

# Parents -- not TV -- may determine whether kids are active or couch potatoes

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Researchers at Oregon State University have confirmed what we knew all along – children in this country are increasingly sedentary, spending too much time sitting and looking at electronic screens.

But it's not necessarily because of the newest gee-whiz gadgets – [parents](#) play a major factor in whether young children are on the move.

In two studies out online today in a special issue of the journal *Early Child Development and Care* devoted to "Parental Influences of Childhood Obesity," OSU researchers examined how parenting style – whether a strict but loving parent or a less-involved and more permissive parent – was associated with sedentary behavior.

Overall, they found that children who had "neglectful" parents, or ones who weren't home often and self-reported spending less time with their [kids](#), were getting 30 minutes more screen time on an average each week day.

More disturbing to lead author David Schary – all of the children ages 2 to 4 were sitting more than several hours per day.

"Across all parenting styles, we saw anywhere from four to five hours a day of sedentary activity," he said. "This is waking hours not including naps or feeding. Some parents counted quiet play – sitting and coloring, working on a puzzle, etc. – as a positive activity, but this is an age where movement is essential."

Schary, a doctoral student in the College of Public Health and Human Sciences at OSU, said parents were grouped into four commonly used scientific categories – authoritarian (high warmth and control), authoritative (controlling, less warm), permissive (warm, low control), and neglectful (low control and warmth).

While all the children in the sample of about 200 families were sitting four to five hours in a typical day, parents in the more neglectful category had children who were spending up to 30 additional minutes a day watching television, playing a video game or being engaged in some other form of "screen time."

"A half an hour each day may not seem like much, but add that up over a week, then a month, and then a year and you have a big impact," Schary said. "One child may be getting up to four hours more active play every week, and this sets the stage for the rest of their life."

Some might wonder whether parents who were less participatory during the week days made up for it during the weekends. Actually, just the opposite happened. Sedentary time increased nearly one hour each weekend day.

Bradley Cardinal, a professor of social psychology of physical activity at OSU, co-authored both papers with Schary. Cardinal said sedentary behavior goes against the natural tendencies of most preschool-age children.

"Toddlers and preschool-age children are spontaneous movers, so it is natural for them to have bursts of activity many minutes per hour," he said. "We find that when kids enter school, their levels of physical activity decrease and overall, it continues to decline throughout their life. Early life movement is imperative for establishing healthy, active lifestyle patterns, self-awareness, social acceptance, and even brain and

cognitive development."

In a separate study, Schary and Cardinal looked at the same group of participants and asked about ways parent support and promote active play. They found that parents who actively played with their kids had the most impact, but that any level of encouragement, even just watching their child play or driving them to an activity – made a difference.

"When children are very young, playing is the main thing they do during waking hours, so parental support and encouragement is crucial," Schary said. "So when we see preschool children not going outside much and sitting while playing with a cell phone or watching TV, we need to help parents counteract that behavior."

Provided by Oregon State University

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