

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviours of Children in Canada

Response to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health Study on Children's Health (September 7, 2022)

About ParticipACTION

As Canada's recognized physical activity leader for over 50 years, ParticipACTION inspires and supports people living in Canada to make physical activity a vital part of their everyday life through public education, innovative engagement initiatives and thought leadership.

Preamble

The COVID-19 pandemic imposed many hardships on families and children across Canada, catalyzing a societal rethinking of the way we live our lives. Children had most of their social and physical activities outside of the home suspended during the pandemic. Moreover, many families found themselves adopting less active and sedentary habits that can be associated with increased chronic disease morbidity and mortality later in life. **Canadian public policy leaders should use this opportunity to better children's health and establish cost-effective policies that contribute to healthy minds and bodies.**

The Impact of COVID-19 on Children's Movement Behaviours

Nearly 3 years after the declaration of the pandemic, we have gained a better understanding of its collateral health consequences in relation to physical inactivity, excessive screen use and changed sleep schedules. Concerningly, **pandemic-related changes in movement behaviours have been associated with poorer mental and physical health outcomes in children and youth.**¹ Many children and youth^{2,3} in Canada have not been adequately active, have not been sleeping enough and have been too sedentary (with screens), undoubtedly resulting in significant health and economic consequences.⁴

Most children attended online school and were restricted from participating in recreational and sports programs, and many were sedentary and using screens because of pandemic-related restrictions.⁵ As a result, adherence to public health measures was associated with reduced physical activity and increased screen time among children and youth,⁶ and increased screen time has been associated with **depression, anxiety, hyperactivity and irritability among young people.**⁷

But it wasn't only the amount of movement that shifted in children and youth throughout the pandemic, but also the *when* and *how*. Families relied less on structured activities and indoor programs at pre-scheduled times. Some took this opportunity to change their work or school day and be active outdoors, in nature;⁸ others embraced exercise apps or virtual programs when it suited them.⁹ Bed and wake times may have shifted with more people attending classes and

working from home.¹⁰ With easing restrictions, we may be able to re-establish the routines and schedules we had before the pandemic or create new ones. And with this switch, now is an ideal time to consider how and when children and youth can get moving to optimize their health.

Less physical education, fewer organized sports, and isolation from friends

Recent Canadian research provided evidence that stress due to social isolation was associated with deterioration in multiple mental health domains during COVID-19.¹¹ In addition to high screen use and social isolation, the worsening of child mental health could be related to the displacement of sleep, physical exercise, and other prosocial activities, which were disrupted during the pandemic.^{12,13,14}

Although policies aimed at controlling the spread of COVID-19 have varied across the country, youth in Canada were generally asked to limit contact with people outside of their household, which reduces opportunities for physical activity outside of the home. Additionally, many youths across Canada have been affected by school closures and by restrictions on physical education and organized sports.

Not all playing fields are equal

Even more concerning is the fact that equity-deserving groups – e.g., women and girls, newcomers to Canada, persons with disabilities, members of the LGBTQ2S+ communities – report even lower rates of physical activity participation, placing these special populations at even greater risk for poor health outcomes and premature death. These groups have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 with regards to physical activity and sport participation, access, and opportunities.

Reimagining Movement: Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic may have long-lasting implications on children's routines, schedules and by extension, their health behaviours.

Recommendation 1 – Invest in supporting the movement behaviours of children and youth from equity-deserving groups.

Participation in physical activity follow a social gradient, such that those who are more advantaged are more likely to be regularly physically active, less likely to be sedentary, and less likely to experience the adverse health outcomes associated with inactive lifestyles than their less advantaged peer. Consequently, physical activity should be considered a socialized issue with apparent health equity implications, and as such, an intersectoral approach is needed to address the disparities among equity-deserving groups.

A significant multi-year financial commitment is required to successfully shift intentions and perceptions about physical activity and provide equity-deserving groups with opportunities to

be active. ParticipACTION, along with its partners and key stakeholders continue to develop, sustain and enhance inclusive physical activity initiatives with proven results. But we have only scratched the surface; further investment is needed to continue building on the momentum and impact achieved to date, while scaling initiatives to better serve underrepresented populations. Research indicates that physical activity can play an important role in ‘leveling the playing field’ to underserved and underrepresented populations, offering equitable access to the many benefits that come with being active. This approach will ensure we are optimizing the dissemination of the best available knowledge to individuals and groups best positioned to use resulting resources.

Recommendation 2 – Support families’ pursuit of healthy movement behaviours for their kids.

Families can support children and youth in achieving healthy physical activity, sedentary and sleep behaviours by encouraging, facilitating, modelling, setting expectations and engaging in healthy movement behaviours with them.

Examples of supportive activities by the Government could include:

- Developing, implementing and evaluating strategies for healthy movement behaviours that draw from the guiding strategy “A Common Vision for Increasing Physical Activity and Reducing Sedentary Living in Canada: Let’s Get Moving”.¹⁵
- Providing sustained resources and developing policies for the promotion and implementation of the 24-Hour Movement Guidelines in the context of the family.¹⁶
- Requiring manufacturers of digital screen devices to disclose on product labels the potential harms associated with excessive use.
- Investing in no-charge active play spaces (especially outdoors) for families with children of all ages.
- Providing infrastructure and social marketing to support families in adopting active transport practices.
- Updating educational curricula to better incorporate healthy physical activity, sedentary and sleep behaviours with a family-focused lens and through a whole-school approach.
- Supporting neighbourhood associations, recreation centres and schools in developing programs to encourage family physical activity.
- Reviewing and amending bylaws as needed to allow, promote and encourage outdoor play opportunities (e.g., climbing trees, playing street hockey and pick-up ball games, building tree forts, tobogganing)
- Providing transit options that reach beaches, hiking trails, parks and other areas that promote healthy movement behaviours.
- Developing child protection policies that promote independent movement opportunities suited to the capacity of the child and their environment.

Summary

Physical inactivity is a pervasive public health issue that must be urgently recognized as a national priority.

ParticipACTION remains focused on making physical activity a part of our everyday routines by reframing the way people think about getting active, through public education, thought leadership, innovative programs and tools that drive behaviour change.

Federal government investments are required to scale initiatives to reach and engage more people living in Canada, especially those who face social inequities to getting active, because our message is more important than ever: physical activity needs to be viewed as a necessity of life and one of the most important things you can do for your overall health and well-being. Everyone can experience the health benefits of physical activity – age, abilities, ethnicity, shape or size should not matter.

Helping us all become a more active and less sedentary population should not be seen as a burden or a cost but rather a powerful investment that will make Canada a healthy, joyful, environmentally progressive, inclusive and economically strong nation.

We welcome the opportunity to speak to the committee further about our work.

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