

Danger: Children at Risk

by Candace Brown

Dans cet article, l'auteure expose les risques et les dangers associés à l'inactivité physique chez les jeunes, particulièrement chez les filles. Elle constate que les standards canadiens d'éducation physique sont beaucoup moins élevés que ceux d'autres pays.

Circumstantial evidence and logic support the idea that an inactive child will become an inactive adult and, thus, an adult at risk... The onus is on society to intervene, by encouraging children to become more active.

Dr. Oded Bar-Or (4)

Canadian attitudes towards fitness and physical activity have evolved dramatically in recent years. Increasingly, Canadians are abandoning their sedentary lifestyles for active living, recognizing that regular enjoyable physical activity is a means to enhanced physical, mental, and social well-being. The documented health benefits of physical activity for adults fuel the drive for making physical activity the norm rather than the exception. The strongest argument for increased physical activity is the prevention of cardiovascular disease (CVD) which kills more Canadians than any other disease. Physical inactivity is a major

risk factor for CVD and studies suggest that adults could cut their risk of CVD in half by being regularly active. Establishing patterns of regular activity in children that will carry over into adulthood could contribute to the prevention of CVD in the next generation of adults.

Yet the increased awareness in adults about the importance of physical fitness has not been reflected in educational programming. Canadians continue to overlook the long-term value of physical education and give it unequal weight when compared to other subjects in the curriculum. Many schools across the country continue to allocate comparatively little time for quality physical education and health, ranking Canada among the lowest of developed countries in providing physical activity for children. Of overall school time from Kindergarten to Grade Six, only about 60 minutes per week is devoted to physical fitness, compared to countries like Japan (135 minutes) and Denmark (150 minutes).

For the average Canadian child, physical fitness as expressed by aerobic power, seems to be a decreasing function of age from the time we put him [her] behind a desk in our schools. (Bailey)

The result is that children today expend four times less energy than did children 40 years ago. Increased mechani-



zation, reduction of playground space and affordable/available facilities, passive recreation, the advent of television, computers, and video games, combined with a lack of training in physical education at schools means that approximately 40 per cent of Canadian children already have at least one risk factor for heart disease. According to the facts and figures compiled by Dr. Graham Fishburne from the University of Alberta in *Elementary Education*: 60 per cent of Canadian children do not meet average fitness standards; children in Canada watch, on average, six and a half hours of T.V. per day; in Grade Two, one child in four cannot touch toes; 76 per cent of elementary school girls and 26 per cent of boys cannot do one chin up; obese children face health risks including: hypertension, psychosocial damage, respiratory, and orthopedic problems; 40 per cent of North American children are overweight (qtd. in Lees).

At even greater risk are female children. Gender differences in activity patterns, fitness levels, and program opportunities appear between boys and girls at an early age showing boys to be more physically active and fit than girls. Economic status, ethnicity, activity program offerings, and female role models are factors related to the gender gap and directly effect the motivation and skill level of girls in physical activity. However, girls who are supported and encouraged to participate in physical activity that is relevant to their gender, who have female role models, and are raised in a school system that provides developmentally appropriate activities based on skill, body awareness, co-operation, and minimum aggression, are equally as successful as boys in physical fitness and ability.

The benefits of quality daily physical education for children are well known. Research shows that regular physical activity of 30 minutes or more each day reduces the risk of coronary heart disease in adulthood. Started early in childhood, physical activity can increase the peak bone mass of early adulthood, and can delay the onset of bone loss and reduce the rate of osteoporosis. Girls and boys who are physically active are healthier, less aggressive, less susceptible to stress, more independent, have greater self-esteem, and develop better social skills.

And numerous studies show that increased physical education does not harm academic work but may even enhance it. Over and over findings indicate that health, fitness, discipline, enthusiasm, and academic results were superior in the experimental groups compared to the control groups not receiving fitness programs, reminding us that the mind and the body are interdependent. Howard Gardner, a psychologist at Harvard University has developed a theory that humans use a combination of intelligences to understand and master the world around them. Schools emphasize and assess logical and linguistic capabilities in the construction of intelligence, but there are at least five more intelligences, including "body/kinesthetic" that people use to develop skills that are important to their way of life.

The issues stated above reveal the challenges towards

increasing the awareness of quality daily physical education and the importance of a healthy, active lifestyle. Physical educators have long understood the importance of physical activity in the development of the child and the necessity of co-ordinated and developmentally appropriate physical education as an integral part of the core curriculum. Advocating quality daily physical education in schools and insisting on physical education specialists to deliver the program, promoting partnerships in the community and the sharing of facilities, providing role models and a better balance between media coverage of elite athletes and those depicting active living are some of the ways to reduce the barriers that prevent young children from experiencing active living skills.

Educating children to value the joys and benefits of an active lifestyle are best accomplished during the early years when life habits are learned and incorporated. Children must be taught the skills, knowledge, attitude and behaviour that lead to active living as a way of life in which physical activity is valued and integrated into daily life.

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References

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