

WellSpring

Media and Children's Physical Activity

Why Not "Live Outside the Box"?

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How will the ever increasing percentage of children who are overweight or obese affect our health-care system in the future? Half of Alberta's youth are not active enough for healthy growth and development according to the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute (2002).

The prevalence of overweight among boys increased from 15% in 1981 to 28.8% in 1996 and among girls from 15% to 23.6%. Obesity in children more than doubled over that time, from 5% to 13.5% for boys and 11.8% for girls (Tremblay & Willms, 2000).

On the following pages, Sharon McCann explains how media entertainment has affected our children's physical activity. According to McCann, a possible long-term solution to the problem is to teach "our youth critical viewing skills, time management, and responsible media consumption habits."

In response to the problem of physical inactivity, the Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks and Wildlife Foundation (a provincial government organization committed to promoting sport, recreation, and active living) developed the "Live Outside the Box" campaign. The campaign targets children and youth, encouraging them to be active (in an activity of their choice) and to free themselves from a sedentary lifestyle dominated by time spent in

front of a television or computer. In fact, increasing activity time at the expense of media entertainment makes sense, not just for our children and youth, but for all Albertans!

The campaign tagline, "everything is more fun when it's real," purposely challenges children and youth to experience reality through activity, instead of the "imaginary" world of television and computers. You will find more information about the "Live Outside the Box" campaign at www.liveoutsidethebox.ca.

The campaign web site also links to another Government of Alberta health-promotion initiative, the Healthy Alberta web site (www.healthyalberta.com). The Healthy Alberta site offers children, parents, and teachers a wide range of active living and healthy eating ideas and resources.



Where Have all the Hours Gone? Media Entertainment and Physical Activity

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It's official. Our children are now more than fully employed in the non-paying job of consuming media.

A recent report from the Kaiser Family Foundation (2005) states that the average child between eight and 19 spends 6.5 hours a day with TV, the Internet, video games, radio, MP3 players, and other media. If you consider viewing more than one kind of media at a time, total media exposure adds up to 8.5 hours a day—equivalent to more than a 40-hour work week. In other words, children now spend more time consuming media than their parents spend at work.

A Canadian report, *Kids Take on the Media* (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2004), surveyed 5,756 students aged 8–15. The report reveals that 50% of Canadian children have their own television, and that watching television is a daily pastime for 75% of all Canadian children between grades 3 and 10.

The Kaiser Foundation and Canadian Teachers' Federation reports speak volumes about our children's growing obsession with media. These findings also tell us that we can expect higher health-care costs. Taxpayers will pay for treating the medical conditions that result from sedentary media consumption, poor nutrition, and other related lifestyle choices.

What's the Effect of Too Much Media?

What are the adverse health and social consequences of too much media entertainment? (The American Medical Association defines "too much media" as more than five hours a day (Walsh, Goldman, & Brown, 1996).) According to the AMA, effects include

- obesity due to decreased physical activity and fitness;

"Teaching our youth critical viewing skills, time management, and responsible media consumption habits now will lead to a future generation of healthier and more active Albertans"
—Sharon McCann.

- increased cholesterol levels;
- excess sodium intake;
- impaired bone development;
- insomnia;
- eye strain;
- impaired school performance;
- increased use of tobacco and alcohol;
- aggressive behaviour;
- shorter attention span;
- poor communication skills;
- low self-esteem;
- poor body image;
- increased preoccupation with consumerism.

On the other hand, other recent research (Marshall, Biddle, Gorely, Cameron, & Murdey, 2004) indicates the complexity of the relationship between children's media consumption and their physical inactivity and obesity levels: "Relationships between sedentary behavior and health are unlikely to be explained using single markers of inactivity, such as TV viewing or video/computer game use." More research is needed to determine the extent to which media is replacing other activities in our children's lives.

So, What Can We Do?

If the current epidemic of obesity is to be reduced, we need widespread public awareness programs to educate the public about how media consumption affects children's activity levels and overall health. But what kind of education would best address the problem?

The web sites of many organizations that promote sport, recreation, and active living already offer educational materials and strategies. But can we realistically expect people who use computers all day to devote their evenings to surfing the many active living sites? "Lack of time" is one of the most frequently cited excuses for not exercising, so it's unlikely that excessive media consumption problems can be resolved by encouraging even more media consumption.

If media entertainment has displaced our children's physical activity, we need to devise new and innovative strategies that "steal back" many of the hours

that children now spend on media—time that could be spent playing outside, participating in sports and recreation, and socializing with family and friends.

Educational strategies have proven effective in decreasing tobacco use, drinking and driving, and teen pregnancy. Public education in the form of media awareness programs should be equally effective in educating and encouraging couch potatoes to adopt more active and productive lifestyle choices. Media risk reduction studies have already shown that children can gain back 100 minutes a day of leisure time from reducing their dependency on screen entertainment (Kline, 2003).

Media Awareness

Media awareness, also referred to as media education and media literacy, is the ability to think critically about media. Being media literate means having the skills to access, analyse, and evaluate information presented in any form.

Media awareness skills can be applied to all media formats, including print, radio, and moving images. Media awareness can also be used to deconstruct the news media, music, film, video games, advertising, web sites, comics, and even the logos and messages we wear on our clothing.

Does media education work? According to a study conducted by the Medical Centre of Stanford University, media education programs were successful in reducing media use and aggression and bullying on the playground. (Robinson, Wilde, Navacruz, Haydel, & Varady, 2001). A research project conducted in 1999 also showed a reduction in weight gain in test schools that had media awareness programs (Robinson, 1999). Robinson's promising research clearly indicates that targeting media consumption through school media education programs may be a highly effective strategy for reducing sedentary lifestyles, overweight, and inactivity among children.

When children are taught from an early age to look for the underlying intent of media messages, they become less vulnerable to manipulative marketing ploys that try to persuade them to buy junk food, sugary cereals, and soft drinks. Consumer advocate Ralph Nader believes that this vulnerability can be reduced by giving

children vistas other than television and computer screens. He recommends bringing children to nature, their forgotten natural advocate: "Gardening, hiking, swimming, and field studies in the woods open their senses to the sounds of nature as respites from the technological and entertainment noises that saturate them day after day" (Nader, 2004).

In the long term, media awareness programs have also been shown to help improve the overall quality of media because audiences gradually become more selective. In the UK, which has had mandatory media education programs for many decades, there is evidence that media awareness helps children and youth become more critical consumers with higher expectations of the media. Children who are taught to be media literate are more likely to turn off poorer quality programs and find something else to do (Bazelgette, 1991).

Who teaches the media educators? How do teachers and parents acquire the necessary skills to help children become media literate? The answer is that schools, universities, community groups, and government agencies need to provide cross-curricular and community-wide training if we are to motivate future generations of Albertans to get off their couches and on to the walking paths, sports fields, and ski slopes.

Some will continue to advocate turning off the television and getting rid of all time-consuming media distractions. This strategy may be effective in the short-term, but how will hiding media help to educate and empower children to make informed and responsible media choices in the future? How will they learn to balance their daily media consumption with healthy physical activities and still leave time for family and friends?

Media awareness kits for parents, film-study packages for teachers, and "media diet" guides for families can help Albertans become more discriminating consumers of media, while at the same time becoming more physically active. A "media-diet" guide could help families take a balanced approach to consuming media, just as food guides offer guidelines on healthy eating.

It is also important to make available a wide array of easy and entertaining fitness and leisure activities that can compete in entertainment value with movies, television, and video games.

Teaching our youth critical viewing skills, time management, and responsible media consumption habits *now* will lead to a future generation of healthier and more active Albertans.

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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
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