



MORE THAN CHILD'S PLAY

 [Listen to this article!](#)

Related reading

► [Are my children active enough?](#)

► [How can we encourage an active living community?](#)

Glenda* worries that her six children aren't active enough.

"I know that they should be getting more exercise some days, but it is difficult. With their school, my work, and other activities, we don't always find the time," said Glenda.

One of Glenda's sons, Nicholas, age ten, says that although he likes games such as soccer, he also spends a lot of time inside playing Nintendo. How to encourage Nicholas and his siblings to be active is a challenge for Glenda. Parents across Canada face the same challenge with their own children.

There are many different reasons why kids are active or not active. "It's not just a matter of what they choose to do; social, physical and policy factors also affect their level of activity."

Active kids = healthy adults

Regular physical activity—for children, at least 90 minutes a day—is a very important part of a healthy lifestyle. A child's activity level plays an essential role in the development of their physical and mental health. Sadly, [Canada's report card on physical activity for children and youth: 2008](#) shows that the majority of children in Canada are not getting the amount of exercise they need each day for healthy growth and development. Children who are inactive are more likely to be inactive adults.

For kids and adults, not being active enough can have serious, negative results over the course of a lifetime. [Increasing physical activity can help prevent many chronic diseases](#) (requires PDF reader), including the Big Four: cardiovascular disease, diabetes, lung disease and certain types of cancers.

Social factors make a difference to kids' physical activity

Eight-year-old Helen, Glenda's youngest child, loves to play outside in winter in her front yard.

"I really like it when the whole family gets together and makes a snowman," she says.

Glenda tries to get her kids to live a healthy, active life. She encourages healthy activity by playing outside with them.

Families are role models

Like Glenda, parents' attitudes affect how active their sons and daughters are. According to Canada's 2006 report card on physical activity for children and youth, less than one-third of parents are aware of the [daily activity guidelines for children and youth](#).

"For kids and adults, not being active enough can have serious, negative results over the course of a lifetime."

Parents' concerns about safety can be limiting

Moms and dads may be scared to let their kids play outside or at recreation facilities because they are worried about injuries, bullying or even abductions. In the 2006 report, almost 80% of parents identified their children's safety as a key concern.

Various groups have developed [guidelines for playground safety](#) to reduce the risk of injuries during play.

The Canadian Parks and Recreation Association (CPRA) has developed [Making All Recreation Safe](#), a toolkit that will help communities put in place strategies to prevent abuse and harassment to make sport and recreation safer.

As well, many communities have developed neighbourhood safety programs to help residents feel safer.

Physical activity can be expensive

Sharon Jollimore, director of National Initiatives and Alliances at CPRA, says a family's economic situation can influence kids' access to physical activity opportunities.

"You can provide a low-income family with swimming passes, but if they don't have the transportation to get there, or they don't have the bathing suits to put on, it's not necessarily going to benefit them."

Sharon adds that some facilities require people to prove they can't pay before providing a subsidy. "Some families would be too proud to ask for help."

Many communities are developing programs to make physical activities available to everyone. One example is [Everybody Gets to Play](#), an initiative that helps communities to find new ways to help low-income families participate in recreation programs.

Girls aren't as active as boys

Natalie, 12, likes to kick the soccer ball around during recess. A lot of the time she ends up playing soccer with the boys because the girls her age aren't generally active during the break.

"The girls are usually in their own little [groups] talking," said Natalie. "It's not always fun standing around talking about random stuff."

[Boys are more active than girls](#) (requires PDF reader).

There are many ways to encourage girls to be more active:

- Use inclusive language that lets girls know they have a place in sport.
- Emphasize fun and being with friends.
- Share personal experiences about how physical activity makes you feel; talk about female role models.
- Encourage girls to try a variety of sports and activities.

Where you live can make a difference to how active you are

Plan communities with activity in mind

To encourage kids to be active, urban planners need to consider the locations of green spaces and bus routes and how neighbourhoods connect to each other.

Community design can either encourage or limit physical activity.

For example:

- Are there sidewalks or trails to ride bicycles on?
- How close are parks and other play spaces?
- How easy it is to walk from street to street?

Kids with disabilities need places to play

Katherine and her five-year-old daughter, Kira, visited Edmonton from northern Alberta to test out some wheelchair accessible playgrounds. Kira has spina bifida, a birth defect where the spine does not develop properly. She can't use the play areas in her own community because they aren't wheelchair accessible.

"The little girl was thrilled with the designed play spaces in Edmonton", said Kim Sanderson, of the Community Services department for the City of Edmonton.

Katherine said the play spaces gave Kira more confidence and helped her learn physical skills she normally doesn't get to practice. "You have no idea what this means to me as a parent," she said.

Parents can advocate for accessible playgrounds in their neighbourhood. They can also let activity program leaders know if their child has a disability and needs support in being active.

Community success story: Make the program times match the bus schedule!

A town on the Sunshine Coast in BC realized attendance was down at its recreation centre. The staff knew that many people in the community had trouble getting to the centre to take the programs. They simply changed the start times of different programs to fit the bus schedule. Attendance rose.

"It was as simple as that, and it was significant enough to allow adults and kids to participate because otherwise they couldn't get there on time," said Sharon Jollimore of CPRA. "People can look at their own communities and discover what the obstacles are that keep kids and other people from enjoying recreation."

Laws can make a difference to active living

Neighbourhood by-laws can encourage—or discourage—physical activity

Specific by-laws or legislation can affect whether children are active or not. By-laws in some communities discourage certain types of physical activity. For example, bans on street hockey or other road games may reduce active opportunities that are free and close to home. At the same time, we need to ensure that play areas for children are in environments that will reduce their risk of injury.

Mandatory physical activity and physical education in schools

Many, but not all provinces have legislated daily physical activity in schools. In Ontario, for example, all kids from Kindergarten to Grade 8 now do 20 minutes of physical activity every day.

Some schools go a step further and have a daily physical education program, planned and taught by experts, as part of the school curriculum. In Canada, the [amount of physical education in schools](#) depends on the individual province, school board and school.

Helping children be more active is up to *all* of us

There are many ways individuals, communities, and governments can increase kids' activity levels.

Parents and family

- Reduce and limit kids' time in front of the TV and computer.
- Play with your kids and praise them for being active - if they play sports, go to their games and practices to cheer them on.
- Get to know your neighbours, and introduce your children to Block Parents in your neighbourhood, so they know where to go to get help.
- Work with teachers and school boards to make regular physical activity part of the school day.

- Encourage programs that help kids to walk or bike to school.
- Work with your elected officials to make active living for everyone a priority in your neighbourhood.

Recreation and physical activity leaders

- Train staff and volunteers to be sensitive to families who may be in need of subsidized programs.
- Have a plan to help people who don't speak English or French as their first language feel included and welcome in activity facilities.
- Fit programs to clients' needs, such as making program times match bus schedule.

Schools and child care programs

- Establish a no-cut policy for school teams so everyone who tries out gets to play.
- Reschedule school team practices so after-school programs can share the gym.
- Choose age appropriate activities, which are enjoyable to kids and reduce their risk of injury.
- Offer active options for kids during lunch break or after school.
- Integrate fitness breaks into class time and field trips.

Local and provincial governments

- Ensure play spaces and green areas are attractive, creative, safe places for kids to play in all seasons and are accessible to people with a wide range of abilities.
- Where possible, involve parents and kids in planning decisions.
- Establish community by-laws that encourage, rather than discourage being active.

When we create opportunities for activity at home and in the community, and encourage active ways to get from one place to another, we help children get the physical activity they need for healthy growth and development.

** Names of the families and children in this article have been changed.*

This article was prepared by the Alberta Centre for Active Living.

It can be found at www.centre4activeliving.ca/publications/chn/feature-articles/.

Production of this material has been made possible through a financial contribution from the Public Health Agency of Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Public Healthy Agency of Canada.

Last reviewed/updated: August 2008