

Physical activity counselling affects parents and gets children to move

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Parents can affect their children's physical activity. A unique finding of a recent study conducted at the University of Jyväskylä in 2011–2013 was that parents who have previously provided little support for their children's physical activity can make changes that have a positive effect on the daily physical activity of the children.

A remarkable proportion of children are too sedentary from the perspective of their growth and development. The [home environment](#) and the parents are known to play a key role in the development of [physical activity](#) habits. Physical activity-related parenting practices are known to be very stable.

The study reveals that physical activity counseling can have an effect on parenting practices, and consequently, children's daily physical activity. In particular, the parents providing little [support](#) for their children's daily physical activity can make behavior changes that increase the children's physical activity.

"During the six-month counseling period, parents who previously tended not to provide support for their children's daily physical activity remarkably increased the level of support. Correspondingly, the level of their children's physical activity increased by almost one-third compared to the children of control group families," says postdoctoral researcher Arto Laukkanen from the University of Jyväskylä.

Parenting practices that support children's physical activity can be

divided into three categories: being physically active with the children, having an encouraging atmosphere for physical activity and supporting children's physical activity directly or indirectly.

"A home environment that respects child-oriented practices and provides freedom and stimuli for physical activity has been found to associate with the creation of sustained physical activity habits. In the present study, we encouraged [parents](#) to favor walking instead of driving, taking the stairs instead of the elevator and going outdoors at least once a weekend," Laukkanen explains.

"As a rule of thumb, we used an idea that children are physically active for about an hour at school or daycare, and recommended that another physically active hour should occur during leisure time," he adds.

Permanent changes are challenging – also in parenting

Although the results were encouraging, physical activity-related parenting practices, as well as the level of [children's](#) physical activity, returned to the baseline level after the six-month counseling period. Therefore, future studies should examine how to make [parenting practices](#) more permanent. The physical activity habits of new families should be attended in a very early phase, and their development should be supported continuously.

More information: Arto Laukkanen et al. Parental Support and Objectively Measured Physical Activity in Children: A Yearlong Cluster-Randomized Controlled Efficacy Trial, *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/02701367.2017.1329924](https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2017.1329924)

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