



**How much
exercise
do children
need to
stay fit? ▶**

In general, children need at least 30 minutes of vigorous physical activity every day. Each session should include a cardiovascular component to sufficiently increase a child's heart rate well above resting conditions. Even though most cardiovascular diseases are considered to be adult illnesses, fatty deposits have been detected in the arteries of children as young as three years of age, and high blood pressure exists in about five per cent of children. Aerobic exercise can make the heart pump more efficiently and reduces the risk of cardiovascular diseases.

Dr. Michel Portmann, a professor in the Département de Kinanthropologie, Université du Québec à Montréal, and coach of 1996 Olympic gold medallist Bruny Surin, says that children don't have to exercise diligently when they are young. Activities such as playing on monkey bars, running, and skipping every day will keep them fit. Parents and coaches can judge whether children are fit by watching them in play, noting their ability to move with energy. A child who tires easily or does not seem to have the energy needed to play actively may need more exercise.

Unfortunately, children are three to four times less active than they were 40 years ago. A recent study indicates that almost 40 per cent of five- to eight-year-old children in North America can be classified as obese. Obesity rates in Canadian children have increased by 50 per cent over the past 15 years. The 1988 *Campbell's Survey on Well-Being in Canada* reported that only 10 per cent of Canadian youth are active intensely enough to receive the health benefits associated with regular physical activity.

One cause of this phenomenon is the unacceptable decline in the physical education programs of most Canadian schools. The Canadian Institute of Child Health reports that the average Canadian child only takes physical education twice a week and a mere 12 per cent of children are receiving daily physical education. This decline in physical activity means that fewer children will enjoy the improved health that comes from daily exercise.

As children grow older, their lives become more sedentary. Many take the bus or are driven to school where they sit behind a desk all day. In the evening, they watch TV or play computer games. On average, the Canadian child and youth watches 26 hours of television per week. This is in addition to the 25 to 30 hours they spend sitting in school.