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Helping Your Children and Youth Be More Active!



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Summary: Many children/youth struggle with mental and physical health problems in modern society. As it turns out, evidence suggests that the lack of nature, outdoor activity and exercise may contribute to many of these problems. The solution? Get outside and get active.

In our increasingly digital world, children and youth spend a lot of time in front of screens. The lure of social media and gaming is present 24/7. Extra-curricular activities are expensive, and children and youth may feel awkward about looking bad or uncoordinated when trying a new activity. Over time, this can contribute to hours (and eventually days!) of physical inactivity.

Did you know? 54% of 5 to 17 year olds are not active enough for optimal growth and development (Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute, 2016). Studies show that inactive lifestyles are linked to the rise in physical and mental health problems seen in children and youth. The good news is that there are many things you can do to help encourage children and youth to be more active.

Indoor vs outdoor activities?

As a caretaker, parent or guardian, it's best if you can plan outdoor activities for your child or youth. Studies confirm that being outside is essential for our mental health — it gives us fresh air, sunshine, and so much more. Sometimes, when children get outside you don't even have to encourage them to move, they'll start moving on their own!

If your child or youth has an issue preventing them from being able to go outside, talk to your primary care provider to who can help suggest workarounds.

How to help children and youth be more active

1. Get active together. Children learn by example. It simply won't work if you tell them to get out and get moving if you're not willing to be an active role mode

- Make time in your weekly routines for active family time. This might mean scheduling family walks after dinner, or planning weekend bike rides or hikes.
- Get outside even when it's not very nice outside. Dress appropriately and challenge each other to find unique ways to get outdoors even when it's raining or snowing.
- Encourage unstructured play and ask your children what they want to do. They might want to climb, play in the garden, or have a pick-up game of road hockey with the neighbours. These activities are great because they're free and encourage creative thinking.
- Make it social. Invite others to take part in the fun. We are social creatures and it can help your kids be more active if they're part of a larger group.

2. Use active transportation. We spend a lot of our time in vehicles, driving to school and work and running errands. These are missed opportunities to get active outside!

- Consider your weekly routine. Are there any short trips you take that could be replaced by biking or

walking? Maybe you live near the school, or could bike to the grocery store instead of driving.
- Take the bus so you will have to walk between different stops or park your own car further away in the parking lot.

3. Start a fun activity. When your children participate in recreational activities, they will learn valuable lifelong skills like teamwork, swimming, skiing, skating etc. Integrate activities when they are young. If getting outside and being active is part of their lifestyle when they are young, it's more likely to continue as they get older.

- Encourage your child or youth to have fun rather than focusing on winning or being better than others. Some children and youth find the pressure of competitive sports to be too much and it actually discourages them from being active.
- Consider activities like Beavers, Scouts, 4H and Cadets that tend to incorporate more outdoor activities. They offer sliding scale fees for families that might not otherwise be able to enroll their children.

4. Assign active chores.

- Ask your child or youth to help with more active/outdoor focused chores like walking the dog, helping with gardening, shoveling the driveway or taking out the garbage/ recycling.

5. Limit screen time. Screens can be addictive. They provide our brains with the same reward chemicals we get through physical activity. For example, if your youth gets "likes" on an Instagram post, they'll get a boost of dopamine or adrenaline even though they didn't really do anything active or productive. When our brains get used to these easy rewards, we're less likely to want to do physical activities.
CHEO's research has helped to develop Canadian screen time guidelines:

- Age 2 and under -- No screen time
- Age 3-4 years of age - No more than one hour of screen time per day in total and the less time the better.
- School aged children (5-17 years) should get no more than two hours of recreational screen time per day and the less time the better.