

'We could do a better job': U of T expert on new guidelines about physical activity for kids under four

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Experts have been saying for decades that Canadians are in the midst of an inactivity crisis. A new report released this week looks at the lives of

babies and toddlers and concludes that they are far too sedentary and get too much screen time.

The report, by a number of experts including researchers at Ottawa's Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO), the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology and ParticipAction, includes new guidelines that advocate for three hours of physical activity a day for infants and [children](#) up to age four, with at least one of those hours committed to "energetic play."

John Cairney, a professor in the Faculty of Kinesiology & Physical Education, has published extensively on [early childhood](#) physical activity. He speaks with Valerie Iancovich about what these latest guidelines could mean for Canadian families.

This report seems to suggest that parents make assumptions about how much their small children are moving in a kind of innate, organic way. How do we get back to really allowing children to get the movement they need?

That is a real challenge for parents. For many families in Canada, children are in daycare from an earlier age and are starting school sooner. This means there is much more structure in the lives of children than in previous generations. Parents should ask daycares and schools about their policies are around unstructured play – how much of the day is devoted to [free play](#), which must include "active" play alongside other activities (for example, arts and crafts)?

[Read the guidelines for children up to the age of four](#)

It is also sometimes difficult to allow kids the time they need to explore

and play and practise fundamental movement skills because of our busy lives. Some of that play also involves some risk (for example, the chance of falling while learning to walk). We want to keep our kids safe but we don't want to bubble wrap our children either. As difficult as it is, we need to step back sometimes and let our children take some reasonable risks in their physical literacy journey – that is the how they learn and grow.

Is it mostly about eliminating screen time and getting back to play? What role, if any, does structured physical activity (toddler soccer, baby yoga) play in the solution?

There are clear guidelines about limiting [screen time](#) and those should be followed. But, as important as free play is, structured play is also important. We know from the literature on motor development that children do not acquire fundamental movement skills only through free play. Instruction, support and constant encouragement are also needed.

There are some great programs in the community that support movement skill development. It is really important though to pick programs that emphasize movement skill across domains (fine, gross, balance) and not just specific sport skills. The early years should be about acquiring the fundamentals of [physical activity](#) and sport. It is not the time to specialize in a single sport. It should always be about fun!

The trend is hardly new. What might advocates and health-promotion campaigns be getting wrong in raising awareness about this? Or is this just a result of the modern lifestyle demands on families?

It isn't new, but the hope is by continuing to raise awareness, we can get the message through. Often it is not about not having enough time but how we use the time we have. Instead of an hour of TV watching in the evening, play an active game together as a family. Go for a walk and use the time to connect with your children. I am not saying it is easy, but if we see the value and know the importance of doing it, we are more likely to make it happen. Part of this knowledge. Part of it is making a commitment to change. Remember, playing with your children is good for you too.

This report says daily toddler physical activity should include at least one hour of "energetic play" for three and four year olds – something that previously wasn't recommended until age five. Why the change?

Part of it is related to concerns about how little time children three to four spend in energetic play. We used to think this just happened naturally but we see from research this is not so. It is tragic that we need to make these recommendations, but it speaks to how the experience of children – the ways children's lives are structured around sedentary pursuits – has changed so profoundly in our society over the past couple of decades.

Can you speak to any potential connection between these findings in preschool children and the lack of universal access to early childhood education? If we had a more regulated system that not only had standardized curriculum, but provided access to early childhood education for all young children (across the socioeconomic spectrum), could we perhaps expect

healthier, more active kids?

A quality early childhood program (preschool, daycare) should include opportunities for the development of physical literacy. This requires training and support for staff and ongoing monitoring. The provision of quality daycare that is universally accessible is extremely important. However, even in structured settings, we could do a better job.

Provided by University of Toronto

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