

Helping Children to Be Active, Eat Well and Accept their Bodies

Being active, eating well and accepting themselves are key to a child's health and well being. Parents and caregivers can play an active role in helping children develop healthy attitudes and habits that will last them a lifetime.

What's happening today?

- More than half of 5-17-year-olds are not active enough for optimal growth and development.
- A study of Canadian children aged 6-12 found that only one in five children eat the recommended five or more servings of vegetables and fruit daily.
- Children in Grade 3 begin to feel dissatisfied with their bodies, develop a desire to be thin and may try to lose weight.

Why is this happening?

- Increased use of cars, computers and TV, results in less time being active, walking and playing.
- Larger portion sizes and increased availability of fast foods, results in unhealthy eating and eating more food than the body requires.
- The media delivers the message that a large body shape is unacceptable. Seeing media images of thin females and muscular males can cause children to strive for these unrealistic "ideals".

What can we do?

Focus on the positive behaviours that promote health - being active, eating well and being yourself. Parents and caregivers influence their children's lives and are powerful role models. When children see adults enjoying being active, eating well and being themselves, they learn from and imitate them. By giving children positive messages, adults help children learn the benefits of taking care of themselves through healthy habits.

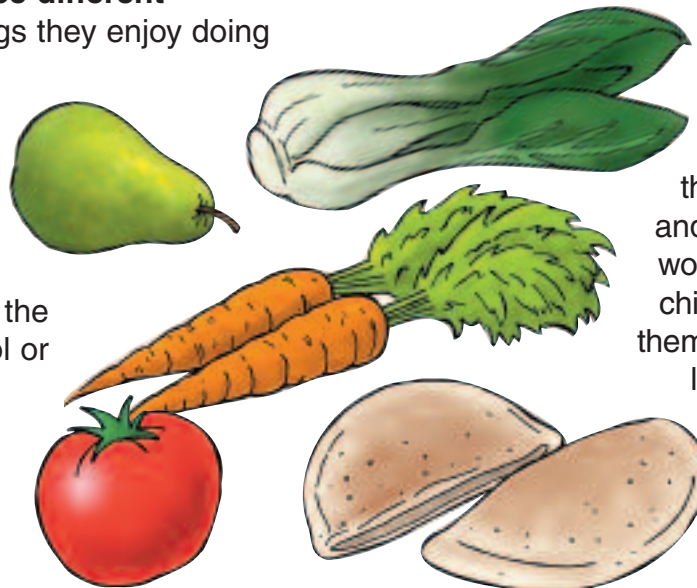


Be Active

Get your kids moving and encourage daily physical activity! Kids need about 90 minutes of physical activity every day.

- **Plan to make physical activity part of each day.** Active parents have active kids.
- **Plan active time with your children.** After a meal, go for a walk, throw a ball or play tag. Instead of just watching your children play, join in.
- **Increase the time your children spend on physical activity starting with at least 30 minutes more per day.** Encourage children to walk to school or to a friend's house more often.

- **Reduce “non-active” time starting with at least 30 minutes less per day.** Set limits on the amount of time your children spend watching TV and playing computer games.
- **Help children find fun things to do.** Plan active outings with family, friends and neighbours. Plan celebrations and vacations around movement and play, such as bowling and swimming.
- **Encourage children to go outside to play.** If safety is an issue, provide supervision.
- **Help children participate in a variety of physical activities** such as running and jumping for endurance, stretching and bending for flexibility and climbing or swinging for strength.
- **Allow children to experience different activities.** They will find things they enjoy doing that give them a sense of accomplishment. Some children enjoy team sports while others prefer individual activities.
- **Build regular physical activity into your day.** Take the stairs, walk children to school or get off the bus one stop earlier and walk the rest of the way.



Eat Well

Healthy eating means enjoying eating, eating according to hunger and using *Canada’s Food Guide to Healthy Eating* to help you choose which foods to eat and how much to eat. To help children eat well:

- **Make meal and snack times pleasant.** When possible, eat meals and snacks together. Children who sit down with others regularly for meals are more likely to eat healthier, learn table manners and develop stronger relationships. Allow enough time for children to eat and encourage them to eat slowly. Reduce distractions by turning off the TV in order to focus on food, family and friends. Make mealtimes a pleasant time for conversation. While sitting together, avoid talking about

difficult issues that can make mealtime stressful – plan another time to discuss them.

- **Try new foods.** Introduce children to new foods along with familiar foods. Encourage children to try new foods without forcing them. It can take many attempts before some children will taste and enjoy a new food. Include foods that aren’t your favourites. Children may like peas even if you don’t. Try introducing everyone to a new food each month. Children pick up messages about how you view food. If you are excited about a new food, children may be too.
- **Involve children in the planning, shopping, preparing and serving of meals;** they have fun, develop cooking skills and are more likely to eat the food offered. Sit down with children and plan meals and snacks for the next week. Ask

them about their favourite foods and use them in the meal plan. Allow children to look through cookbooks and choose recipes they would like to try. Take children shopping, teach them to read labels and let them select fresh vegetables and fruit for snacks. With supervision, all children can help with meal preparation. A

6-year-old can scrub and wash vegetables, an 8-year-old can measure ingredients and set the table, a 10-year-old can prepare simple recipes and a 12-year-old can use a knife.

- **Eat and enjoy a variety of foods from each of the four food groups every day.** The foods from *Canada’s Food Guide to Healthy Eating* are the “everyday” foods that provide growing children with the nutrients their bodies require. Foods that are low in nutrients, such as soft drinks, chocolate bars and potato chips, are “sometimes” foods. These foods can be part of healthy eating if children have these foods occasionally. Set limits, making sure that “sometimes” foods do not replace foods from the four food groups on a regular basis.

- **Serve water more often** and limit fruit juice to eight ounces (250 mL) daily. Limit drinks with caffeine and/or added sugars (tea, coffee, soft drinks, fruit drinks and sport drinks).
- **Begin every day with a healthy breakfast** that includes food from at least three of the four food groups.
- **Eat more vegetables and fruit.** Add more colour into each meal. Have a variety of different, brightly-coloured vegetables and fruit for everyone to choose from. Serve raw veggies at dinner—kids often like them better than cooked vegetables. Fill a bowl with fruit and put it where children can easily reach it.
- **Listen to your body and allow children to do the same.** When children are healthy and active, adults need to trust that children know when they are hungry, when they are full, how much to eat and whether or not to eat a particular food. Encourage children to eat when they are hungry. For most of us this means having three balanced meals and two healthy snacks each day. Also encourage children to stop eating when they feel satisfied, even if they have not finished everything on their plate. Let children choose the foods they want to eat from the healthy choices available at each meal.
- **Accept that adults are responsible for what, when and where children eat.** Adults are responsible for providing children with a variety of nutritious foods to choose from; regular times to eat and a safe and relaxing place to eat. When children trust that there will be food available at the next meal, they are more able to practice healthy eating habits.
- **Avoid using food as a reward or punishment.** Also, soothe hurt feelings with a hug instead of food.

Accept Yourself

Parents and caregivers affect the way children feel about themselves and their bodies. When children feel good about themselves and their bodies they are more likely to make healthy choices.

Encourage a healthy body image in children:

- **Genetics plays an important role in determining body shape and size.** Help children understand that there are things that they cannot control. Ask children to look at other family members to help find out if their bodies are programmed to be tall, short, big, small or in between. Remind children that their bodies are changing and growing, and that weight gain is normal, especially during puberty.
- **Reflect on your own body image and be aware of the messages you send about your body.** Do you emphasize your skills and talents rather than your physical appearance? Be aware that the comments you make about your weight or body parts, influence children. When



you have a positive view of yourself and your body, the children around you will feel better about themselves.

- **Believe in and promote the message that healthy bodies come in many heights, weights, shapes and sizes.** Understand that some thin people live on soft drinks and chips and very little physical activity while some heavier people eat well and are fit. Avoid making comments about people based on weight, shape, size, race, age or gender. Children who learn to accept diversity are better able to love their own bodies and themselves.

- **Teach children that weight and shape teasing is unacceptable and hurtful.** If you hear children calling someone “fat” or “skinny”, do not ignore it. Let children know that everyone is unique and that all body shapes and sizes have beauty and value. Talk to children about respect and standing up for others.
- **Accept children for who they are.** Tell them they are special and important. When adults feel positive about children, these children will feel good about themselves. Praise children for the things they do, like the way they treat others, rather than for the way they look. Encourage children to focus on their abilities, not their appearance. Help them to identify their strengths.
- **Encourage children to be critical of the images and messages on TV, in magazines and on music videos.** Explain how the media uses unrealistic images to sell products. Talk with them about what they see and hear. By helping children identify unhealthy images, they develop a more realistic picture of the healthy range of body shapes and sizes.

It's Worth It!

Try your best to show children that being physically active, eating well and accepting yourself are important. By taking small steps now, you can help children establish attitudes and behaviours that can make them healthier and that last a lifetime!

For more information:

1. Satter, E. (1999). *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*. Madison, Wisconsin: Kelcy Press.
2. Toronto Public Health: www.toronto.ca/health
3. For *Canada's Physical Activity Guides* for Children and Youth, visit: www.hcsc.gc.ca/hppb/paguide/
4. For *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating*, visit: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/search.a-z/a.html
5. To find out more about media literacy, visit www.media-awareness.ca

