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MOVE IT!

Physiotherapists urge parents to get active with their children and keep them moving this school year

It's the start of another school year and Canadian physiotherapists are taking this opportunity to talk tough about the epidemic of overweight and inactive children in this country. According to Statistics Canada about 25 percent of Canadian children are overweight. The Active Healthy Kids Canada 2009 Report Card found that only 13 percent of children and youth are getting the 90 minutes of physical activity recommended by Canada's Physical Activity Guide.

As primary health practitioners, physiotherapists regularly treat children and youth with injuries and disease that are directly related to a lack of physical activity or obesity. They are deeply concerned that so few children and youth are meeting the minimum daily requirements of activity to allow for healthy growth and development. Physiotherapists say parents must act now to help turn back the tide on childhood obesity and inactivity by making this the year they get their kids into after school sports or other less formal physical activities.

"There are no excuses for children not to be involved in physical activity on a daily basis. It's a lifestyle strategy that has to be adopted," says Lia-Marie Arniel, a Winnipeg physiotherapist who runs programs for increasing physical activity and fitness in children. "Parents just have to do it alongside their children. Be active everyday, otherwise the children will become more prone to serious illnesses like diabetes, osteoporosis, and cardiovascular disease," adds Arniel. "Inactivity and obesity hand in hand are among the greatest threats to the health of today's youth and children, and must be taken seriously."

Arniel recommends that of the 90 minutes of physical activity a day children should be doing, at least 30 minutes should be continuous aerobic conditioning like simply brisk walking, running, jumping, dancing or bike riding. These are activities that stimulate the natural developmental patterns of movement and growth. "Kids don't need fancy equipment, they just need to move their bodies, preferably in an upright position, get away from the computer," stresses Arniel. Tanya Kozera, a physiotherapist who works with the Family Lifestyle Program in Winnipeg and does child physical activity research at the University of Manitoba says the most important step parents can take is to be active themselves. "Active parent equals active child," says Kozera. "If the parent role models physical activity, the child is more likely to be active." She has the following tips for parents:

- Listen to your child's interest and choice and be prepared to engage the child in the physical activity that interests them.
- If your child is not interested in a team sport perhaps an individual sport like running or swimming is more suitable.
- Start a physical activity jar. Put pieces of paper into it with various simple physical activities written down such as walking, or biking. Each evening a family member draws out a physical activity that everyone does together.
- Encourage active play, like playing tag, hopscotch, hide and seek or scavenger hunts. Every minute spent in active play is time spent away from sedentary pursuits.

Moving from a sedentary lifestyle to an active one requires planning and perseverance from both parents and children. But there are professional resources readily available. Physiotherapists can work with families to create physical activity action plans that are realistic and attainable. They can also provide families with targeted exercise strategies for overweight children and coordinate comprehensive obesity management programs. However, to make physical activity a lifetime commitment that will result in healthier, happier, and smarter children, parents must start at home and make a concerted effort to encourage their children to go outside and play.