

Is Your Province Fit for Kids?

Canadian children are in the grips of an inactivity epidemic.
Here's how we can help them shape up **by SARA BEDAL**

PICTURE THIS: It's a typical weekday morning and parents are gridlocked in a school parking lot, dropping off their kids. Students spot their friends, pulling out Game Boys and Pixel Chix for a quick bit of fun before the bell rings. Meanwhile, the custodian prepares the gym for a grade-eight assembly, while the phys. ed teacher wonders what she'll do with her rambunctious grade twos now that the gym is taken — again. Too bad, she thinks, the playground equipment was recently declared unsafe.

What's wrong with this picture? Everything.

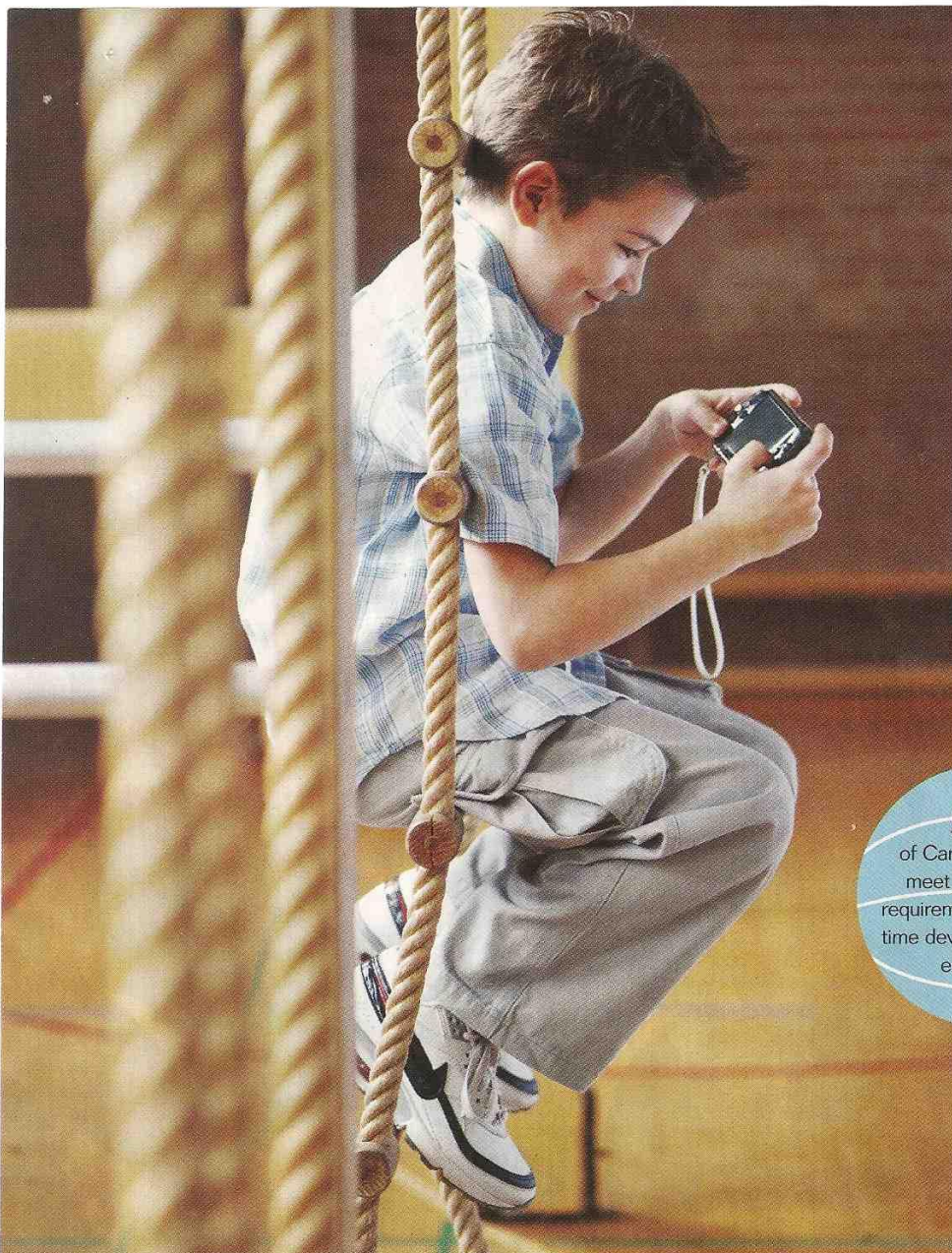
Scenes like this are played out at schools across the country, and while it may seem benign and no big deal — parents driving their kids to school, gym classes cancelled — stats on children's levels of fitness underscore how our kids are not measuring up. Fifty-seven percent of children in Canada are not active enough to meet international guidelines for optimal growth and development. Children's overweight/obesity rates have almost tripled in the last two decades. And the real kicker? If we don't reverse the trend, today's children may face a shorter life expectancy than their parents.

Clearly, there's a crisis. Certainly an obesity crisis, but increasingly health care professionals are talking about an inactivity crisis — some are even calling it an inactivity epidemic.

PHOTOS: YVONNE DUVEVOORDEN PROPS STYLING: JAY JUNNILA/JUDY INC. HAIR: BUFFY SHELDON/JUDY INC. SHOT ON LOCATION AT OVERLAND LEARNING CENTRE



Too often, phys. ed class is the first to get postponed, shortened or flat out cancelled.



57%
of Canadian schools
meet the provincial
requirements for allotted
time devoted to physical
education.†

In response, *Today's Parent* wanted to tell the story behind the statistics. By examining both the active and inactive ways kids spend their days, we developed a report card assessing how each area of the country is progressing in offering fitness opportunities to kids. According to our six criteria, British Columbia comes out on top (see "Who's the Fittest in the Land?" p. 68). Does this suggest climate plays a role? Perhaps. Population size and regional economy are also potential factors in why BC garnered top marks. But our aim was not to pit province against province, rather to spark discussion among educators and among parents. If the experts are right and we're looking at an

epidemic, then we need to know how fit our kids are today before we can plan for tomorrow.

How active should KIDS be?

According to the Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (CAHPERD), children should be actively moving for at least 90 minutes a day, a conclusion supported by the Ontario Medical Association, which last fall released a report saying schools should schedule one hour a day of structured aerobic activity and exercise for elementary and secondary school students.

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THE REPORT CARD

	Total score out of 30	Percent	Grade
BC	21.5	72	B
Ont.	20.5	68	C+
Alta.	19.5	65	C
Man.	18.5	62	C-
Sask.	17.5	58	D+
NS	16.5	55	D
Que.	15	50	D-
NB	13.5	45	F
NL	13.5	45	F
PEI	11.5	38	F

Number Crunching

Our provincial report card runs the gamut from B to F, but what do these grades really mean? Of course, we haven't measured just how fit kids are in each province, but we have singled out six key indicators that suggest what shape kids are in and what fitness opportunities are available to them.

We selected the indicators knowing that lifestyle is inextricably linked to fitness levels. We looked at screen time, overweight/obesity rates, weekly physical activity and the percentage of kids who "inactively commute" to school. We also included minutes of weekly phys. ed (though, what governments recommend is not necessarily followed) and

parents' involvement in their kids' physical activity.

We then set benchmarks and awarded each province a score out of five for each indicator. For example, when we looked at the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth and discovered, on average, 32% of kids aged 4 to 14 watch more than two hours of TV or videos a day, we assigned five points to BC, where the percentage is only 23. PEI, on the other hand, received only one point in this category since it's reported that about 44% of children in this age group are glued to the tube for more than two hours daily.

In setting the benchmark for minutes of phys. ed per week, we turned to the Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, which recommends a minimum of 150 minutes a week. Data for the other four indicators were drawn from the 2004 Canadian Community Health Survey – Nutrition and the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute's 2000 Physical Activity Monitor. Finally, each province earned a score out of 30, which we converted to a percent and then arrived at a letter grade.

NOTE: We could not rank the territories because of small population — and hence, sample size. Similarly, comparisons between provinces should be made with caution due to small sample sizes and margins of error.

Who's the Fittest in the Land? A province-by-province breakdown

Province	% of kids (2–17) who are overweight or obese	% of kids (4–14) who watch more than 2 hours of TV or videos daily	Minutes of phys. ed per week, grades 1 to 8 (as determined by education ministries)	% of kids (6–11) participating in physical activities fewer than 7 hours weekly	% of kids (5–17) inactively commuting to school	% of parents who play active games or sports with their child often or very often
Newfoundland and Labrador	36	38.6	90	18.5	57	45
Prince Edward Island	30	44.3	60–108	8.8	79	40
Nova Scotia	32	37.4	100–150 (grades 1 to 6; exclusive of French first language schools*)	16.9	54	42
New Brunswick	34	41.1	Anglophone: 100–150 Francophone: 80–115**	14	64	41
Quebec	23	31	90 (includes health education)	26.4	59	42
Ontario	27	34.3	No specified time allotment; ministry estimates 60–120	13.4	47	51
Manitoba	31	33.4	115–125	12.3	42	37
Saskatchewan	29	35.5	150	11.4	48	40
Alberta	22	30.8	10% of instruction time (includes health for grades K to 6)	9.4	52	38
British Columbia	26	23	148	14.3	43	37

*No specified time allotment for grades 7 and 8 **Includes personal and social development

Sounds good in theory, but in practice? How do we ensure our kids are active enough now to help ward off serious health conditions such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease?

“Part of the problem with finding a solution is that there’s no definable enemy,” says John Corlett, dean of the Faculty of Applied Health Sciences at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ont. “There’s a real difficulty in identifying the opposition — who’s to blame here?”

How active should SCHOOLS be?

It’s easy to blame schools, especially with reduced gym time and cutbacks of qualified phys. ed teachers. But Louise Humbert, an associate professor in the College of Kinesiology at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, believes the solution is more complex than simply leaving it to schools to jam more minutes of physical activity into the curriculum. Humbert feels there has to be a cultural shift, incorporating education ministries, school boards and

20% of Canadian kids receive daily physical education.

41% receive one to two days per week.

10% receive none at all.*

CASE STUDY:

P.J. Gillen School in Esterhazy, Sask.

How one school made phys. ed part of every student’s day

Drop by Esterhazy on a school day and, depending on the time of year, you may find kids clipping on cross-country skis, sweeping the ice at the local curling rink or cannonballing at the local outdoor swimming pool. Sounds like fun? That’s the idea behind P.J. Gillen School’s daily offering of physical education to its 210 students, kindergarten to grade five.

Daily phys. ed is due in large part to the efforts of the school’s principal, Reg Leidl. Since joining the staff of P.J. Gillen as the gym teacher in 1985, Leidl’s been committed to ensuring his students are active. Every day.

In PE circles, the school’s program is known as Quality Daily Physical Education (QDPE), a term coined by the Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (CAHPERD). Each year, CAHPERD recognizes Canadian schools that deliver daily phys. ed to their students for a minimum of 150 minutes a week. In 2004, almost 300 schools earned this “diamond” award and P.J. Gillen has won the top award 15 years running.

Making the leap to daily phys. ed took some innovative thinking, says Leidl. First, he had to get his staff to buy in. So Leidl makes a concerted effort to listen and respond to his teachers’ requests for their own programs. Today, about a third of P.J. Gillen’s teachers have training in phys. ed and teach most of the school’s gym periods. Secondly, since demand for gym time surpassed availability, Leidl looked outside the school. Skating, snowshoeing, swimming and bowling are now part of the QDPE program. In short, the community became his gymnasium.

Leidl acknowledges that extending the phys. ed curriculum into the community may be a tougher challenge in urban areas, where recreation facilities may not be within walking distance. And scheduling gym every day for all students at larger schools can pose a logistical headache. Still, he urges other educators to “start somewhere. If you can’t do it daily, then increase it to what you can do. Be creative.”

Respect also underscores the school’s philosophy on cutting kids from teams. “We never cut anybody here,” says Leidl, who takes the same approach when coaching Esterhazy’s high school football team. He admits the team loses more games than it wins, but says, “Ask kids, ‘Would you rather play or win?’ I think we all know what the answer would be.” In track and field, top kids train along with others and the school makes a point of recognizing individual improvement at assemblies. “The kids eat that up. They love that kind of stuff,” says Leidl. Whatever the activity — a cross-country skiing jaunt combined with a wiener roast, or a swimming party capped off with playing in the park — it’s camaraderie that’s front and centre.

By putting sport in a social context, Leidl hopes he and his staff are sowing seeds for a lifelong love of being active. “People continue physical activity after school not so much in the elite sport areas, but in areas where there’s socialization and not a lot of emphasis on skill,” he says. “I’m totally convinced that’s what the hook is after you get out of school. It’s all the other things.”



87%
of Canadian schools
have equipment and
facilities for physical
education programs rated
as inadequate.†

These Kids Are Made for Walking

Kids are prone to bursts of energy (and less-than-perfect memories), so it's virtually impossible to accurately measure just how active they really are. But a new nationwide study may come close.

CAN PLAY, or Canada's Study on Physical Activity Levels Among Youth, has young people, aged five to 19, **fastening Digi-Walker pedometers to their belts**, waistbands and pant pockets and wearing them for seven consecutive days. The electronic devices measure total steps taken during the day as well as other up-and-down hip movements such as squatting down to tie up a shoe. (The pedometers don't count cycling on a smooth surface, for example, and mustn't be worn in the water.)

The Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute (CFLRI) launched CAN PLAY in April 2005, with financial support from federal, provincial and territorial governments. **The groundbreaking study will measure a total of 30,000 youth over three years** for 52 weeks of the year with the goal of determining who's more — and less — active according to factors such as age, sex and location. Findings should help guide government promotion of physical activity. Look for first-year national results on the CFLRI website (cflri.ca) this fall, while provincial/territorial data should be available by the end of the study's second year in 2007.

administrations. She suggests re-examining policies, such as amalgamating school divisions, that, at first glance, may be fiscally prudent, but disregard the health impact of busing kids to and from school for an hour a day. She points to other moves, such as forbidding students to bike to school (because of recurring theft) instead of moving bike racks to more secure locations, which she calls downright baffling.

Yet most experts single out schools as a promising place to start. Currently, progress is inconsistent. No province, for instance, insists on daily physical *education*, but Alberta and Ontario have mandated daily physical *activity* in the schools — 30 minutes and at least 20 minutes, respectively. The difference? Physical activity can be widely interpreted — it could be as simple as walking around the schoolyard or as vigorous as aerobics in the gym for the whole school.

In Saskatchewan, the ministry of education's guidelines admirably specify 150 minutes of physical education a week for grades one to nine, but that can get short shrift

when other subjects such as language arts and music compete for precious curriculum time.

Meanwhile, the presence of qualified phys. ed teachers is equally patchy. For example, Quebec, Prince Edward Island and the French schools in New Brunswick require all elementary-level PE teachers to have a bachelor's degree in physical education (or the equivalent), but other provinces don't make this stipulation. So what ends up happening is the grade-three teacher, who has no phys. ed training, supervises, say, an elimination game — where most kids sit on the sidelines and many of the girls don't want to play because the game is too competitive. Activity level: next to zero.

While not all effective gym teachers boast a specialist's degree, Humbert believes teachers who are *not* physical education specialists too often are challenged at teaching fundamental motor patterns. This is important because without those basic skills, it's difficult for kids to build and ultimately develop a lifelong love of physical fitness. And that's the point — to not only get kids active, but to help them love it.

How active should PARENTS be?

Not surprisingly, then, it often rests with parents to spark — and support — their children's interest in physical activity, and studies show they should start with themselves. A 1998 Statistics Canada survey found, for instance, that 64 percent of children (aged 5 to 14) participated in sports when one or both of their parents were active. (That figure jumped to 86 percent when at least one parent was active *and* involved in sport on a volunteer basis.) Contrast that with only 36 percent of kids who played sports when neither of their parents was active in organized sports or volunteered in sport.

"Parents have got to be a partner in this move to enhance the health of our children," says Humbert. Whether it's squeezing in a 20-minute walk between supper and homework or cycling a local nature path on a Sunday afternoon, "it's about *making* the time as opposed to *finding* the time," she says. "Then it's about being supported." By schools. By employers. By city planners. By policy-makers. "It's going to take a while." ♥

Kids Down Under Get Busy

Physical inactivity among youth is hardly a made-in-Canada problem. It's global, says the World Health Organization, which estimates less than one-third of young people worldwide are sufficiently active.

But just how far are some countries prepared to go in addressing the problem? Australia, for one, has opted to play hardball. Prime Minister John Howard has announced that in order to receive funding to 2008, education jurisdictions must include in their curricula at least **two hours of physical activity per week for children in primary and junior secondary schools.**

"Around 40 percent of our children do not participate in organized sport outside school hours," Howard said, adding an estimated **1.5 million Australians under 18 are overweight or obese.** "While parents will continue to play the primary role in bringing up their children, we all need to tackle this issue — in partnership with school and sporting communities, with the health sector and food industry."

Prior to Howard's announcement, there were no national minimum requirements for physical activity. Now the plan is for **kids to get their two hours a week through phys. ed classes, exercise and fitness programs and extracurricular sports — all at school.** The program complements another Australian government initiative, which is plowing \$90 million AU into an after-school physical activity program.

Fitness Snapshots

39% of Canadian schools report having a physical education specialist.†

\$5.3 billion: The health care cost to Canadians in 2001 due to illness, injuries and diseases associated with physical inactivity.†

57% of Canadian children (5 to 17) are not active enough to meet international guidelines for optimal growth and development. Children from economically disadvantaged families have fewer opportunities for participation in physical activity.†

† Sources: Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance; Canadian Council of University Physical Education and Kinesiology Administrators