

# How family and friends can be healthy role models for kids

Did you know that physical activity helps to ward off infections, alleviates stress and anxiety, increases energy, helps improve school grades and provides an opportunity for socializing with friends and spending time with family?

Overall, regular activity prevents against a number of chronic diseases including heart disease, osteoporosis, certain types of cancers and type II diabetes.

And yet, only 9% of children and youth meet the Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines of 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity a day.

For both children and adolescents, the physical activity they do get, tends to take place during the school week as opposed to on the weekend.

## Family and friends are the solution

By simply conveying their beliefs about the importance of physical activity and encouraging kids to be active, parents play an important role in actually increasing their kids' physical activity levels.

In fact, the more encouraging parents are, the more likely their children will increase the number of steps they take.

And while this is true for both boys and girls, it is especially important for girls, who are less active than boys at all ages.

Actually participating in physical activity with kids can also increase physical activity levels, however, parents who try to control their children's physical activity or are overly concerned with their children getting hurt can actually decrease the activity that they get.

When it comes to getting teens active, parental encouragement, praise and engagement are important, but so too is the support they provide in terms of logistics, for example, helping their kids get to activities or sports.

Finally, particularly with teens, peers play an important role. Parents may not always have control over all their kid's choices, but they can help them find ways to be active while with their friends.

## Practical tips to role model physical activity

- Encourage kids to walk to and from school.
- While bussing is often available for kids who live a certain number of kilometers away from the school, a walk instead provides approximately 30-40 minutes of the 60 that they need daily for healthy growth and development.

- If you drive them to school, trade in the car for a bike and cycle to school, or walk. You will also reap the benefits.
- If time is an issue, park your car further from the school and get a short walk in. Every step counts.
- On weekends, encourage your kids to walk, wheel, skateboard, roller blade to friends' houses.
- Set an example by taking public transportation with your child and/or encourage your teen and their friends take public transportation to the mall or events. People who take public transportation are more active. Knowing how to use public transportation is a valuable skill as they get older.
- Make time for family physical activity during the week. Go for a walk around the block after dinner, go to the park and play, play catch in the backyard
- On the weekend, dedicate time to being active. Go skating, tobogganing, snow shoeing, swimming, bowling, hiking.
- Learn a new activity / sport together. Activities such as skiing, martial arts and tennis are great activities to learn together. Invite your kid's friends to join you.
- Praise your child for both the success they have in sport and for the effort they put in to participating and trying.
- If you have a daughter, find out what kinds of activities your daughter likes and enroll her in those. Encourage her to try different sports – both team and individual – to get a sense of what she likes. She may not have ever imagined playing hockey, for example (one of the fastest growing sports for girls). For more ideas on how to get girls more active, check out [CAAWS](#).
- When your kids have friends over, send them outside. Kids are more active outside and spend less time on screens.
- Encourage your kids to explore the outdoors (and don't hover). Let them climb trees, use playground equipment, and ride their bikes (yes, with a helmet). Taking risks can teach valuable lifelong skills, instill confidence and improve fitness levels and related skills such as agility and balance.
- Challenge your kids to track their activity using a simple pedometer or a program on their smart phone. Many are available and have the same qualities that habit-forming video games have.
- Incorporate more standing into your family time. Stand up during commercials when watching TV together, have stand-up (or walking) family meetings, stand to eat dessert.

In summary, be an active role model. When your kids see you being active, it teaches them the importance of physical activity and demonstrates your belief in its value.