

LONG LIVE KIDS: HELPING OUR CHILDREN TO EAT SMART, MOVE MORE AND BE MEDIA WISE

Linda Millar | Concerned Children's Advertisers

As teachers, we always seem to be adding something new to an already overcrowded curriculum. When asked if we should be concerned about childhood overweight and obesity in our classrooms, we must once again ask ourselves, "Is this something that I really need to do?" The answer is simple. Yes.

The Facts

According to the 2004 Canadian Community Health Survey, 26% of our Canadian children and adolescents are overweight or obese. Sadly, without intervention, up to 80% of these children may remain overweight or obese into adulthood. Children who are overweight or obese are at greater risk for a number of preventable, chronic diseases, such as:

- Hypertension or high blood pressure;
- Coronary heart disease;
- Type 2 diabetes;
- Stroke;
- Sleep apnea and other breathing problems;
- Certain cancers, including breast, colon and endometrial cancer; and
- Mental health problems, including low self-esteem and depression.

Research from the Children's Lifestyle and School Performance Study, Halifax, Nova Scotia, suggests that school attendance, school performance, attention span, fatigue and hyperactivity are all affected by a child's dietary intake and level of physical activity.¹

How are We Doing?

For the fourth consecutive year, Active Healthy Kids Canada gave Canada an overall "D" grade reflecting insufficient appropriate physical activity opportunities and programs available to the majority of Canadian children and youth. The key findings in this study, released in May 2008, are as follows:

- 90% of Canadian children and youth are not meeting the guidelines set forth by Canada's Physical Activity Guides for Children and Youth as determined by objective measures (CFLRI).²



- Approximately half of the children and youth surveyed in the various studies self-reported that they are physically active, contradicting the first point above (HBSC, NBSW Survey, TTFM Survey).³
- Physical activity levels drop off in the teenage years. In the NBSW Survey, more students in Grades 6-8 (58%) reported being active when compared to students in Grades 9-12 (47%).⁴
- Girls are less active than boys. In the TTFM Survey, 50% of boys and only 36% of girls reported meeting a target of 90 minutes of physical activity on most days of the week. Fifty-nine percent of boys and 45% of girls reported that they were active in the NBSW Survey.⁵
- Low socioeconomic status (SES) of the family is associated with lower physical activity levels (HBSC Survey).⁶

Schools must not be part of this obesogenic environment. They need to be a part of the solution to help our kids live long and healthy lives.

What are the Solutions?

Childhood overweight and obesity is an extremely complex issue, requiring cooperative and collaborative solutions. Research indicates that no one sector is solely to blame. All sectors of society must be involved in the solutions; the home, the school and the community each play a crucial role in determining the success of any strategies.

³ Ibid.

⁴ It's Time to Unplug Our Kids: Canada's Report Card on Physical Activity for Children & Youth, Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2008.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

¹ Children's Lifestyle and School Performance Study, Dalhousie University, Faculty of Medicine, 2006.

² It's Time to Unplug Our Kids: Canada's Report Card on Physical Activity for Children & Youth, Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2008.

Children know they need to have healthy diets. They also know that they should be active but they seem to have difficulty connecting these two ideas. It's difficult for them to know when and how much to eat and move, and how to make small changes that will reap huge benefits for their health both now and in the future.

Concerned Children's Advertisers, in consultation with leading experts in the field of children who are overweight and/or obese, has identified three "pillars" that need to be addressed if we are to affect positive change in the health of our children. These pillars are physical activity, healthy eating, and media literacy.

What is Long Live Kids?

Concerned Children's Advertisers has worked with issue experts to create and deliver a national, bilingual, solution-oriented program that helps children to "eat smart, move more and be media wise." Using the collective resources made possible by this non-profit consortium of government agencies, industry, advertising agencies, production houses, education, parent and community organizations, CCA has developed a multi-year social marketing and educational campaign.

Wrapped around the three public service messages produced by CCA, educators are provided with comprehensive lesson plans for K-8 that align with provincial curriculum guidelines and integrate across the curriculum. Additionally, there is a national bilingual program for parents and communities that parallels the classroom curriculum and has tips, tools and strategies that help adults promote and maintain healthy, active living with their families and communities.

These materials, endorsed by leading educational and parent organizations, including the Canadian Teacher's Federation, the Canadian Association of Principals and the Canadian Home and School Federation, can be downloaded free of charge by visiting the Concerned Children's Advertiser's Web site at www.cca-kids.ca.

A Simple Equation

Although there is nothing simple about childhood overweight and obesity, there is a relatively straightforward way to explain to children the importance of balancing what they eat with how they move. If children are taught to think of their "Energy In" as the food they eat and "Energy Out" as their physical activity, they can understand that their bodies work something like a teeter-totter. It is their job to keep the balance even on both sides.

By following *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating* and learning what, how much and how often they should eat, children can begin making small changes to their diet now that can affect their health now and in the future. Health Canada also offers a *Physical Activity Guide for Children and Youth* that provides valuable

information on the amount, type and frequency of movement required to nurture healthy growth.

Translated *Canada's Food Guide* Now Available

Eating Well with *Canada's Food Guide* has been translated into 10 different languages: Arabic, Chinese, Farsi (Persian), Korean, Punjabi, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog, Tamil and Urdu.

An educator's version of the *Canada's Food Guide for Healthy Eating* and *Canada's Physical Activity Guide for Children and Youth* can be accessed online at www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/alt_formats/hpfb-dgpsa/pdf/pubs/res-educat-eng.pdf and www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/pau-uap/paguide/index.html, respectively.

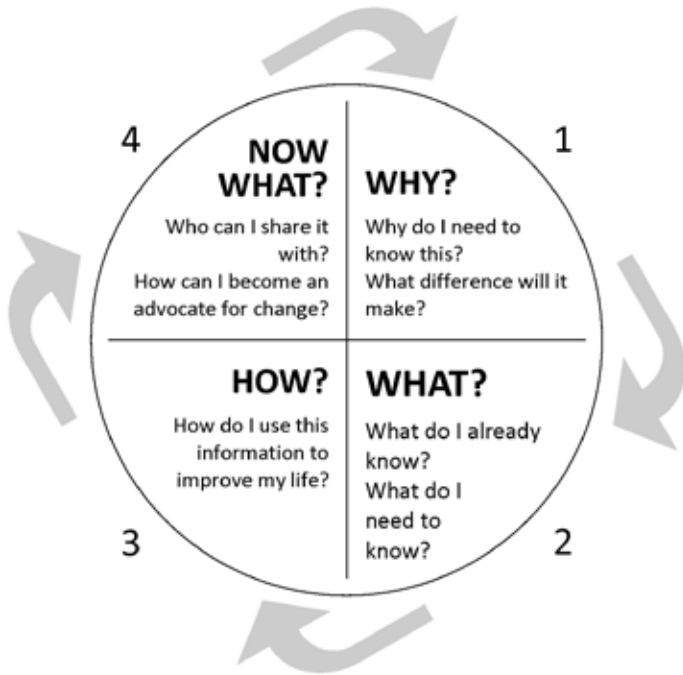
Why Media Literacy?

You may be wondering what media literacy has to do with childhood overweight and obesity. The truth is, our kids live in a media-rich environment and what they see in magazines, on-line, on television or in movies doesn't always portray the healthiest of images. Once children learn to deconstruct advertisements and other media, they learn the first and most important principle of media literacy – all media has been constructed or created by a group of specialists, directed at a particular group for a particular reason. Thanks to special effects, airbrushing and other technological advancements, often young and beautiful bodies are not quite as they appear! Add to that the amount of leisure time that our kids spend surfing the net, in chat rooms, on the phone, playing hand-held video games, watching TV and plugged into their tunes and it is no surprise that they are short-changing their bodies in the physical activity department.

By teaching children to balance their leisure time between active and passive pursuits, we are encouraging them to develop healthy habits that can last a lifetime. Concerned Children's Advertisers *Long Live Kids* program recognizes the importance of teaching our children to "watch carefully, think critically and navigate safely" when dealing with all media. The program contains lessons that teach the principles of media literacy as well as a section entitled *Advertising 101* that helps educators and parents work with children to provide them with the tools to be critical viewers and critical consumers of advertising.

CCA's Wheel of Learning

We go to University and take teacher training in an effort to prepare us for how to best reach children and how to make a positive impact on their lives. Then we get into the classroom and do whatever it takes to be the best teachers we can be. Concerned Children's Advertisers' Wheel of Learning provides educators with a checklist that can be a helpful teaching tool for all subject areas.



Next Steps

First, ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I doing all that I can to help my students live active, healthy lives?
- Am I modeling healthy behaviours with my students?
- Do I encourage small daily improvements in physical activity and healthy eating and celebrate their successes?
- Do I teach media literacy skills and encourage my students to balance their leisure time between active and passive pursuits?

Start small and think big. Download the lesson plans, send home the parent tips, take your students for a walk, host a Food Fair, invite a local community organization to share what's going on in the community, ask a dietitian to talk to your students, start an "Active Play Time Challenge" – dance, jump, skip, eat, play and live!

About the Author

Linda Millar is a retired educator from the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board. Having been in the prevention field for over 25 years, Linda presently works as an educational consultant for Concerned Children's Advertisers. To learn more about Concerned Children's Advertisers and their variety of programs and resources, check out our Web site at www.cca-kids.ca.

If we consider a child's learning process as a circle, we can divide it into four quadrants and take it step by step.

- Quadrant One provides opportunities for children to buy into the subject matter by connecting it with their own lives and experiences.
- Quadrant Two is where we provide children with current, accurate, age appropriate information on any given topic.
- Quadrant Three allows the students to take this new information and use it in a variety of fun and engaging ways. This is where they test it out to see if it really does make a difference in the way they live.
- Quadrant Four is probably the most important part. This is where the students take the new information, use the skills they have learned and then share it with others. They host a knowledge fair, put on an assembly, start a noon hour club or activity, peer teach younger students – the possibilities are endless. At this stage, our students are empowered to become part of the solutions themselves. Related to the issue of childhood overweight and obesity, this is where they become advocates for healthy, active living and truly affect change in themselves and others. This is where we can make the difference and encourage them to do the same.

