

Time for play

Are your kids getting all the exercise they need?

By PINO PLATI

WHEN schools reopened for the new term this month, chances are a lot of conversations revolved around what the kids did in the summer. For many children, unfortunately, too much time will have been spent in front of the TV or on the computer, and not enough outdoors, getting some exercise.

I recall what it was like when I was growing up. When the school bell rang for the last time to signal the start of summer, we would already be planning our holiday program with friends. We'd go ride our bicycles, play street hockey or go to the park to enjoy a game of baseball. Computers and Playstation games were not options back then. So our only choices were to be creative.

If you are a parent like myself with children of your own, we could probably talk for hours about how our childhood lives were so different from those of our children. In many respects it has improved, but in others - especially physical fitness - things aren't so rosy. I have been involved in the fitness industry for almost 20 years, but never have I seen so



many children and teenagers who are simply out of shape. Worse, many of them are so obese that they are at high risk for various health problems.

Recent studies bear out this observation. Statistics Canada reports that 26% of Canadians between the ages of two and 17 are overweight or obese, an increase of 15% since 1978. Children are consuming too many calories in fatty or processed foods and sugary drinks and spending too much time in front of the TV and computer.

Obesity matters. Excess fat is not merely unfashionable, it's unhealthy and potentially dangerous. In the young, it can cause poor self esteem and be socially isolating. And as obesity in children typically leads to obesity in adulthood, it can often lead to serious illness and premature death as an adult.

There is an epidemic of obesity amongst Canadian children but, unfortunately, many parents are still not recognizing this problem in their own kids. (To find out if your child is overweight, visit www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/healthyweight/assessing/bmi/index.htm. This is not recommended for use as the sole measurement of either body composition or level of fitness. Please consult your doctor).

The weight problem is one that is getting worse, but the good news is that there is much we can do as parents to make sure it doesn't! Remember, we can no longer rely on physical education in the schools to provide enough exercise for our children.

If your child has a poor fitness level and/or is overweight, follow these four steps you can start implementing right away.

1 . Parent self check! Look in the mirror and evaluate your own weight and activity level. Part of helping your child commit to a healthy lifestyle includes being a positive role model. Show your child that exercise and nutrition are important by regularly eating well and exercising yourself.

2. Give it 30 days. I'm a firm believer that if you can do something for 30 days then a new habit will form. So set your plan and do it for 30 days.

The 'Plan'

Exercise/Activity

- Reduce junk time. Limit TV/computer time to one hour per day.
- Choose the right activity for your child's age: If you don't, they may be bored or frustrated.
- Get 60 minutes or more of physical activity every day.
- Accumulate activity throughout the day which can be broken down into bouts of 15 minutes or more.
- Avoid periods of inactivity of two hours or more.
- Keep the focus on fun: Kids won't do something they don't enjoy.
- Being active doesn't have to be at an expense. Choose walking, cycling or playing a sport.



Nutrition

- Rid your pantry of the junk. There won't be temptation if it's not in the house.
- Stock your fridge with ready to eat snacks (i.e. fruits, veggies, cheese, yogurt etc). Pick what's in season as these often taste the best.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Save a healthy treat for once a week. Kids will look forward to it.
- Pre-plan your meals to avoid last minute "take-out".

Rest

- Nothing beats a good night's rest. Studies suggest that children between the ages of three and six years require 10-12 hours of sleep, those aged six to nine need 10 hours, and kids between nine and 12 need nine hours of sleep.
- Getting enough sleep will benefit their mood, memory and concentration required for school and activity the next day. It also benefits their immune system and development.

3. Engage your kids. Let them in on The Plan. My kids love having 'meetings'. One day I jokingly decided to call a meeting and was shocked to find how excited and attentive they were to hear what I had to say.

4. Implement The Plan. Cut out and keep The Plan (outlined in the panel above) someplace where it can be reviewed every day. Before you know it, all of this will become second nature.

Kids who enjoy sports and exercise tend to stay active throughout their lives. And staying fit can help children to:

- Achieve greater self esteem and confidence
- Build strong bones and strengthen

muscles and heart

- Achieve and maintain a healthy weight
- Improve fitness levels
- Feel better about their bodies
- Reduce their risk of obesity, diabetes and other physical and psychological health problems
- Positively influence choices pertaining to nutrition and the decision not to smoke
- Find positive ways to spend their free time
- Relax

Apart from this, healthy, physically

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active students are more likely to be academically motivated, alert and successful. And physical competence builds self-esteem at every age.

Some parents tell me their kids won't change. Everything is possible! I know it's not easy but if we all love and cherish our children, it is our responsibility as parents to be assertive in doing what is best for our children's health. The goal is to model a healthy active lifestyle and not to fixate on weight. If we get the lifestyle right, the body will follow.

Right through your 30-day goal, there's a good chance you will be challenged by your kids – DON'T BACK DOWN. Stick to it – they will thank you in the end.

As an incentive in getting our kids active, the federal government allows parents of young people under the age of 16, who register their children in programs that promote physical activity, to claim a federal tax credit for up to \$500 per year per child on registration fees and memberships.

For more information on the tax credit, visit www.cra-arc.gc.ca/fitness.

Studies also suggest that childhood obesity is more prevalent in lower income families. So for those that desperately need the help of trained fitness leaders and cannot otherwise afford it, Real Club Training, located in Woodbridge, will subsidize 100% of the cost of their after school Kids Fitness Program for those families that qualify. For more information, please contact info@realclubtraining.ca.

"Whatever your child's fitness personality, remember that all kids can be physically fit. Your positive attitude will help the kid who's reluctant to exercise. Be active yourself and support your child's interests. If you start this early enough, your child will come to regard activity as a normal – and fun – part of your family's everyday routine." **W**

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