

FRONT PORCH PERSPECTIVE: Children and physical activity

By Stephen Somerville

As a society, we have to be generally concerned about children's lack of physical activity and the dietary challenges that many have. Before school let out for the summer recess, my son brought home a blue folder that caught my eye. Inside the folder was a section entitled, 'Eating healthy with Canada's food groups.'

After reading the materials, my rhetorical question is this: since Ryan seems to know all about the food groups, why does he consistently persist in stating that ice cream and Pringles chips are one of the basic food groups and should therefore be consumed on a daily basis?

I was walking by Dr. G Williams Secondary School in late May and what I saw brought back some memories.

I saw what looked like a bunch of Grade Nine boys running around the track. They were all wearing school issue uniforms and the teacher had his stop watch and was timing the kids as they came around the track.

Some of the children finished strongly while others had a great deal of difficulty and a few of the students had stopped running and were simply walking.

Not much different than when I did the same thing thirty-odd years ago.

But it got me thinking about something else; something that I don't see enough of now.

I don't see any kids playing street hockey or any kids getting together to play baseball or football in the park anymore.

I recall playing street hockey from morning until night with my buddies. We would even take on other 'streets' where I grew up.

First team to twenty was usually considered the winner.

Maybe it takes too much effort to get everyone together today or maybe kids just like to play in their leagues and want their free time to do other things.

The problem is that this 'free time' in a great deal of cases leads to children playing video games on the computer for countless hours.

I am probably just as guilty as the next guy in that I sometimes let my son play more of these games than I should, but he is an active boy who likes playing soccer, golf, skiing and other sports.

I bought a portable basketball hoop a while back for the driveway with the intention of introducing Ryan to the game. I have been very pleasantly surprised that in addition to my son, both of my nephews will join him outside shooting baskets, although the shoot around usually reverts at some point to an NHL type game including body checks!

I digress.

It does seem to me that there are more young couch potatoes today than when I was growing up.

And the federal government has tried to do something about it over the years although I don't think enough.

According to Wikipedia, ParticipACTION is a national non-profit organization, originally launched as a Canadian government program in the 1970s, to promote healthy living and physical fitness. It shut down due to financial cutbacks in 2001, but was revived on February 19, 2007 with a grant of \$5 million from the Federal Government.

ParticipACTION is well known for its television public service announcements and segments such as a 1973 commercial, comparing the health of a 30-year-old Canadian to a 60-year-old Swede, which started a national discussion on the state of physical education in Canada.

If you are of my vintage, then you may recall one of the programs associated with ParticipACTION - the 'Awards of Excellence'.

I believe the government was doing this program in concert with Montreal hosting the 1976 Olympics.

The physical fitness program consisted of a number of activities in which a student would be graded against an aged adjusted standard. I can't recall all of the activities that were measured, but I do remember the shuttle run, sit ups and the dreaded flexed arm hang.

If you were in the top category for each category, then you were awarded the Gold 'Award of Excellence' patch. There was a Silver and Bronze level as well.

I still have my patches somewhere in the house.

I don't know why the program was stopped; they should resurrect it in concert with a new healthy lifestyle advertising program have a funny celebrity like Martin Short or Jim Carrey as the spokesman with some funny television commercials. Or even go back to comparing our health against that 60-year-old Swede.

Anything that can be used to encourage and promote healthy and active lifestyles for our children needs to be undertaken.

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