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Health

Kids failing at physical fitness, national study says

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The Telegram

Active Healthy Kids Canada released its report card on physical activity Tuesday afternoon and the verdict was clear - the kids aren't alright.

The report card gives an "F" grade for physical activity, as well as failing grades in active play, too much screen time and federal government involvement.

Sean McKenna, chairman of the Small Steps, Big Results committee for Recreation Newfoundland and Labrador said this year's report card focused on children under five years old.

"Lifestyle patterns set before the age of five predict obesity and health outcomes in later childhood and throughout adult life," McKenna said.

One of the key areas of concern is the amount of time young children spend in front of screens, said Linda Rohr, a professor at Memorial University.

"Canadian children are accumulating six hours of screen time on weekdays and over seven hours on weekends - roughly equivalent to an adult's workweek," Rohr said. "Too much screen time is associated with

negative psychological consequences such as reduced academic achievement, reduced cognitive functioning and reduced sleep."

Worse, government recommendations say children under two years of age shouldn't spend any time in front of a TV or computer, yet 90 per cent of children do, and on average, kids start watching TV at five months old.

"Despite the negative effects of early childhood screen time exposure, new e-parenting products continue to surface," Rohr said. "In fact, four of the 10 best-selling education apps in the iTunes store are designed for children under four years of age."

The report card isn't too kind to provincial and federal governments, but a lot of the focus is on the parents, especially for children under five.

"As parents, we need to remember how we spent our childhood and encourage active play," said Trisha Keough-Boyer, from School Sports NL. "Active play is free, unstructured activities such as running with friends

in the playground, playing with balls and collecting sticks in the woods."

The national report card found only 10 per cent of Newfoundland and Labrador kids are meeting the Canadian guideline of 90 minutes of physical activity per day - less than the national average of 12 per cent.

Nationally, the report card has been giving a failing grade on activity levels for the past three years, but the level of children meeting national guidelines has been slowly getting worse.

The results and recommendations were endorsed by the YMCA and Easter Seals. Dierdre Greene from Easter Seals said kids with disabilities face special challenges.

"The reality for Easter Seals kids is that they go out to a world every day that has facilities and activities that weren't designed for them," she said. "Small community playgrounds in local subdivisions are not typically that accessible or wheelchair friendly."

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Figure:

Tuesday at the Boys and Girls Club in Buckmaster's Circle, a news conference was held to discuss the report card for children's health in the province. From left, Sean McKenna, Dr. Tracey Bridger, Dr. Linda Rohr, Dr. Antony Card, Trisha Keough-Boyer and Dr. Dierdre Greene address the media. - Photo By Mark Burt/Special to The Telegram

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