Major Initiatives Related to Childhood Obesity and Physical Inactivity in Canada

The Year in Review

Mark S. Tremblay, PhD

ABSTRACT

This commentary briefly reviews 10 significant initiatives related to childhood obesity and physical inactivity in Canada in 2007. These include: the Children's Fitness Tax Credit; CAN-PLAY research findings from the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute; resurrection of ParticipACTION; Healthy Weights for Healthy Kids report from the Standing Committee on Health; launch of the Canadian Health Measures Survey; publication of the Canadian Clinical Practice Guidelines on the Management and Prevention of Obesity in Adults and Children; Canada's food and beverage industry initiatives launch; hosting the International Conference on Physical Activity and Obesity in Children; release of the Active Healthy Kids Canada report card on physical activity for children and youth; and publication of the "advancing the future of Canada's physical activity measurement and guidelines" project. The diversity and intensity of activity addressing the childhood obesity and physical inactivity "epidemic" in Canada is encouraging and must be maintained.

MeSH terms: Motor activity; movement; obesity; child; adolescent

RÉSUMÉ

Nous passons brièvement en revue 10 grandes initiatives liées à l'obésité et à la sédentarité chez les enfants au Canada en 2007. Ce sont : le Crédit d'impôt pour la condition physique des enfants; les résultats de l'étude sur l'activité physique des jeunes au Canada (ÉAPJC) de l'Institut canadien de la recherche sur la condition physique et le mode de vie; la résurrection de ParticipACTION; le rapport Des enfants en santé : une question de poids du Comité permanent de la santé de la Chambre des communes; le lancement de l'Enquête canadienne sur les mesures de la santé; la publication des Lignes directrices canadiennes de 2006 sur la prise en charge et la prévention de l'obésité chez les adultes et les enfants; le lancement des initiatives de l'industrie des aliments et des boissons du Canada; la conférence internationale organisée par l'Université Queen's sur l'activité physique et l'obésité chez les enfants; la publication du Bulletin canadien de l'activité physique chez les jeunes de Jeunes en forme Canada; et la publication des résultats du projet « Advancing the Future of Physical Activity Measurement and Guidelines in Canada » de la Société canadienne de physiologie de l'exercice. La diversité et l'intensité des mesures de lutte contre « l'épidémie » d'obésité et de sédentarité chez les enfants au Canada sont encourageantes et doivent être soutenues.

Director, Healthy Living and Obesity Research, Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario Research Institute; Senior Scientific Advisor on Health Measurement, Statistics Canada; Chair, Active Healthy Kids Canada

Correspondence: Mark Tremblay, Statistics Canada, Room 0005, Main Building, Tunney's Pasture, Ottawa, ON K1A 0T6, Tel: 613-951-4385, Fax: 613-951-2497, E-mail: mark.tremblay@statcan.ca

Dramatic increases in childhood obesity in Canada were observed several years ago¹ and have since been confirmed on several occasions.²⁻⁴ Accurate and consistent measures of the physical activity level of Canadian children have been lacking and existing evidence indicates both increases⁵ and decreases⁶ over time. In recent years, Canada has received failing grades with respect to childhood physical activity and obesity.⁷ Clearly this issue is important and requires attention, adaptations and resources from all sectors.⁸ The purpose of this short review is to highlight 10 substantial initiatives in Canada in 2007 that demonstrate the breadth and depth of efforts directed towards this issue in Canada.

1. The 2006 federal budget proposed to create a children's fitness tax credit to cover eligible fees up to \$500 for enrolment in organized physical activity programs. Background research was completed in 2006 to provide specific guidance and recommendations related to eligible programs, special considerations for children with disabilities, implementation logistics and future considerations.⁹ In January 2007, the Canadian Government implemented a Children's Fitness Tax Credit to reimburse parents for expenses related to eligible fitness activities.
2. In February 2007, the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute released the first national direct measures data on physical activity levels of Canadian children and youth.¹⁰ These data were based on 7-day pedometer measurements from a national sample of approximately 6,000 children and youth aged 5-19 years. The results are summarized in Figure 1 and indicate that 73-91% of Canadian children do not accumulate sufficient daily steps.¹⁰⁻¹³
3. In February 2007, Canada resurrected the internationally renowned physical activity social marketing and communications organization "ParticipACTION".¹⁴ ParticipACTION has an adult brand awareness of approximately 85% in Canada.¹⁵ The federal government committed \$5 million for the first 14 months to assist the organization in getting re-established, in formulating a social marketing strate-

gy, partnering with stakeholder groups, initiating funding partnerships within the private sector and developing a longer-term business plan.

4. In March 2007, after nearly a year of study, the Standing Committee on Health of the House of Commons released its report on Healthy Weights for Healthy Kids.¹⁶ The Committee heard from over 100 witnesses and received briefs from over 60 organizations. The report includes 13 specific recommendations that the federal government should act upon to increase physical activity, improve eating behaviours, and reduce childhood obesity in Canada.
5. In March 2007, Statistics Canada launched the Canadian Health Measures Survey, the most comprehensive, nationally representative direct health measures survey ever conducted in Canada.¹⁷ Direct measures of health, including anthropometry, blood pressure, spirometry, physical activity, physical fitness, and oral health will be obtained on approximately 5,000 Canadians aged 6-79 years. Blood and urine specimens are also being collected for measures of general health, chronic disease, infectious disease, nutrition and environmental biomarkers. The survey will provide robust, population-representative data on indicators of obesity, physical activity, physical inactivity and physical fitness. These data should be available in 2009-10.
6. In April 2007, Canadian researchers published the first clinical practice guidelines on the management and prevention of obesity in adults and children.¹⁸ The 26 papers and executive summary published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* supplement are all evidence-based and include eight papers specific to children and youth. Clinical practice guidelines specific to children are provided in papers related to the classification of overweight and obesity; clinical evaluation; dietary interventions; physical activity and exercise therapy; combined diet and exercise treatment; pharmacotherapy and bariatric surgery; prevention through physical

Figure 1. Percentage of Canadian children aged 5-19 years meeting various physical activity guidelines

CPA Guide = Canada's Physical Activity Guide for Children and Youth¹¹ (16,500 steps per day); Epstein¹² (15,000 steps per day); Tudor-Locke et al.¹³ (12,000 and 15,000 steps per day for 6-12 year-old girls and boys, respectively). Results are based on the Canadian Physical Activity Levels Among Youth (CANPLAY) study.¹⁰

activity; and prevention through nutrition.

7. In April 2007, Canada's food and beverage industry announced three significant initiatives affecting food advertising and marketing directed to children <12 years.¹⁹ The initiative is a partnership between the Food and Consumer Products of Canada, Concerned Children's Advertisers and Advertising Standards Canada and includes a social marketing program called "Long Live Kids",²⁰ the Canadian children's food and beverage advertising initiative²¹ and a strengthening of the framework for regulating advertising to children.²²
8. Canada hosted the International Conference on Physical Activity and Obesity in Children in Toronto on June 24-27, 2007 with nearly 1,000 delegates from around the world. The short-term goal of the conference was to assimilate, interpret and share the evidence with key stakeholders, to develop recommendations concerning effective physical activity policies and programs at the community level to address obesity in children and youth. The long-term aim of the conference

is to inform the development of a scientifically based community strategy to reduce the incidence of childhood and youth obesity through increased sport and physical activity participation.²³

9. On June 27, 2007, Active Healthy Kids Canada released the third Annual Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth.²⁴ The Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card provides comprehensive, evidence-informed assessments of the "state of the nation" with respect to physical activity for Canadian children and youth. The preparation and distribution of the report card is meant to serve as an accountability index for all Canadians, a surveillance mechanism, an advocacy tool for physical activity leaders and organizations, a policy driver and a process for identifying research and surveillance needs. The Report Card indicated substantial room for improvement but also provided recommendations for action to "improve the grade".
10. In November 2006, the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology, in partnership with the Public Health

Agency of Canada, the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch of Health Canada, and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research initiated a project titled "Advancing the Future of Canada's Physical Activity Measurement and Guidelines".²⁵ The project involved an expert think tank, a research retreat, and the preparation of 14 scientific background papers designed to inform Canada's physical activity guides,¹¹ including papers specifically addressing physical activity guidelines and measurement concerns for pre-school children, and school-aged children and youth. The papers are scheduled to be published in both official languages in a combined issue of the *Canadian Journal of Public Health* and *Applied Physiology, Nutrition and Metabolism* in November 2007.

The diversity and intensity of activity surrounding the childhood obesity and inactivity "epidemic" in Canada is encouraging (and not limited to the sample of initiatives summarized here). To achieve success and have a positive influence on the health of Canadian children and the environments where they live, learn, and play, interventions and policy changes will need to be developed, implemented, monitored and evaluated; recommendations will need to be acted upon; ongoing research and surveillance will be required; and clinical practice will require adaptations. All sectors (governments, industry, health care, media, communities, schools, and families) must participate in an aggressive, informed and sustained movement to recalibrate the behaviours of Canadian children to achieve sustained and pervasive healthy living outcomes. Going forward, it will be important to assess the impact and implementation of

the programs listed in this brief review while also holding various sectors and agencies accountable for the implementation of existing and future recommendations for action.

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