

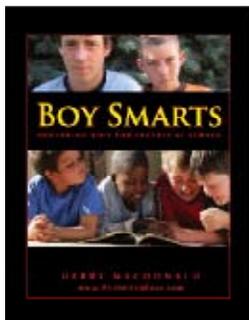


GET ACTIVE!

PROMOTING OPTIMAL HEALTH AND LEARNING

Wherever you live in Canada, this month it's hard to avoid a touch of cabin fever from the shortened hours of natural light and lengthened time indoors. When children are also stuck inside, and possibly driving us stir-crazy with endless demands for more electronic play-time, it can be tough to find the space to consider the physical, mental, and emotional effects of physical inactivity. Among the many health concerns related to physical inactivity, childhood obesity ranks high. Like many nations, Canada's rates of obesity for young people have been steadily rising. In 1978, 15% of youth between 5 and 17 were obese, but today almost a third (31%) of our youth are obese. A *Statistics Canada Health Report* predicts if the current trend continues, by 2040, up to 70% of adults over 40 years of age will be either overweight or obese. Interestingly, young men currently in their twenties and thirties have an elevated risk of obesity, even more than men in their fifties.

For the first time in Canadian history, rising rates of childhood obesity may lead to children having a shorter lifespan than their parents.





While most parents and teachers appreciate that daily exercise can help to prevent health difficulties such as Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and obesity, fewer are aware of how much activity can also boost overall mood and the ability to learn. For all of us, young and old, fitness levels are linked to cognitive vitality. Evidence shows that kids with healthy levels of fitness also have higher levels of academic achievement than unfit kids. The bottom line: physical activity powers the brain.

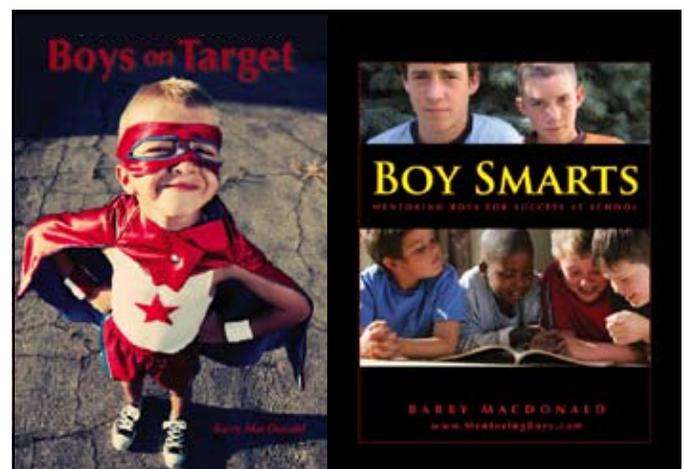
According to a 2013 study published in *PLOS ONE* entitled “Influence of Childhood Aerobic Fitness on Learning and Memory,” higher levels of fitness can bolster a child’s ability to learn and remember information. When asked to recall the information they had read, fit children outperformed their less fit counterparts, even when researchers controlled for factors such as socioeconomic status. The authors further suggest that rigorous activity may be especially helpful for students who struggle with classroom learning, and they caution education policymakers not to eliminate physical activity from the school day. “Reducing or eliminating physical education in schools, as is often done in tight financial times, may not be the best way to ensure educational success among our young people,” they say.

Promote healthy living with the 5-2-1-0 rule

From birth children need our encouragement and modeling for healthy eating, engagement in regular physical activity, and the emotional management of stress. Healthy habits begin at home. The *Childhood Obesity Foundation* advocates that the best thing parents and teachers can do to foster healthy living is to embrace their simple 5-2-1-0 rule for developing wholesome habits for the entire family. I offer here a concise overview of the 5-2-1-0 rule adapted from their website:

5 or more servings of fruit & vegetables per day

Although getting 5 servings into children might seem like a daunting prospect—especially if you have kids who are picky eaters—according to a 2004 *Canadian Community Health Survey*, children who eat 5 or more servings of fruit and vegetables a day are significantly less likely to become overweight or obese than children who eat less than 3 servings per day. Additional evidence supports the linkage between high fruit and vegetable consumption and decreased cancers, diabetes and heart disease rates. Ensure your child eats fruit and vegetables at every meal and as a snack. If you have a blender, you can



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make smoothies that include greens, vegetables such as cucumbers, and fruit. Dinners can begin with a salad, a clear vegetable broth soup or raw vegetables, perhaps with a couple of tempting healthy dips, so that people eat less of the main course.



2 hours of screen time or less per day

The latest *Canadian Community Health Survey* data indicates that children who watch more than 2 hours of screen time (TV, video games, or any personal electronic device) per day are twice as likely to become overweight or obese than children who watch less than 1 hour per day. Limit screen time to 2 hours or less per day and encourage more physical activity, which can come in many forms—through participation in organized sports, yes, but also through going to the pool, a skating rink, a playground or forest. If your children are young enough, take them to the beach or a park, where they will likely start to explore rocks, logs, tree stumps and hills in spontaneous play.

1 hour or more of physical activity per day

According to *Canada's Physical Activity Guide*, children should engage in 30 minutes a day of vigorous physical activity (such as running or playing soccer),

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and 60 minutes a day of moderate physical activity (such as playing outdoors or walking to school). Research shows that walking vigorously for just 20 minutes per day boosts our mood, and can be just as effective as taking an anti-depressant for mild to moderate depression.

0 sugar sweetened beverages per day

Studies show that 30 - 50% of Canadian teens drink at least one can of pop per day. A 13 year old boy needs to jog 50 minutes per day to burn off the 260 calories contained in a 590ml (20oz) bottle of pop. Over consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages—including pop, fruit drinks, sports drinks, and flavoured milk—is a major contributor to childhood obesity. These beverages are essentially a form of liquid candy and should rarely be served (fruit juice should be limited to one small glass per day). Pack water or milk in your child's school lunch instead of a juice box. Get in the habit of offering your children water to drink.

Moderation is key

Weight is significant, but remember that it is only one marker of overall health, and a healthy weight varies by age, gender, height, and body type. The 5-2-1-0 rule does not simply aim to promote weight loss; it fosters moderation and the sort of healthy lifestyle many older adults grew up with years ago.

Whether you are already promoting optimal health in your family with your own version of the 5-2-1-0 rule or struggling with the question of how to get more vegetables into your children, keep in mind that children will do what we do, not necessarily what we say. Studies show that school-aged children are twice as likely to be physically active if their mothers are active and are almost six times more likely to be active when both parents are physically active.

A new year's wish for you

Even on those days that your kids are sitting around inside as "*The sun [does] not shine. It [is] too wet to play,*" no cat in the hat—or Dr. Seuss—will likely arrive to stir up the day.

So pull on those boots, step outside—and get everyone moving.

As you work to strengthen healthy lifestyle choices in your family, I wish that you, as well as your children, will enjoy good health and vitality in 2014. •••

Barry MacDonald

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The challenges associated with being male vary in each community. I welcome the opportunity to work with your parents and teachers to strengthen how they support boys.

For details contact info@mentoringboys.com.



Soon this newsletter will ONLY be distributed on social media.



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