

# WellSpring

## A Cornerstone to a Healthy Start

### Physical Activity and Healthy Eating for Toddlers and Preschoolers



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Recent media reports have raised the alarm about the increasing prevalence of obesity and overweight in the youngest sector of our population—children between two- and five-years-old. Fortunately, parents and childcare providers can access support networks and resources that address both healthy eating and physical activity.

For example, Healthy Start for Life is available online from the Dietitians of Canada ([www.dietitians.ca/healthystart/](http://www.dietitians.ca/healthystart/)). This resource-rich site results from a collaboration between the Dietitians of Canada and nine other organizations. These groups share a common goal—to promote healthy eating and physical activity among toddlers and preschool children.

This resource will help parents and childcare providers

- learn more about the nutrition and physical activity needs of preschoolers;
- come up with activities that promote positive attitudes towards healthy eating and active living;

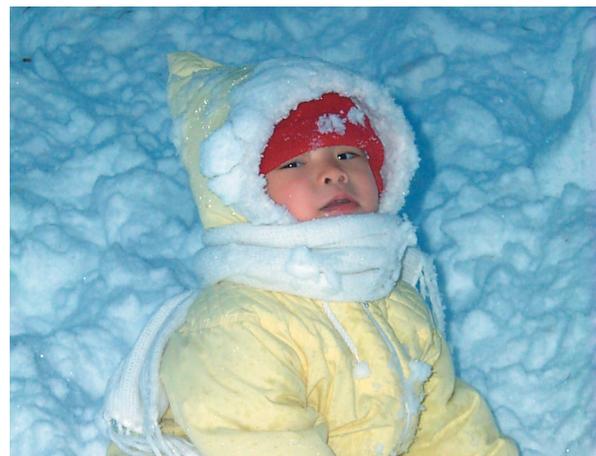
"Over one-third of Canadian children aged 2 to 11 were overweight in 1998/99, and of these, about half could be considered obese..."  
— Health Canada, 2002a.

- think of ways to help prevent childhood obesity, diabetes, and other health problems in later life.

Healthy Start for Life also provides an online course for parents and childcare providers.

Other excellent parts of this resource include frequently asked questions, the "Eating Well Together Planner," and the "Keeping Active Together Planner." These sections outline healthy menus for snacks and meals and age-appropriate physical activities, including endurance, flexibility, coordination, and strength-building activities—plus, where to find more information.

The "Snactivity Box" developed by the Calgary Health Region and described in the article that follows will make an excellent addition to the Healthy Start for Life's comprehensive list of resources for parents and childcare providers who want to foster the healthy development of toddlers and preschoolers.



## Do a “Snactivity a Day!”

DIANE HOY, RD, SPECIALIST IN NUTRITION AND ACTIVE LIVING, CALGARY HEALTH REGION.

Many people assume that children are naturally active and participate readily in physical activities during their early years. Unfortunately, TV, video games, safety concerns, and demanding schedules reduce physical activity opportunities. The early childhood years are the ideal time to help children develop basic movement skills and positive attitudes towards active living that they can carry into later life (McWhorter, Wallman, & Alpert, 2003). Parents, families, teachers, early childhood professionals, and caregivers play a crucial role in providing opportunities for children to be physically active.

Currently, there are no Canadian guidelines for physical activity among children aged between birth and five. However, we can use the American guidelines for this age group published by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (2002).

### Quick Facts

Current research supports the following facts.

- Structured physical activity: At least 30 minutes a day for toddlers; at least 60 minutes a day for preschoolers.
- Unstructured physical activity: At least 60 minutes a day (and up to several hours per day) for both toddlers and preschoolers.
- Toddlers and preschoolers should not be sedentary for more than 60 minutes at a time except while sleeping.
- Children need physical activity every day (regardless of the weather). Over half of Canada’s children are not active enough for healthy growth and development (Flynn & Staden, 2001).
- Physical activity is needed for healthy child development. Among its other benefits, physical activity
  - enhances development of brain function, coordination, social skills, gross motor skills, emotions, leadership, and imagination;
  - helps children to build confidence and positive self-esteem;
  - helps to build strong bones and muscles, improves flexibility, develops good posture and balance, improves fitness, reduces stress, and improves sleep;
- promotes healthy weights;
- helps children learn to move skilfully and enjoy being active.
- Very few adults who were physically inactive as children become active as adults (National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 2002). Encouraging children to enjoy moving and promoting confidence in movement skills at an early age will help to ensure later participation in physical activity.
- Physical activity can be inexpensive and easy.

### Developing the Snactivity Box

Two dietitians, Kristyn Hall (MSc, RD) and Heidi Reisch (RD), at the Calgary Health Region saw a gap in getting the healthy eating and active living messages out to young children. Hall and Reisch carried out a needs assessment after receiving funding from Alberta Health and Wellness and the Alberta Cancer Board.

"A study published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* showed that the average Canadian child is sedentary for three to five hours a day in front of the TV." Between 1981 and 1996, "the prevalence of obesity in children tripled, from 5 percent to 16.6 percent for boys and from 5 percent to 14.6 percent for girls."  
— Health Canada, 2002b.

Reisch and Hall’s primary purpose was to “gather information that might guide the development of effective resources and to better understand the way in which daycare providers would like to be supported in health promotion activities” (Dozois, 2002). Reisch and Hall gathered data from the *Calgary Health Region Daycare Project: Focus Group Report* (Dozois, 2002), interviewed family dayhome providers, and did focus group testing.

With data in hand, Hall and Reisch developed a toolkit with the help of colleagues and dietetic interns. Dayhomes, daycares, and the Mount Royal College Early Childhood Education Program provided arenas for pretesting, refining, and testing. In June 2004, after many collective hours of work, the Snactivity Box was born. The unique and catchy name, “Snactivity,” incorporates concepts both of healthy eating and active living.

### What's in the Snactivity Box?

Intended for early childhood professionals in daycares or dayhomes, the Snactivity Box contains 22 interactive activities to promote healthy eating and active living habits in children aged between two and six. Space and time limitations, adult to child ratios, and cost were all considered when putting the Box together.

The Snactivity Box contains written instructions and most of the supplies needed to do the activities (packaged neatly in hanging file folders in an easy-to-carry plastic box). The kit includes 12 healthy eating activities and 10 active living activities.

Each of the 22 activities is organized as follows.

- **Objective:** Describes the purpose of the activity.
- **Supplies:** The supplies needed for each activity are outlined under the activity's description. Most supplies are included in this kit. Supplies not provided in the kit are described.
- **What to do:** Each activity contains detailed instructions. The active living activities focus on children's developmental abilities and suggest indoor activities that require minimal space.
- **Taking the message home:** This section provides ideas that may help parents incorporate the healthy eating and/or active living message at home.

### Key Messages for Parents and Caregivers

Below are some key messages contained for parents and caregivers in the "Snactivity Box." (The information in this section comes from Flynn & Staden (2001), Canadian Child Care Federation (2001), Ready Set Go (n.d.), and Valentine (2003).)

- Physical activity should be fun and a part of the child's daily life, not something he/she is required to do. Active play is the way young children are physically active.
- Starting in infancy, all children should participate in daily physical activity that promotes fitness and movement skills. Provide age-appropriate and safe opportunities for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers to be active.
- At each stage of development, children should acquire movement skills that build towards more complex movements. These skills help lay the foundation for lifelong physical activity.
- Focus on improving basic movement skills such as running, jumping, twisting, kicking, throwing, and

catching. These motor skills are the building blocks for more complex movement.

- Basic movement skills need to be encouraged—they do not just happen as a child grows older. These skills develop depending on each child's heredity, activity experiences, and environment.
- Design activities that help children feel competent and comfortable participating in a variety of fun and challenging sports and activities. Games for young children should be non-competitive and focus on participation.
- Girls tend to be less active than boys. This tendency may be due in part to how children are socialized ("girls play with dolls; boys are rough and tough"). Activities need to be gender-neutral, so that active living is equally promoted in both boys and girls (Canadian Child Care Federation, 2001).

### Distributing the Snactivity Box

The Snactivity Box will be pilot-tested in about 25 daycares and dayhomes in Calgary and area. Diane Hoy, RD, and Jacquie Rusk, RD, at Calgary Health Region are taking care of this task with the support of the Alberta Cancer Board. The resource will be evaluated in 2005.

In the meantime, a CD-ROM of the Snactivity Box was made available to all daycare and dayhome agencies in the Calgary Health Region in September 2004 as part of a new guidebook for early childhood professionals, *Creating the Circle of Healthy Child Care* (Calgary Health Region, 3 Cheers for the Early Years, 2004). With the distribution of this resource, childcare providers can put together a Snactivity Box on their own (the supporting material for the resources costs about \$90).

### Summing Up

Childhood is an excellent time to help children develop healthy eating and safe active living habits for life. Developing these habits early in life provides a foundation of wellness that allows children to grow up in a healthy way. The Snactivity Box can help—so, have fun and "Do a Snactivity a Day!"

The Snactivity Box is on the Calgary Health Region web site at [www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/nutrition](http://www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/nutrition). For more information, contact Diane Hoy, RD, at (403) 943-8127 or [Diane.Hoy@CalgaryHealthRegion.ca](mailto:Diane.Hoy@CalgaryHealthRegion.ca). Diane's focus is on nutrition in children under six.

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## Mission Statement of the Alberta Centre for Active Living

Working with practitioners, organizations, and communities to improve the health and quality of life of Albertans through physical activity.

IF YOU HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS OR QUESTIONS, WE'D LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU.

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