



The Research File

Information for professionals from the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute

Understanding Youth Physical Activity

International surveys of youth physical activity yield three consistent findings:

- 1) a good proportion of children and adolescents are not sufficiently active,
- 2) a considerably smaller proportion of girls than boys are sufficiently active, and
- 3) physical activity participation declines with age during adolescence, among both boys and girls, but even more among girls.

In Canada, the situation is no different. The 1998 Physical Activity Monitor shows that three out of five children and youth aged 5 to 17 are not active enough for optimal growth and development. Youth aged 13–17 are less active than children aged 5–12, with 33% of teenagers and 43% of grade school children considered active enough. Differences between boys and girls occur in both age groups: 40% of teenage boys and 25% of teenage girls are deemed active enough, and 48% of grade school boys and 37% of grade school girls are considered sufficiently active.

What Affects Physical Activity?

The physical activity of children and adolescents is affected by many factors beyond the school setting. Research shows that

- activity levels have seasonal variation with the highest levels in summer and the lowest in winter;
- children are more active on weekends than during the week;

- children are more active outdoors;
- attitudes toward physical activity, prior experience in physical activity, and current activity habits contribute significantly to children's intention to exercise.

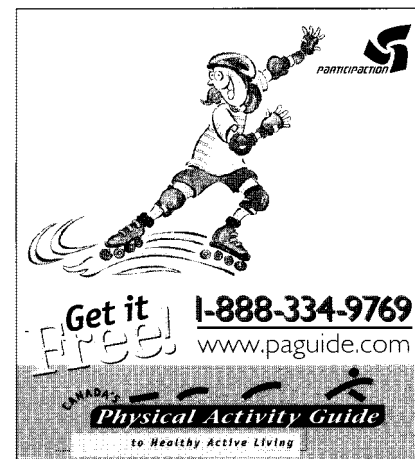
Children who are more active tend to

- have siblings and parents who are active as well (this is especially true of adolescents);
- have parental support for physical activity;
- have access to convenient play spaces, sports equipment, and transportation to sports or fitness programs;
- have confidence in their ability to engage in exercise;
- see themselves as competent in physical activity or sport;
- have positive attitudes toward physical education;
- enjoy physical activity.

Children also perceive a number of benefits from engaging in physical activity, among them:

- excitement and having fun;
- learning and improving skills;
- staying in shape, improving appearance;
- increasing strength, endurance, and flexibility.

Boys more often cite competition and girls more often cite weight management as a reason for engaging in physical activity. Girls are less likely than boys to participate in team sports and more likely to participate in aerobics or dance.



Reaching Youth

Schools and communities should coordinate their efforts to make the best use of their resources to provide opportunities and social environments that support children's involvement in a range of activities and help them to develop motor skills, improve fitness, and experience enjoyment and success.

Schools provide "unique existing community infrastructures" because they serve a large number of children and adolescents year round, have facilities and equipment, as well as staff who either have expertise or can be trained to teach the skills and benefits of lifelong physical activity. Physical education classes can teach the behavioural skills necessary for participation in community-based organized programs and sports.

Communities have many agencies and facilities for promoting physical activity outside of school through sports and recreation programs. Some findings indicate that over 80% of physical activity occurs outside of school physical education programs. Resources and linkages to the community are therefore very important. So are community policies to support children's physical activity, as well as programs specifically designed to meet the interests of girls.

For More Info...

Stone, E.J., McKenzie, T.L., Welk, G.J., & Booth, M.L. (1998). Effects of physical activity interventions in youth: Review and synthesis. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 15(4), 298–315.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (1997). Guidelines for school and community programs to promote lifelong physical activity among young people. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 46(RR-6), 1–36.

Benefits of Physical Activity for Young Canadians

Physical activity can provide important health benefits for children and adolescents. Here are just a few:

- improved aerobic endurance and muscular strength;
- favourable effect on risk factors for cardiovascular disease (body mass index, blood lipid profiles, resting blood pressure);
- decreased blood pressure in adolescents with borderline hypertension;
- increased physical fitness and decreased degree of overweight among obese children;
- increased bone mass density among young people;
- higher levels of self-esteem and self-concept;
- lower levels of anxiety and stress.

