes.

"We're not talking about physical activity involved in training for a particular sport or a high level of fitness but activity that will optimize growth and development and prevent disease," said Tremblay, who is an adviser on health measurement at Statistics Canada as well as a professor of exercise physiology and pediatric exercise science at the University of Saskatchewan.

"In fact it is unorganized sport - pick up games in the neighbourhood, unstructured activity, games like tag, an activity that is part of day to day living, such as walking to school or to the store, or doing

chores around the house - that have been shown to have a health benefit and a protective effect on overweight and obesity prevalence among children and youth."

The best mark on the report card went to sports participation, which received a C+ grade. While 70 to 80 per cent of medium to higher income families participate in sports, only 55 to 60 per cent of children from low-income families participate.

Boys were found to be more physically active than girls. Also, the report found a gradient from east to west - with those in eastern Canada least active and those in western Canada more active. There are also ethnic differences, with the aboriginal population at a higher risk of being obese while southeast Asians were at a lower risk.

"We have to not only increase the level of activity, but we need to level the playing field across ethnicities, sexes, socio-economic statuses and different regions of the country," Tremblay said.

Federal strategies and investments received a C-on the report card because funding for the Physical Activity Unit of Health Canada has decreased substantially since the early '90s.

A mark of C-was given to screen time as half of Canadian kids are spending two or more hours a day watching TV and they rank among the highest in the world for computer time. Children who watch TV more than two hours per day are more likely to be overweight, the report said.

"Clearly physical activity cannot compete with these (entertaining, sedentary) activities ...The report card is not advocating the banning of multimedia opportunities in the home," Tremblay said. "You need to do things in moderation. You need a variety."

The information used to develop the report card was based on analyses of the National Longitudinal Survey on Children and Youth, the Health Behaviour of School Children Survey and Canadian Community Health Survey, data from the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute and other studies. In addition to the Heart and Stroke Foundation, financial supporters include Kellogg Canada and the Canadian Institute of Health Research.

Marks were assigned by Active Healthy Kids Canada after consultation with leading physical activity researchers in North America.

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If young children are taught to understand how their bodies move, they'll be more likely to join the teams, he told CBC News Online. Instead of being intimidated, they'll learn to enjoy sports and physical activities.

Endocrinologist Dr. Laurent Legault of Montreal Children's Hospital agrees self-consciousness and low self-esteem can be barriers to phys-ed instruction. "We want to move past the team sports concept and move to activities that someone can take with them when they're 80," Legault said in March 2004. Teaching outdoor activities like cross-country skiing, for example, can be a hit with students.

Before they can get to that stage, though, children need some tools. MacDonald called today's children "physically illiterate" – just as they need to learn the mechanics of grammar to read and write, they also need to learn the "language of movement."

Students in primary grades need a foundation of quality phys-ed classes taught by phys-ed specialists, just as teachers specialize in teaching math or science, he said.

Lesson plans should teach gross and fine motor skills, spatial awareness and timing. It may seem like children can run instinctively, but according to MacDonald, they need to learn the pacing of running.

Teaching children how to do three simple activities – run, jump and throw – is the key to their being able to enjoy other physical activities, from dance to golf to hockey.

Under this strategy, by the time children are about 11, they'll have the proper psychomotor development and skills needed to play sports, he said.

Instead, adults impose their rules on children, forcing them to play sports by adult rules. Under that formula, only the elite kids who can handle it are able to succeed at sports, the professor said.

He cites Canada's Kyle Shewfelt, Olympic gold medallist in gymnastics, as an example of the one-third of Canadians who were physically active as a child.

At age six, before starting school, Shewfelt was asked by a coach where he learned to do a handspring. "In the backyard," Shewfelt answered. Parents, teachers and coaches nurtured the naturally gifted athlete to success at the Olympic floor event.

The CIHI report notes physical activity among children and youth is often linked to school settings. While 54 per cent of all Canadian schools reported in 2001 that they had a policy to offer daily phys-ed classes, only 16 per cent actually did so, according to the study. And in 1998, only slightly more than one-third of students aged five to 13 walked to school. Supervised programs to walk or cycle to school are another way to fight obesity.

The Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance recommends 150 minutes a week of physical education, but only one in five schools meets the requirement. On average, schools offer about 25 minutes of the huffing and puffing-type physical activity needed to keep the heart and lungs fit, said the association's Terry McGuinty.

So far, daily phys-ed is required until graduation in Quebec, and Alberta plans to mandate it by 2005.