

ACTIVE KIDS SCORE HIGHER: MORE ACTIVITY TIME ADDS UP TO BETTER LEARNING

Active Healthy Kids

Here's good news for parents, teachers and legislators who want to help kids learn and excel: it's easy as child's play. The 2009 Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth, released in collaboration with ParticipACTION and the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario Research Institute – Healthy Active Living and Obesity Research Group (CHEO-HALO), reveals that children who are more physically active are also more academically fit, resulting in better scores in math and reading, higher grades, greater perceptual skill and overall academic readiness.

"Being active feeds the brain, giving active kids an academic advantage over their peers who are more sedentary," says Dr. Mark Tremblay, Chief Scientific Officer, Active Healthy Kids Canada. "We've always known that physical activity is essential for kids' health and their long-term well-being. Now we know that it also improves school performance. A workout for your body is a workout for your brain."

Unfortunately, this year's Report Card gives most Canadian children a failing grade for Physical Activity Levels, with only 13% of Canadian kids getting the recommended 90 minutes of physical activity a day. The Report Card also assigns an F for Screen Time, as 90% of Canadian children are still spending too much time in front of television, computer and video screens. Also distressing are the grades for Active Transportation (a D, as most families live close enough to walk or bike to school, but do not) and for school Physical Education and School Policy, which rate a mediocre C- and C, respectively.

"Unfortunately, in our eagerness to ensure academic success, we've cut out time for activity in the school day and devoted it to sedentary study," says Tremblay. "But research shows that reducing physical activity does not improve academic ability or test scores. Kids need to get up and move more to enhance physical and intellectual health and success at school."

The Report Card does note that there is some reason for optimism, even with the overall failing grade. The number of Canadian children who are active is on the rise—up to 13% from 9% in 2006. It also offers solid recommendations for how our society can do better.

Teamwork: The Answer to Making Time and Space for Play

School schedules are packed with heavy curriculum expectations, parents have intense work demands that eat away at family free time, and governments, as well as individuals, are feeling the pinch of today's economy.

All true, agrees Michelle Brownrigg, Chief Executive Officer, Active Healthy Kids Canada. But there are solutions.

"Improving opportunities to be active is not an either-or proposition. It's an investment with direct benefits that are immediate and lasting," she says. "Helping the 87 % of Canadian kids who aren't getting enough daily activity will take a concerted, joint effort."

"Schools don't sacrifice academic results when they devote time to Phys. Ed. The kids do as well or better than they did when all their work was at their desks. Most busy household schedules can find time for activity by simply turning off the TV or computer and going outside. Municipalities can and should invest money in parks and sports – but they also need to consider policies and by-laws that act as barriers to play in their communities."

Look around, says Brownrigg. See what you can do.

School:

Recognize the importance of physical activity. Treat Phys. Ed. classes as any other subject, with devoted time, skilled instructors and assistance for children who need extra encouragement or teaching. Offer an assortment of activities, from traditional team sports to individual activities like yoga or martial arts. Team up with children's home supports and local community groups to ensure that the message of physical activity is communicated, just as the importance of homework completion is emphasized.

Home:

Parents can inquire about the activity policy in their children's schools and insist that physical activity be integrated into the curriculum and overall school programming. For example, school fundraisers can promote movement with dance-a-thons or laps around the school.

You can also lead the way at home through modeling active behaviour and by scheduling time for play. Though families are feeling the time pinch, TV and computer time in most Canadian households far exceeds the recommended limit of two hours per day. For a better academic outcome for your child, replace screen time with active play.

Get children ready to learn by having them walk or bike to school each day. If your schedule doesn't allow you to supervise the route twice a day, team up with neighbours to form a "walking school bus" or choose a daycare that uses active

transportation. You can also emphasize the routine of daily play by packing a skipping rope or ball glove in your child's knapsack, increasing the possibility that recess will be an active time.

Communities and governments:

Communities are vital partners in increasing the opportunities for active play and for creating bridges between school physical activity and family activity. Supervising school and public play spaces in the hours after school can make investments in park infrastructure go further by increasing community use, helping kids and parents feel safe and encouraged to go out and play.

It's great when municipalities can support active play in their communities through investment in sport infrastructure, but removing barriers to play can be just as important to improving kids' health. Eliminating by-laws that restrict ball playing, road hockey and skateboarding in public areas means that physical activity becomes an easy addition to day-to-day living and part of a community's culture and self-perception. The results?

Safer streets, knowing your neighbours, higher test scores in your area and an increase in community commitment from kids and all residents.

Governments can also provide leadership in the area of physical play by putting activity on the public and political agendas. Active Healthy Kids Canada applauds the provincial ministers of Sport, Physical Activity and Recreation in Canada, who have

collectively set a target of increasing the number of active Canadian children to 20% by 2015, and looks forward to noting their progress toward that goal.

Active play: The essential ingredient in better performance

"When you add up better health today, decreased health care costs in the future and increased mental focus and academic results, it's clear that being active is not an extra—it's an essential ingredient in raising healthy, intelligent children who will be able to guide our society in years to come," says Dr. Art Quinney, Chair of Active Healthy Kids Canada. "We all know that Canada needs people with good minds. And good minds grow in active, healthy kids."

The Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card is made possible through financial support from the Public Health Agency of Canada, the Lawson Foundation, Kellogg's and the Heart and Stroke Foundation.

For more information or to download this year's Report Card, visit www.activehealthykids.ca.

Note: CTF President Mary-Lou Donnelly is a Board Member of ParticipACTION and we gratefully acknowledge ParticipACTION for this article.