

# Lifestyle Tips



Issue 10-10/12

## ADHD and getting active



Being active is an important part of every childhood, but research suggests that physical activity may be beneficial for children specifically with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD. Regular physical activity can improve strength and motor skills and it can also

help with behaviour, by improving attention.

What is ADHD? ADHD is one of the leading childhood psychiatric disorders in North America, and diagnosis is based upon symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity and/or impulsivity. Symptoms persist into adulthood, and can impact functioning in social, academic and work settings.<sup>1</sup> In the

classroom, students are normally expected to sit still, stay seated, pay attention, concentrate, be quiet and follow directions, which are all important for the learning process. Because ADHD symptoms can make it hard to do all of these things, the classroom can be challenging for some children. No single treatment is the answer for every child with ADHD. Research shows that physical activity can help



children with ADHD manage symptoms and help them succeed in school. Here are some keys to encouraging regular physical activity for children with ADHD:

**Know how much they need** – the Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines state that children ages 5-17 should get at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous-intensity physical activity each day.<sup>2</sup> Children are encouraged to participate in a variety of physical activities that are enjoyable and safe, get their bodies moving and their hearts pumping. Some examples are brisk walking, running, swimming and bicycling. Children should accumulate this activity over and above the activities of daily living, such as getting ready for school and doing the dishes.

**Make it a priority** – unfortunately, we know that only seven per cent of children and youth are active enough to meet the guidelines in Canada.<sup>3</sup> However, many kids are getting close! Adding 15 more minutes of outdoor play time at or after school, or adding a few bike rides or walks to your morning or evening routine could make all the difference. Think of every need to get somewhere as an opportunity to add some activity to your day.

Give them time and freedom to move – it may be tempting to try to quiet a child with ADHD down and encourage them to stop moving, but they, like all kids, need regular opportunities to run around, explore, play and let loose. Physical activity doesn't always need to be structured or organized—it can take many forms, from hopscotch to wall ball to hide and seek to made-up games.

**Unplug** – we live in a very sedentary society, where televisions, smartphones and video games compete for our children's attention. Making an effort to reduce screen time will give your child more time to seek out active alternatives. Plus, keeping sedentary time to a minimum itself is beneficial and can help your child do better in school and improve their self-esteem.<sup>4</sup>

Every family with children with ADHD knows that there are many different approaches to managing it. If you are working to establish more regular physical activity opportunities for your child, remember that children with ADHD often receive criticism. Be on the lookout for your child's willingness to try something new, break a sweat, or overcome an obstacle—and then praise him or her for this. Physical activity can

be an effective tool in managing symptoms of ADHD, and the side effect is having fun!

1. Gapin, JL., Labban, JD., Etnier, JL. (2011). The effects of physical activity on attention deficit hyperactive disorder symptoms: The evidence. *Preventative Medicine*. Vol. 52:S70-74.
2. Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology. (2012). Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines. Accessed from: <http://www.csep.ca/guidelines>
3. Active Healthy Kids Canada (2012). Is Active Play Extinct? The Active Healthy Kids Canada 2012 Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth. Toronto: Active Healthy Kids Canada.
4. Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology. (2012). Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines. Accessed from: <http://www.csep.ca/guidelines>