

Trimmer Kids

How to keep your little ones from being too big

DIANE PETERS

When Julia Wyncoll's eldest daughter was two years old and sat watching a video, the normally energetic and curious child went nearly comatose. The Toronto mom realized then that TV and kids don't mix and decided to limit her family's screen time.

Now, her kids are eight, five and two and are far from having the weight problems that plague a growing number of Canadian youngsters. Good genes help, says Julia, but so do a balanced diet, lots of time outside and a turned-off TV in the basement. Like Julia, you've probably developed some techniques for keeping your children trim and healthy. With 28% of Canadian kids overweight, and the dark days of winter looming, you'll need all the creative ideas you can get.

KEEP MOVING

Try to get your kids to meet Health Canada's current recommendation of 90 minutes of physical activity a day. Add a few minutes a day to the time they spend being active now. Look to the outdoors. "Kids like to be outdoors, so we need to provide them with opportunities to be active outside," says Randy Calvert, an exercise physiologist at McMaster Children's Hospital in Hamilton, Ont. Put up a basketball hoop in your driveway and get some used skates and a toboggan for winter.

Plan regular times in the week to get outside together. Go for a hike or take some sports equipment to the park. "Bring a bunch of stuff and play whatever you want when

you get there," suggests Geoff Ball, director of the Pediatric Centre for Weight and Health at Stollery Children's Hospital in Edmonton. Unstructured playtime motivates young kids to be active. Teens, however, might prefer organized games, particularly if you let them invite their friends.

FEED THEM WELL

"Find time to eat together as a family," says Ball, as studies show that everyone eats better and communicates more at sit-down meals. Julia, who is a dancer and Pilates instructor, tosses the vegetables on the table while she's cooking and lets her hungry kids wolf down their carrots and broccoli first. At her house, fruit and yogourt are the everyday desserts; cookies come out only on weekends.

If you feel your kids are eating too much, use smaller plates and decrease the space devoted to protein and starch, while upping the real estate occupied by green and yellow vegetables (we don't mean mashed potatoes). Calvert warns against buying foods labelled "low fat" since they are rarely lower in calories and often just replace fat with starch and sugar. Water down juices (100% pure fruit juice has a

lot of sugar and calories) or serve whole fruits more often. Limit sugary soft drinks.

If evening events — even sports — make it hard to have sit-down suppers, set aside time to make healthy sandwiches to eat on the run. When you dine out, decide in advance as a family on a healthy restaurant. "Be clear," says Ball. "Before you go out, say, 'This is what we're going to have or not have. Don't argue in front of the menu.'" Set rules for ordering high-calorie foods such as french fries and milkshakes. Avoid using fast food and treats such as ice cream as rewards for good marks and good behaviour. Offer special activities and outings instead.

BE A MODEL

Always follow your own advice. Kids take note when a parent fills her plate with healthy greens, takes up jogging and runs errands on foot. Also, tell your kids how great it is to be healthy — not thin but healthy. "I've always tried to teach my kids about the link between eating well, being active and loving your body," says Julia. "If you're sitting down all the time, how can you enjoy your body?" 

