

The Learning Team

Volume 21, Number 4 | Summer 2018

A publication for parents and teachers working together for children's education



Working together to ensure the health of our young people

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Have smartphones destroyed a generation?



Although children are born programmed to play, many today have limited exposure to the types of outdoor games that teach fundamental movement skills.

Teaching kids how to move has become essential

Richard Monette, managing director, Active For Life

Although it may seem a bit counterintuitive, we must teach kids how to move. Humans are born with the capacity to move, but not the skills to do so.

Think about swimming the front crawl as an example. Most of us are born with the ability to stroke the water with our arms, kick our legs and turn our heads to the side, but we have to be taught these skills in order to be able to swim. The same is true for all “movement skills” that we believe are innate, such as running, jumping and throwing.

Most of us have experienced this learning process through the games we played as kids. It was simple: go outside, join whatever game was going on, watch the older kids and do what they did. If the game was kick the can, you learned to kick. If it was hide and seek or tag, you learned to twist, turn and zigzag as you ran. Scrub baseball taught us how to pitch, catch and strike a ball with a stick.

Without knowing it, as our skills grew, so did our confidence and our enjoyment. And that was magical, because when kids learn to love moving early in life, they tend to remain active for the rest of their lives.

For centuries, the system worked perfectly. Children’s search for pleasure led them to play games, and through play they learned the movement skills needed to survive. But today the system is backfiring.

One reason is kids’ inherent desire to seek fun and pleasure, not movement skills, per se. Like past generations, kids are born programmed to play, but the games they play have changed.

My childhood was filled with active games that helped me become an active person. Today’s kids learn sedentary games. They learn to handle a joystick, a keyboard and smartphones. The village still teaches kids to play, but today’s games have little to do with moving well.

Furthermore, a perfect storm of factors have combined to create an environment in which most parents are fearful for the safety of their children, so they drive them everywhere and more or less encourage them to spend more time indoors than out. Consequently, we have ended up with the most inactive generation in history.

What are we to do? How can we help our kids learn and enjoy moving instead of becoming sedentary for life? One thing is clear: We have to adopt a different perspective than our own parents.

We have to come to terms with a few things:

1. Acknowledge that inactivity is the new norm and it’s making kids sick.

The level of physical activity has dropped dramatically over just a few generations. As a result, we are faced with a near-epidemic level of child obesity. A growing number of kids suffer what used to be “adult diseases” such as high cholesterol, Type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure. As experts warn us, sitting is the new smoking.

2. Accept that we need to help our kids develop movement skills.

This is called physical literacy and it’s about developing the fundamental movement skills that all children need, such as running, hopping, throwing, catching and jumping. These skills give kids the confidence to participate in different physical activities, sports and games for a lifetime.

3. Physical literacy depends on awareness from parents.

Like learning a language, physical literacy is best developed from a young age. Parents who want to help their kids develop physical literacy don’t have to do anything more than what most parents want to do anyway — spend a bit of time with their children doing activities they enjoy. Kids who develop their skills early will most likely keep going. The reward for helping your kids develop physical literacy is that you don’t need to send them outside to play; they will go on their own.

4. Physical literacy is essential for all kids, not just athletes in the making.

I like the term “physical literacy” because it emphasizes that it’s not just about developing athletes. Physical literacy leads to kids being more skilled, confident and motivated to move. Children who are physically competent are also better off cognitively, emotionally and socially. Learning to be comfortable in your body is essential for the athlete, but also the rocket scientist or budding writer.

5. Engage the village.

Parents can’t do it alone. If kids are to move more, not less, then going forward the entire village has to step up. Communities need to activate. Governments have to make physical literacy a priority and schools have to increase physical education, not cut it. These institutions will change their ways if we — the parents — speak up.

It is hard to believe that we have arrived at a point where we need to help children learn to move, but here we are. It is time to take on the task and help our kids. It takes a village to teach the right skills essential to a better life.

This article was originally published by the Globe and Mail in September of 2014.

Richard Monette is the managing director of Active for Life, a national initiative created to help parents raise physically literate children. At activeforlife.com, parents, educators and coaches will find fun activities, engaging articles and free resources to get kids active, healthy and happy. Sign up for Active for Life’s monthly newsletters. Connect with Active for Life on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Serve and return

Healthy child-adult interactions build strong brains

Nicole Sherren, scientific director, Palix Foundation

Back in the mid-1990s while I was working on my PhD, I had the opportunity to spend a week visiting the Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center at the University of California, San Diego. One evening, in a grocery store parking lot, I was approached by a young man who looked like a throwback to the 1960s, sporting a tie-dyed T-shirt, macramé bag, a significant amount of facial hair, and smelling heavily of patchouli. He was selling herbal supplements and his opening pitch made me smile.

“Hey, do you know that we only use 10 per cent of our brains?”

“Really?” I replied. “Well then, would you be willing to donate 90 per cent of your brain to science?”

When he didn’t respond I added, “No? How about 50 per cent then?”

I don’t know anyone who would willingly give up any part of their brain. In fact, you are your brain: your brain is responsible not only for your ability to learn and remember, but also for your thoughts, feelings, decisions, your ability to form and maintain relationships, and your ability to cope with challenges. It is the organ of interest in depression, anxiety, addiction, and ADHD and contributes to the risk for a number of other chronic health problems like heart disease, diabetes and certain types of cancer.

We’ve known for decades that children who experience a lot of adversity don’t usually do as well in school, in employment or in relationships as those who don’t, but more recent research over the past 25 years is finally shedding light on why this occurs, and it all comes back to the brain. Brains don’t develop solely on the basis of a preset genetic blueprint; they are also built over time through a complex interplay between our biology and the experiences we have in childhood.

The experiences that matter the most during development are social and can be thought of like the serve and return action between two people playing tennis. Babies and children “serve” by reaching out for interaction with adults through eye contact, babbling, facial expressions, crying and eventually through conversations and other activities; adults must return the serve by responding in a developmentally appropriate way in order to keep the action going.

This back-and-forth social interaction allows babies and children to practice key skills such as language and literacy, attention, working memory, emotional control, forming and maintaining relationships, and problem-solving. Repeated use of these skills will strengthen corresponding brain circuits and provide a strong foundation for more complex circuits to build on. The quality of these interactions is critically important to brain development: inconsistent, unresponsive or absent social interactions disrupt the development of neural circuits and can lead to poor learning, social and health outcomes.

Stress also shapes the architecture of the developing brain, but not all stress is the same. Small, developmentally appropriate challenges such as getting an immunization or the first day of school are healthy for brain development because they give children the opportunity to practice their stress-coping skills and strengthen those neural circuits. Toxic stress, such as that from adverse experiences like abuse, neglect or family dysfunction, releases large amounts of stress hormones that can disrupt the development of neural circuits over time, again leading to poor outcomes, sometimes even decades in the future.

Even though children are not born resilient, it is possible to build the foundations of resilience in all children

by providing them with opportunities to practice key skills while supported by stable, responsive adults and by preventing or buffering the sources of toxic stress in their lives. The good news is that any adult can play the serve and return game with kids to help them build the skills that will help them succeed in school, in work and in life. That's why this information is so critical to the education system. Out of all the adults in children's lives other than immediate family, teachers spend the most time interacting with them. They have the ability to make the classroom a safe, welcoming and predictable space for children who might not get that when they leave. This gives all children a supportive environment in which to build stronger brain architecture by practicing all the skills they'll need to succeed in life.

Here in Alberta, the Palix Foundation has been actively mobilizing this knowledge across the broad areas of health, human service, education and justice. We've engaged people at each level of the system — from government policy and senior decision-makers right down to the front line — in an effort to create a jurisdiction wherein all players are aligned with and using the science of brain development in their work.

These efforts are now paying off: we've seen shifts in prerequisites to apply for some provincial funds, the adoption of new, brain science-aligned programs, a focus on professional development across multiple sectors, shifts in health-care practices and a myriad other examples of on-the-ground change. In the education system specifically, the science of brain development has made its way into ministry policy frameworks and reports, was the focus of last year's High School Redesign, and has helped guide the development of new initiatives and partnerships in both school boards and individual schools.

Our Alberta Family Wellness Initiative website (albertafamilywellness.org) is full of free resources you can use to learn about brain development and share the information with your colleagues. We also recently created a free, online "brain story certification" course designed to deepen understanding of brain development and its impact on lifelong health. The course runs approximately 30 hours and features 39 of North America's foremost experts in early brain development, mental health, and addiction.

Do you want to know more about brain development? Get your brain story certification at www.albertafamilywellness.org/training.



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Back-and-forth social interaction between babies and their caregivers strengthens brain circuits and provides a foundation for future development.

Children, youth and depression



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Depression often starts between the ages of 15 and 30, but it can affect teens and younger children.

Canadian Mental Health Association

While we may think of low mood or other challenges as adult problems, they can affect people at any age. Children and teens can experience mental illnesses like depression. Sometimes it can be difficult for adults to understand how difficult children's problems can be because we look at their problems through adult eyes. But the pressures of growing up can be very hard for some children. It's important that we remind ourselves that while their problems may seem unimportant to us, they can feel overwhelming to young people. It's important to take depression in young people seriously.

What is depression?

Depression is a type of mental illness called a mood disorder. Mood disorders affect the way you feel, which also affects the way you think and act. With depression, you may feel "down," hopeless or find that you can't enjoy things you used to like. Many people who experience depression feel irritable or angry. And some people say that they feel "numb" all the time.

Recognizing depression in young people can be more difficult than recognizing depression in adults because young people experience so many changes. You may wonder what is "normal" and what might be a problem. Also, many children and teens may not want to talk about their feelings, or may have their own explanation for their experiences. However, you may still notice the following changes:

- **Changes in feelings:** Your child may show signs of being unhappy, worried, guilty, angry, fearful, helpless, hopeless, lonely or rejected.
- **Changes in physical health:** Your child may start to complain of headaches or general aches and pains that you can't explain. They may feel tired all the time or have problems eating or sleeping. Your child may unexpectedly gain or lose weight.
- **Changes in thinking:** Your child may say things that indicate low self-esteem, self-dislike or self-blame — for example, they may talk about themselves only in negative terms. They may have a hard time concentrating. In some cases, they may show signs that they're thinking about suicide.
- **Changes in behaviour:** Your child might withdraw from others, cry easily or show less interest in sports, games or other fun activities that they normally enjoy. They might overreact and have sudden outbursts of anger or tears over small incidents.

Some of these changes may be signs of mental health problems other than depression. It's important to look at the bigger picture: how intense the changes are, how they impact your child's life and how long they last. It's particularly important to talk to your child if you've noticed several changes lasting more than two weeks.

Who does it affect?

Depression often starts between the ages of 15 and 30, but it can affect anyone — even teens and younger children. While we don't know exactly what causes depression, many factors are likely at play. These include family history, personality, life events and changes in your child's body. Certain medications and physical illnesses can also contribute to depression.

What can I do about it?

Depression is very treatable. Children, teens and adults can all recover from depression. For children and teens in particular, early treatment is important so they can get back to their education and other goals as quickly as possible.

Support for a young person who experiences depression may come from several different people and places. Your family doctor is often the first place you start, but you may also find support through people like psychiatrists, psychologists, counsellors, social workers or peer support workers. Many communities offer programs that support healthy children and build social connections — these are also helpful in preventing depression.

Schools are also an important place for all children. Many schools offer programs that build skills, resiliency and supports. If you're concerned about your child's health, teachers and school counsellors can describe changes they've seen or problems they've noticed during the school day. If your child is diagnosed with a mental illness, your child's school may make small changes to support your child's learning goals. Many schools offer counselling or referrals to community services.

Counselling and support

Many children start with counselling like cognitive-behavioural therapy (or CBT). CBT teaches people how their thoughts, feelings and actions work together. It also teaches skills such as healthy thinking, problem solving and stress management. CBT has been widely adapted for different groups and different situations, and it's also useful to prevent depression.

Self-care strategies to stay well are important for everyone. This includes eating well, exercising, spending time with others and making time for fun activities. Ask your care team for ideas. They can also recommend programs or services in your community that support healthy living.

Support groups may also be helpful. Support groups are an opportunity to share experiences and learn from others. There are also groups specifically for caregivers and family members.

Medication

Your child may also be prescribed an antidepressant if other options don't seem to help. Antidepressants are a group of medications used to treat depression and other mental illnesses. The decision to use medication can be complicated, especially if your child is young. Medications can be helpful for some children, but there may be extra risks to consider. It's important to have an honest discussion with your doctor so you know what to expect. Most professionals will consider medication for children under the age of 18 as a second option to other approaches, like counselling.

How can I help the entire family?

It is important to recognize your own feelings about your child's depression. Many people feel guilty or frustrated when a loved one is diagnosed with a mental illness, and this can affect family relationships. It can also be difficult to cope with your child's unhappy feelings.

Many of the strategies that help your child can help the entire family. Family counselling can give everyone an opportunity to share their experiences and help you develop strategies that take care of the entire family's well-being. Support groups can connect you with other caregivers who are supporting a loved one. And, of course, wellness strategies at home are helpful for everyone.

It's best to be honest with siblings and other family members about a child's illness. That way, your child has several sources of support and understanding.

Do you need more help?

Contact a community organization like the Canadian Mental Health Association to learn more about support and resources in your area.

This article has been republished with permission from the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA). For more information visit the organization's website at <https://cmha.ca>.

Build a healthy relationship with your child

Laura Markham, PhD
Clinical psychologist

1. Start right for a firm foundation.
2. Remember that all relationships take work.
3. Prioritize time with your child.
4. Start with trust, the foundation of every good relationship.
5. Encourage, encourage, encourage.
6. Remember that respect must be mutual.
7. Think of relationships as the slow accretion of daily interactions.
8. Communication habits start early.
9. Don't take it personally (when your child shuts you out or lashes out).
10. Resist the impulse to be punitive.
11. Don't let little rifts build up.
12. Reconnect after every separation.
13. Stay available.

Source:
ahaparenting.com
Dr. Laura Markham is the founder of AhaParenting.com and the author of Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids; Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings and her latest book, The Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids Workbook. This full article is available at www.ahaparenting.com/parenting-tools/connection/building-relationship.



Healthy eating strengthens school community wellness

Joyce Wamambo, practicum student, Communities ChooseWell, Alberta Recreation and Parks Association



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Providing healthy food options is one way to help build a healthy school community.

Many schools have taken the initiative to promote and improve healthy eating and active living habits within their communities. With support from Communities ChooseWell, a free program of the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association, school communities have strengthened community wellness by making the healthy choice the easier choice for all students.

Since the program began in 2005, many

schools across Alberta have received awards and grants for their efforts to improve the health and well-being of their community members. Clandonald School is a great example of that.

In October 2016, Clandonald School, a grades 1–6 elementary school east of Edmonton, received a Communities ChooseWell Healthy Community Award for developing healthy policies. They achieved this by creating an action plan that listed measurable goals, focusing on improving eating habits and physical activity within the school,

explained Anita Datchuk, Clandonald School's health champion coordinator.

These action plan goals were used by the health champions group (students, staff, parents and community members) to create and improve on school initiatives that were meant to promote healthy eating habits and physical activity within the school. Clandonald implemented many programs to support these initiatives.

A healthy breakfast program was implemented whereby any student could enjoy breakfast in a social environment. This initiative was valuable since many students had a long commute to school. With the help of a local catering company, Clandonald School was able to serve weekly hot lunches to all students, and with assistance and dedication from various partnerships and volunteers, these programs ran year-around.

Vegetable smoothies were made for students on special occasions. This added

to Clandonald's healthy school culture. Program leaders were able to further the knowledge of students during lunch breaks; they coached students about healthy eating habits through healthy eating programs and informative bulletin boards that were displayed in the lunchroom.

The program also introduced a variety of infused water choices. School-grown herbs, vegetables and fruit were added to the students' water bottles, and they were encouraged to get creative by combining a variety of things. More importantly, encouraging them to drink water instead of other drinks improved their health.

Additionally, the students grew the fruits and vegetables used in the programs.

"We introduced garden beds and apple trees ... we are currently eating carrots that were brought in from garden beds planted over the summer by our school families," Datchuk said.

The health champions group was in charge of

implementing and following through with every health initiative. Datchuk explained that it was very helpful for Clandonald to have an action plan to keep them on track. This tool was and continues to be valuable as it helps reflect and validate the health champions group's efforts to build a healthy school community. Datchuk also identified how developing partnerships with other organizations is a big key to success. For a small school of only 29 students, these partnerships have provided resources and opportunities that have made the school environment healthier.

Communities ChooseWell promotes and supports the development of policies, programs and partnerships in Alberta's communities to promote wellness through healthy eating and physical activity.

More success stories can be found on the Communities ChooseWell website, www.arpaonline.ca/choosewell.

Have smartphones destroyed a generation?

In an article published in *The Atlantic* in September 2017, psychologist and researcher Jean Twenge delved into the impact of digital technology on the generation of young people, dubbed iGen, who haven't known life without electronic tablets and smartphones.

Twenge notes that, since the release of the iPhone in 2007, teens are

- hanging out with friends less;
- less eager to start driving;
- dating less, more likely to feel lonely; and
- less likely to get enough sleep.

Excerpts from "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?"

There is compelling evidence that the devices we've placed in young people's hands are having profound effects on their lives—and making them seriously unhappy.

The arrival of the smartphone has radically changed every aspect of teenagers' lives, from the nature of their social interactions to their mental health.

Rates of teen depression and suicide have skyrocketed since 2011. It's not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades. Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones.

Across a range of behaviours — drinking, dating, spending time unsupervised — 18-year-olds now act more like 15-year-olds used to, and 15-year-olds act more like 13-year-olds. Childhood now stretches well into high school.

Teens who spend more time than average on screen activities are more likely to be unhappy, and those who spend more time than average on nonscreen activities are more likely to be happy.

[Teens] who spend an above-average amount of time with their friends in person are 20 per cent less likely to say they're unhappy than those who hang out for a below-average amount of time.

"I think we like our phones more than we like actual people."

- Athena, 11-year-old interview subject

Read the full article at www.theatlantic.com.



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The Learning Team

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 The Alberta Teachers' Association

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ISSN 1480-7688