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Canada earns low ranking in new global childhood physical activity report; screen time and reliance on technology identified as major culprits

Report urges recognition of childhood physical activity as a global health priority; inactivity levels reach crisis proportions worldwide

NOVEMBER 26, 2018 - TORONTO – Childhood physical inactivity has reached crisis levels with many children around the world – including in Canada – not moving enough to maintain healthy growth and development, according to a global report released today. Compared to 48 other countries, Canada lags behind on grades that measure Overall Physical Activity (D+), Sedentary Behaviour (D+) and the newest indicator, Physical Fitness (D).

The report was developed by the Active Healthy Kids Global Alliance (AHKGA) to assess global trends in childhood physical activity and formed what is known as the Global Matrix. For Canada, it included data from the [ParticipACTION Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth](#).

“The results are alarming: on average, kids are still sitting too much and moving too little to reach their full potential,” said Dr. Leigh Vanderloo, exercise scientist at ParticipACTION. “The world is facing a global childhood inactivity epidemic, and it will take multiple groups working together from across all of society to shift behaviours and get children moving. That is why a global analysis such as this is so beneficial – it helps us see the trends and learn from each other.”

The report shows that modern lifestyles, including increases in screen time, the urbanization of communities and the increasing automation of previously manual tasks, are contributing to this pervasive public health problem that must be recognized as a priority in Canada and around the world. In Canada, for instance, only 35 percent of 5- to 17-year-olds are getting the recommended 60 minutes of heart-pumping physical activity, while 51 percent engage in more recreational screen time than is recommended by the [Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines](#).

“We all have a collective responsibility to address these cultural and social norms – particularly screen time – because inactive children are at risk for adverse physical, mental, social and cognitive health problems,” said Dr. Mark Tremblay, President of the AHKGA and senior scientist at the CHEO Research Institute in Ottawa. “This generation will face a range of challenges, including the impacts of climate change, increasing globalization, and the consequences of rapid technological change. They will need to be purposely physically active in order to grow into healthy, resilient adults who can survive and thrive in a changing world.”

The report found that countries with the most active children and youth, including Slovenia and Japan, each rely on very different approaches to get kids moving but what is consistent among all of them is that physical activity is driven by pervasive cultural and social norms. Being active is not just a choice, but a way of life.

Slovenia, for instance, which obtained the best grades for Overall Physical Activity (A–), Family and Peers (B+), and Government (A), places an importance on sport, viewing it as an effective tool in fostering national identity. It also has a national school-based surveillance system in place to measure physical fitness of children 6–19 years old. These measures have increased youth physical activity levels to 80 percent.

Japan, which had the best grades for Active Transportation (A–) and Physical Fitness (A), and no grades lower than C–, has a highly established walking-to-school policy which has been successful at promoting active transportation among children and youth.

Based on this report, Canadian researchers are calling for awareness, advocacy, and the creation of supportive physical and social environments which collectively can help shift the norm and make physical activity a part of every Canadian child’s life. Priorities include:

- Creating a culture of active transportation through urban and school travel planning, as well as campaigns to encourage kids to walk, bike or wheel to school;
- Using social marketing across multiple sectors to help build a solid understanding of the negative effects of screen time, along with ways to help manage it;
- Working to build awareness, understanding and adherence to the Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines across the entire child population, including low-income families, Indigenous populations and children with disabilities.

An interactive map with country grades is available at: <https://www.participaction.com/en-ca/resources/global-comparisons>.

About the Global Comparisons

The global comparisons were led by the Active Healthy Kids Global Alliance (AHKGA; www.activehealthykids.org), a not-for-profit organization dedicated to powering the movement to get kids moving. Each country’s research process to determine grades was based on the framework from the ParticipACTION Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth. Ten common indicators were compared: Overall Physical Activity, Organized Sport and Physical Activity, Active Play, Active Transportation, Sedentary Behaviours, Physical Fitness, Family and Peers, School, Community and Environment, and Government. Report Cards from each of the 49 countries, as well as the results of the global comparisons, were presented at the opening plenary of the [Movement to Move Conference](#) in Adelaide, Australia and published in the [Journal of Physical Activity and Health](#).

About ParticipACTION

ParticipACTION is a national non-profit organization that helps Canadians sit less and move more. Originally established in 1971, ParticipACTION works with its partners, which include sport, physical activity, recreation organizations, government and corporate sponsors, to make physical activity a vital part of everyday life. ParticipACTION is generously supported by the Government of Canada. For more information, please visit participaction.com.

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