

Families in Canada scored a C in their levels of physical activity.

FIT AND FUN AS A FAMILY

LAURA ZUCCARO Families, like many individuals, strive to maintain a healthy lifestyle. However, finding time for physical activity can be a challenge for family members managing multiple responsibilities at home, at work and in their community.

Every year, Active Healthy Kids Canada publishes a report card on the physical activity of children and youth as a part of its goal to make physical activity a priority in the everyday lives of families. In the 2013 report card, families in Canada scored a C in their levels of physical activity – a slight improvement from the D+ grade in 2011 and 2012.¹

A closer look at physical activity among children reveals that the vast majority are falling short of the recommended levels of daily physical activity. Only 5% of 5- to 17-year-olds in Canada met the recommended 60 minutes of daily moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity in 2013.² Yet, adults in Canada are aware of the importance of physical activity. According to the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute, 79% of parents have contributed financially to their child's physical activity and 64% of parents report that they *often* or *very often* take their child to their physical activity or sport. However, only 37% of parents report that they *often* or *very often* play active games with their children, 35% *sometimes do* and 28% *rarely or never do*.³

Even though many children participate in physical activity through school or extracurricular activities, exercising as a family has intrinsic benefits. A recent study showed that the more active the parents are, the more active their children are likely to be.⁴ Parents as role models contribute to their children's social learning by encouraging and providing opportunities for physical activity. When parents encourage physical activity at home, children are more likely to engage in healthy, active lifestyles at school and in their communities.

The Active Healthy Kids Canada report recommends that parents encourage their children to engage in unstructured outdoor time. Today, many parents rely

on organized sport and recreation programs as a source of physical activity for their children. However, unstructured physical activity – such as riding bikes, playing street hockey or exploring the neighbourhood – with family and friends contributes to healthy child development. For example, running and climbing develops muscle strength, endurance and movement skills as well as cognitive and emotional development. There is also evidence that playground-type play can help children develop their concentration skills for subsequent tasks.⁵

Early childhood (0 to 5 years) is a critical time for establishing healthy behaviours and patterns that will carry on later in a child's life. Children between the ages of 1 and 5 require at least one hour of unstructured physical activity per day in order to aid in well-rounded development – physical, cognitive and emotional.⁶

By being active and playing together, families can make great strides in enhancing their health and well-being while connecting through conversation, exploring their communities and creating lasting memories! ◀

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¹ Active Healthy Kids Canada (AHKC), *Are We Driving Our Kids to Unhealthy Habits? 2013 Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth* (2013), accessed January 8, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1bUKRm6>.

² Ibid.

³ Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute, *Getting Kids Active! 2010–2011 Physical Activity Monitor: Facts & Figures* (2013), accessed January 13, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1m3sRMB>.

⁴ Bernard F. Fuemmeler, Cheryl B. Anderson and Louise C. Mâsse, "Parent-Child Relationship of Directly Measured Physical Activity," *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* (8:17), accessed January 7, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1gC7rVK>.

⁵ Peter K. Smith and Anthony Pellegrini, "Learning Through Play," *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development*, accessed January 8, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1ghtK2c>.

⁶ AHKC, *Healthy Habits Start Earlier Than You Think: The Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth 2010*, accessed January 7, 2014, <http://bit.ly/K2w3eu>.