

Experts weigh in on sedentary behaviour in schools

April 6 2022, by Adrianna MacPherson



The U of A's Valerie Carson was a member of the research team that developed the sedentary behaviour guidelines based on evidence from around the world.
Credit: WCHRI

We know that school kids spend too much time sitting at their desks. Now we have some evidence-based recommendations to counter that sedentary behavior. They offer guidelines to educators, parents and caregivers to help school-aged children grow and thrive.

"It kind of challenges traditional views of learning," said Valerie Carson. "Learning doesn't always need to happen sitting at a desk."

The recommendations fill a critical gap in information. Educators and parents have known about the negative implications of sedentary behavior, and wanted more information about how to mitigate it at school, explained Carson, an associate professor in the Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation.

"With the pandemic, a lot of screen time and sedentary behavior has just been amplified," said Carson, who is also a member of the Women and Children's Health Research Institute.

To help counteract the effects of school-related sedentary behavior, there are four Ms to keep in mind: manage sedentary behavior, encourage meaningful screen use, model healthy screen use and monitor for signs of problematic screen use.

"Screens have become a large part of our day-to-day lives, so it's important to step back and ask, "Why are we using screens in this situation and how can we maximize the benefits while minimizing the harms?"

These recommendations could involve incorporating movement whenever possible during classroom and homework time, prioritizing screen use for mentally and physically engaging activities rather than passive viewing, and avoiding screens as the default option in learning.

"Screens can play a role, but they should complement the many other ways [young people](#) can learn," said Carson, who co-led the development of the Canadian [24-Hour Movement Guidelines for Children and Youth](#).

Carson said implementing the recommendations shouldn't fall solely on

schools—it's a collective effort for anyone with an interest in student health and well-being.

"This is something that parents, caregivers, pediatricians and policy makers can use. Essentially, the whole community can use these recommendations to support the healthy development of children and youth."

Carson was on the international team of experts that generated the recommendations, which were created through an extensive review of the evidence on the relationship between sedentary behavior and academic and health outcomes. The team also looked at existing national and international guidelines on sedentary behavior among [school-aged children](#) and youth.

The process of developing the recommendations was led by the Sedentary Behavior Research Network in partnership with the CHEO Research Institute and the University of Prince Edward Island. The [guidelines](#) have already been translated into 14 languages.

The recommendations are a tool to support and empower schools, as well as a resource for anyone working with school-aged children in Canada—and beyond, noted Carson: "This is something that would apply across countries, across populations."

"Some schools and teachers may read these recommendations and say, 'We're already doing this,' and that's wonderful," said Carson. "For others, it may spark new conversations and ideas on how to support children and youth as they learn and grow."

Provided by University of Alberta

Citation: Experts weigh in on sedentary behaviour in schools (2022, April 6) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-04-experts-sedentary-behaviour-schools.html>

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