

If you've boosted your veggies, get ready to power down your phones with Healthy Kids Challenge



By Brock Weir

A couple of summers ago, Jen Atkinson trekked out for a remote camping trip.

So far, so good, right?

The remote location, however, meant there was no cell service and, therefore, no texts, no social media and, most importantly, no way to get in touch with anybody.

"I was quite upset," says Atkinson, Managing Director of Windfall Ecology Centre, "and it took me about 20 minutes to realise this is an opportunity: I don't need to be on my cell phone, I can look at the view around me, check it out and be very present."

This fall, Ms. Atkinson and Windfall, the local organizers of the Healthy Kids Community Challenge will be encouraging Aurora kids and their families to seize these opportunities and step away from their screen time.

Kids reading this, along with parents of kids who aren't looking forward to putting up a fight, probably just let out an involuntary shudder, but look at it this way: if you've gone through the first three phases of the Healthy Kids Community Challenge of Run, Jump, Play Everyday, learning the importance of water, and "Choosing to Boost Veggies and Fruit," this should be a piece of cake. Well, maybe not cake.

The Healthy Kids Community Challenge is a Province-wide program involving 45 Ontario communities working on similar activities to encourage active living, healthy eating and generally improved lifestyles.

Themes are set by Public Health Ontario, which recently announced they were expanding the program by up to eight more months, making room to an as-yet-unnamed phase focusing on screen time.

"Turning off the TV, getting away from the screen and television and computers will really help increase physical activity," says Ms. Atkinson. "When kids are active, when families are active, there is better social time, they have more physical activity, they are going to sleep better, they're going to learn better, they're going to think better. Turning the TV off and getting people outside is all about getting up off the couch and outside as well."

"When I was growing up as a kid, story time was a really big thing in my family. We will be introducing things they can do together, things like story time, story of the day, going for an evening walk, rather than sitting in front of the TV in a sedentary position. Having that time before sleep [without screen time] is really important in preparing for a good sleep. When you're in front of a television or game right before bed, your brain is very stimulated and not giving you that restful introduction to a good sleep. Having a different activity, some downtime, is really important."

As Ms. Atkinson spoke to The Auroran, she was very conscious of the fact her phone was in her pocket. It goes with her all the time, including on hikes, but, when in the great outdoors, she makes a point of limiting access, including turning off notifications.

When she's ready to sleep, she makes sure her phone is put away, far removed from the bed.

"A lot of us will go to bed with the screen, the phone or the computer right next to us," she says. "There is some science behind how it might disrupt your sleep, but knowing that you're constantly connected all the time and someone is always needing you and

wanting you is a bit of a stress on its own. Put it aside, put it down, use it as a good tool, but being connected 24/7 is a challenge. When you're constantly on your iPhone you miss the small moments.?