

Raising Heart Healthy Kids...Parents Set A great Example

By Liz Fleming

The apple, they say, doesn't fall far from the tree.

Parents who are healthy and active tend to produce like-minded children...and those who are inactive, who smoke or who eat poorly, tend to produce children who follow in those same unhealthy footsteps.

The truly terrifying truth is that we may be raising the first generation of children who won't outlive their parents.

With childhood obesity approaching epidemic rates and activity levels dropping to all-time lows, our children are in danger of shortened lifespans and a future filled with illness...unless we take a stand. It's time for parents to make a commitment to protecting our children's futures by making healthy changes today...for all members of the family.

Dr. Stafford Dobbin, the local family physician who founded Heart Niagara in 1978 and has since devoted himself to alerting families to the need for heart healthy activity and diet, is passionate about the need to get families moving.

"Studies show that children raised in families where smoking is labeled by parents as a disgusting and dangerous habit tend not to smoke. Likewise, children raised in households where parents value healthy activity tend to think sports are a good idea. It's all about setting examples."

In a world ruled by television, computers and video games, parents have to make powerful decisions to encourage daily physical play and exercise.

"Children are born to take a natural joy in movement...in running and jumping," says Dr. Dobbin. "Our job is to protect and preserve that joy."

Unfortunately, the organized sports in which so many parents eagerly enroll children can often discourage rather than encourage that natural joy in being active.

"Unless children are particularly athletic, they may lose their enthusiasm for participation as they get older and the competition becomes more serious," says Dr. Dobbin.

Overeager parents, living out their own dreams of sporting glory, can accidentally contribute to the problem by pressuring children to perform.

Kids quickly decide that only those who are star players are valued and their interest dies.

"Children need more than organized sport to keep them active," says Dr.

Dobbin. "They need to run and play with their friends after school...to ride

their bikes...to kick a soccer ball around a field...to run simply for the joy of running.”

How can parents get their children to be more active? The first step is to set a healthy example. Parents who go for an after dinner walk and invite their children to come along are taking important steps towards family fitness. The next strides may be harder to achieve, but they're essential. Parents have to take a firm stand on computer, television and video game time and set clear expectations – at least thirty to sixty minutes of heart healthy activity every day. After school recreation is to take place outside or in a gym, not in front of a screen of any kind.

It must be noted that it's a very rare child who'll happily head outside to play on his own. What's needed is the kind of playground gang we all grew up with...in the days before there was much worth watching on television and our mothers didn't want to see us inside until the street lights came on each evening. If your neighborhood doesn't have an outside play mentality, build one. There's strength in numbers, so consider approaching other parents to encourage a united stand on turning off the electronics and revving up the outdoor play. Because safety is an important issue, take turns being the 'park parent' and escort the gang to the park for a game of pickup baseball, hockey or touch football. If the children are small, you won't have to organize a thing. Slides and swings can keep little ones happy for hours. The best news of all? While you're encouraging your children to be active and healthy, you'll be doing yourself a fitness favor at the same time!

Need some ideas for activities? Check out the Families on the Move website at www.healthylivingniagara.com How about healthy eating? Visit www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index_e.html