

Parents have big influence on kids' physical activity, study finds

January 14 2013, by Kate Toogood



Kerry Vander Ploeg, a PhD candidate with UAlberta's School of Public Health, found that parental encouragement makes kids more likely to be physically active.

(Medical Xpress)—With New Year's resolutions upon us, new research from the University of Alberta offers encouragement for parents who want to achieve fitness for the whole family.

Kerry Vander Ploeg, a PhD candidate with the School of Public Health, looked into whether parents' beliefs about and support for [physical activity](#) are associated with [children's physical activity levels](#).

Vander Ploeg and her U of A supervisor, Paul Veugelers, Canada Research Chair in [Population Health](#), analyzed [survey data](#) from 6,585 students and their parents through the REAL Kids Alberta project. They found that parental care, encouragement and engagement in physical activity resulted in a decrease in the number of overweight children—and the more encouragement, the better. Children whose parents encouraged them "very much" were 22 per cent less likely to be overweight than those whose parents encouraged them "quite a lot."

Other parental factors, such as engaging in activities with children and caring about their own physical activity, were independently and positively associated with physical activity, regardless of whether the children were of normal weight or overweight.

"Parental encouragement on its own makes a difference in the amount of a child's physical activity, regardless of these other factors," Vander Ploeg said, noting that insufficient physical activity is one of the most significant [risk factors](#) for [overweight and obesity](#). "It's reassuring that even small demonstrations of support, regardless of whether you are physically active yourself, have a positive effect on the health of your child."

Vander Ploeg says the findings can help parents ensure their children lead healthy, active lives.

"It's not just about signing your kids up for [extracurricular activities](#), which can be expensive," she said. "You don't even need to be an all-star athlete yourself to have healthy, active children. We found that the more you care and the more you encourage, the more likely kids are to be physically active."

She is also quick to point out the significance of the link between parental encouragement and physical activity among overweight

children.

"Most overweight children report greater barriers to physical activity, such as finding activities they enjoy and feel comfortable engaging in, how competitive they are with their peers, and even basic physical barriers such as their ability to use gym or playground equipment," Vander Ploeg said. "Although [overweight children](#) need more encouragement than those who are of normal weight, parental support seems to address, and even remove, some of these barriers."

The research, published in the *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, indicates that health promotion strategies to increase parents' awareness of the value of encouragement can do a lot to increase children's active living habits.

"Intervening at schools and generating excitement about physical activity can help children bring some of that excitement home," Vander Ploeg said. "Schools can educate parents about the value of supporting their children being physically active so kids can be active on days when they aren't in school.

"You have to encourage them to be active, and create that supportive environment so they can continue to make healthy choices and learn those healthy, active living habits."

More information: journal.cpha.ca/index.php/cjph/article/view/3207

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