Helping your child stay physically and emotionally fit

Video games, DVDs, Internet: these days kids have more and more ways to have fun while moving less and less. In fact one study concludes that children, on average, are 40 per cent less physically active than they were just three decades ago. Technology is one of the major culprits as children spend about 26 hours a week watching TV. And that doesn't account for computer or video game time.



It's no secret that kids are starting to pay a heavy price for inactivity. Nearly a quarter of all children in North America are now obese. But inactivity and obesity can also take a huge toll on a child's self-esteem and emotional well-being.

The facts on children's fitness

As medical findings on physical activity continue to pour out, it seems clear that exercise not only makes our kids healthier but happier too. Regular physical activity helps kids:

- **Burn off anxiety and stress.** Children's day-to-day life can be filled with tension and tough times. Exercising encourages the release of mood boosting serotonin and norepinephrine, which lift spirits and reduce stress.
- **Improve self-esteem.** Whether it's because they're fitter, more socially connected to peers or have boosted their brains' endorphins, studies show kids who are regularly active feel better about their bodies and themselves.
- **Fight fat now and down the road.** Staying physically active is one of the most effective ways to maintain a healthy weight long term. Inactivity and obesity increase the risk of Type 2 diabetes and heart problems later in life.
- **Boost academic performance.** Sports and physical activity help children develop the skills of perseverance and self-discipline, key ingredients to good grades.
- **Steer clear of cigarettes and alcohol.** Studies reveal that kids who are involved in sports or other physical activities are less likely to smoke and use alcohol. Improved self-esteem and confidence, and spending time with like-minded peers who are physically fit may help kids just say "no."
- **Better manage Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).** A recent study of 5-12 year olds with ADHD showed that children who exercised five days a week for 40 minutes at a time, showed significant behaviour improvement after just two to four weeks.
- **Deter depression.** Research suggests that regular exercise can protect kids from childhood depression and help in its treatment if it occurs.
- **Build healthy bones and keep them that way.** Exercising during adolescence increases bone density and growth. It also helps stave off osteoporosis in later life.

Getting kids moving

Prying the remote or joystick from the hands of kids often poses a challenge for parents. You can help your kids go from lethargic to lively by:

- **Limiting computer and TV time.** Technology has become a quick, cost-effective and captivating babysitter. Work out a reasonable amount of tech time and try to match this with an equivalent play schedule.

- **Getting them out.** Encourage kids to get off the sofa and get outside. Whether it's cycling, tag, or a game of pick-up road hockey, once kids are moving, chances are they'll forget all about that remote. If it's too cold or wet look for safe indoor alternatives. These can include dancing, "sponge ball" sports or even exercise videos geared for kids.

- **Practicing what you preach.** It's easy to encourage kids to get active but if you're doing it from the comfort of your couch, don't be surprised if your advice carries little weight. Your own action speaks louder than words. Be a positive and energetic role model.

- **Shopping around.** Sometimes it takes time to find a physical activity the kids really enjoy. Encourage them to try a variety of activities and eventually one or two will stick.

- **Keeping it fun.** Putting too much pressure on children to perform can put them off physical activity altogether and bring out personal insecurities. Encourage your kids to focus on the fun and friendships they're building rather winning or losing.

- **Moving as a family.** Instead of bonding with kids over DVDs and videogames, schedule an active outing every week for the whole family and ensure kids have a role in picking and planning the activity. It's not only a great way to stay healthy, but encourages your child to connect with you through quality family time.

Though the temptations of technology can make it a struggle to keep kids moving and motivated, it's more than possible. By providing children with ample opportunities to exercise, being an active role model and limiting "down time," you'll not only help your child build a healthy body and mind, but memories of fun childhood play that will last a lifetime.