



## SCHOOLS AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

### FACTS

- In Canada, rates of obesity amongst children and youth aged 2 to 17 years are increasing. In 1978/79, 3% of children and youth were obese. By 2004, 8% or an estimated 500,000 were obese.<sup>1</sup>
- An additional 18% of Canadian children and youth are overweight. Combined, one quarter (26%) of Canadian children and youth are either overweight or obese.<sup>1</sup>
- Excessive weight gain during adolescence and young adult life may be one of the most important determinants of future development of heart disease and stroke.<sup>2</sup>
- Healthy behaviours including regular physical activity that begin at a young age and continue throughout life are important to achieving and maintaining a healthy weight.<sup>2</sup>
- More than half of Canadian teenagers are inactive and do not accumulate the equivalent of at least one hour of walking per day. Eighty-two percent may not be active enough to meet international guidelines for optimal growth and development.<sup>3</sup> Girls are significantly less active than boys, with 64% of girls and 48% of boys being physically inactive.<sup>3</sup> Only 38% of children in families with incomes below \$25,000 participate in organized sport, compared to 44% amongst middle income children and 50% of children in families with incomes of \$80,000 or more.<sup>4</sup>
- Only 20% of Canadian children receive daily physical education in school, 41% receive one to two days per week, while 10% receive no physical education at all. These numbers get worse as students move through high school grades.<sup>5</sup> For some children, physical education classes provide their only opportunity to participate in moderate to vigorous physical activity.<sup>6</sup>
- Physical education classes averaging 18 or more minutes a day can more than double the odds that an overweight or obese child becomes and remains physically active.<sup>7</sup>



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### RECOMMENDATIONS

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The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada recommends that:

#### Canadian Parents, Guardians and Teachers

1. Encourage schools to implement Quality Daily Physical Education programs (see Background section), with a minimum of 30 minutes of physical activity per day.
  2. Encourage children and youth to follow *Canada's Physical Activity Guides to Healthy Active Living for Children and Youth*. Replace school 'inactive time' with 'active time' to help children build up to at least 90 minutes of daily physical activity as recommended in *Canada's Physical Activity Guides to Healthy Active Living for Children and Youth*.
  3. Visit [www.heartandstroke.ca](http://www.heartandstroke.ca) for tips on helping children become physically active.
  4. Encourage children and youth to be physically active. Studies indicate that one of the best predictors of physical activity among children and youth is the amount of physical activity their parents and other role models do with them.
  5. Identify opportunities in communities for children to safely walk or bike to and from school.
2. Provide one hour per day of structured physical activity to elementary and high school aged children through a variety of activity opportunities. Provide daily physical education that has a balance between lifetime physical activity that promote fitness (aerobic, strength, flexibility) and skill development taught by physical education specialists.
  3. Provide resources to parents and students to enable physical activity in the community and at home.
  4. Work with organizations such as the Heart and Stroke Foundation to improve awareness and knowledge about the health effects of obesity and healthy living.
  5. Develop innovative opportunities for active transportation for children who are regularly bused to school.

#### Researchers

1. Conduct research to evaluate the most effective school-related physical activity programs as well as the factors in school environments that contribute to overweight and obesity amongst children and youth at school.
2. Conduct research to understand and address the barriers to children and youth engaging in physical activity in school.

#### Provincial Governments and School Boards

1. Ensure Quality Daily Physical Education programs are in place for all children from kindergarten through to Grade 12. These programs provide children with the knowledge, skills and opportunities to be more physically active, including:
  - Opportunities for intramural activities before school, during lunch hours, after school or on designated special days.
  - Opportunities for cross-curricular activities to increase physical activity in school.
  - Programs that recognize the importance of physical activity for all.
  - Programs designed to encourage female participation in physical activity.
  - Programs that are appreciative of a range of ethnic sport and activity experiences.
  - Integration of physical activity across disciplines and assigning physical activity homework to engage children to be physically active in the community and at home.



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### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Physical activity is one of the measures used to help achieve and maintain a healthy body weight and has many other health benefits, including reducing stress, increasing energy levels, and improving overall outlook on life.<sup>8</sup>

All children can be physically active, whatever their abilities and interests. Research indicates that children do not have to participate in organized sports to be physically active.<sup>9</sup> Even moderate physical activity such as a brisk walk, on most, if not all days of the week can improve health.<sup>8</sup>

Current Canadian guidelines for physical activity among children indicate that children and youth should increase the time currently spent on **physical activity** starting with **at least 30 minutes more per day** and **reduce “non-active” time** spent on TV, video, computer games and surfing the Internet starting with **at least 30 minutes less per week**.<sup>10,11</sup>

Physical activity can be encouraged in schools in a number of ways – not only during physical education classes. In 1978, UNESCO declared Quality Daily Physical Education (QDPE) as a basic human right. QDPE is a well-planned and varied physical education program taught by qualified and enthusiastic teachers on a daily basis throughout the school year.

A QDPE program includes:

- Daily curricular instruction for a minimum of 30 minutes
- Interscholastic sport programs
- Intramural activities where all students can participate
- School-wide activity events

The Canadian QDPE Report Card was developed by the Canadian Association of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (CAPHERD) and is a checklist for school administrators, teachers and parents to assess the physical education programs at their school. Many schools in Canada have used the Report Card as a first step to improving their programs. The Report Card is available at <http://www.cahperd.ca>.

Teachers and educators should take advantage of school opportunities outside of physical education classes, for example before or after school programs, using physical activity across disciplines (using examples of physical activity to demonstrate mathematics or science concepts) or on designated special days. The benefits of safe walking and biking to school programs include increased physical activity for children and youth, a healthier lifestyle for the

family, less traffic congestion around schools, safer, calmer streets and neighbourhoods and improved air quality and a cleaner environment. Increasing the range of enjoyable, non-competitive physical activities offered at school is an intervention with some evidence of promise.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to ensure that the school environment itself supports and promotes physical activity - from the playground, to the classroom to the gymnasium.<sup>6</sup> School environments that support and encourage physical activity within the school setting have been shown to be effective in increasing student activity levels.<sup>12</sup> Supportive school environments include things such as the use of crossing guards, provision of bicycle racks, and education of children regarding pedestrian and cycling safety.



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The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada recognizes that the life-long heart health of Canadians is affected by both individual and social factors. Individual factors include genetic make-up, personal health choices and actions, and social support. Social factors include the social, economic and environmental conditions in which Canadians live, work, learn and play. The Foundation encourages Canadians to make heart-healthy choices and encourages governments and the private sector to develop policies and programs that support healthy communities and reduce inequalities that negatively affect health and well-being.

This position statement was last updated January 2008.

## REFERENCES

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