

## Pediatric Focus

### TIPPING THE BALANCE: QUESTIONS TO PROMOTE A CHILD'S HEALTHY DECISION-MAKING REGARDING HIS/HER PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND NUTRITION

As we gain a greater understanding about the factors that influence illness prevention, focus is being placed on the importance of a healthy lifestyle. In particular, healthy eating patterns and physical activity can be instrumental in the prevention of obesity, diabetes, and other serious medical problems. Sadly, it has been predicted that the lifestyles of Canadian children aged 9 to 12 years could put them at risk for developing heart disease and other serious medical problems as early as in their 30s.<sup>1</sup> The Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute's 2000 Physical Activity Monitor<sup>2</sup> reported that over half of Canadian children and youth, aged 5 to 17 years, are not active enough to meet the optimal standards for healthy development. A cross-national survey by the World Health Organization<sup>3</sup> reported that 25% of 15-year old Canadian girls (32% of boys) admitted to eating candy or chocolate bars once a day or more.

Ideally, illness prevention through lifestyle modification should begin in childhood. Yet little is understood about how children choose healthy behaviours over unhealthy ones. In adults, behavioural health experts have been developing techniques directed at altering Decisional Balance to improve health behaviours. Decisional Balance, a construct from Prochaska's Transtheoretical Model,<sup>4</sup> has been successfully applied to numerous adult health behaviours. It measures a person's relative balance of reasons for and reasons against performing a particular health behaviour. Under the supervision of Dr. Michael Vallis from the QEII Health Sciences Centre, I have recently developed a new Decisional Balance measure for children by conducting focus groups, getting written feedback from parents, doing an extensive literature review on the determinants of physical activity and nutrition in children and youth, and seeking expert advice. Our goal in this research program is to evaluate if Decisional Balance can predict activity level and healthy eating in children as young as 8 years.

If you are trying to promote physical activity and healthy eating in children, the Decisional Balance concept may be helpful to you. The basic principle is that if the reasons to perform the healthy behaviour outweigh the reasons against, the behaviour is more

likely to be performed. Here are some suggestions to help you tip the balance:

#### Assess the child's reasons for choosing sedentary or physical activities.

For example, ask:

- "What do you like about your favourite physical activities?" (pro for healthy behaviour)
  - "The competition?"
  - "Being part of a group?"
  - "The excitement you feel?"
  - "So others think of you as 'an athlete'?"
- "What do you like about your favourite sedentary activities?" (pro for unhealthy behaviour)
  - "They are easier for you to do?"
  - "They help you relax?"
  - "You find them more fun?"
  - "Getting to chat with others (e.g., ICQ)?"
- "What bothers you about choosing some physical activities?" (con for healthy behaviour)
  - "Playing rough?"
  - "Getting too hot and sweaty?"
  - "Too difficult?"
  - "Not feeling welcome?"
  - "Because you cannot do them whenever you want?"
  - "Not having the equipment, space, or money you need?"

#### Assess the child's reasons for choosing energy-dense or nutrient-dense foods.

For example, ask:

- "What do you like about your favourite nutritious foods?" (pro for healthy eating)
  - "Does not feel heavy in your stomach?"
  - "Will not make you gain as much weight?"
  - "Fill you up better?"
  - "Are healthier?"
  - "They look better (e.g., the colours)?"
- "What do you like about your favourite treat foods?" (pro for unhealthy eating)
  - "Are comforting to eat?"
  - "Pass the time when you are bored?"
  - "Often around or offered at home?"
  - "Give you instant energy?"
  - "Because your friends eat them?"
- "What bothers you about choosing some nutritious foods?" (con for healthy eating)
  - "They are not available at school (e.g., vending machines or cafeteria)?"
  - "Difficult to make / pack?"
  - "They go stale or bad?"
  - "Cost more?"

Initiate an open, supportive discussion between family members.

For example:

- **Reinforce** the family's current reasons for doing physical activity or choosing healthy (nutrient-dense) foods.
- Help the family **brainstorm** about more pros/ benefits of healthy choices (e.g., health benefits, higher energy levels, developing friendships).
- **Reassure** that their difficulties with behavioural change are normal and understandable (e.g., discuss the environmental and cultural influences that make the cost of unhealthy choices so low such as technical advances to decrease energy expenditure and the availability of fast food restaurants<sup>5</sup>).
- Send a **balanced, realistic message** that all activities and foods can be part of healthy living and that small changes are beneficial.
- Help the family **problem solve** to reduce the benefits of choosing sedentary activities and calorie-dense foods and to facilitate choosing physical activity and nutrient-dense foods. For example, collaborate with the family to find solutions such as:
  - Scheduling times to visit a favourite skateboarding park after school with friends.
  - Making a plan to increase the variety of healthy snack foods available at home before grocery shopping.
  - Finding alternative ways to relax, have fun, or cure boredom.

Assessing the family's Decisional Balance is an important first step when helping a child change his/her health behaviour. This allows the family to process the relevant and meaningful pros and cons of their choices and to feel better about having difficulties with change. Asking these questions requires you to talk with families about the day-to-day details of their lives and to think creatively when helping them problem solve around barriers. These issues may seem like common sense, but most families have not participated in this type of discussion. As the family begins to experiment with a new behaviour, it is important for them to frequently process the reasons for doing what they do or eating what they eat. Initiating and modelling this type of supportive, open dialogue can help foster continued communication when they leave your office and help families make **the healthy, more desirable choice**.

This fall, we will be conducting a cross-sectional research study with children and youth in grades 3, 7, and 11 within the Halifax Regional School District to evaluate the association between Decisional Balance and child health behaviour using accelerometers and food frequency questionnaires. Parents serve as role models

for their children and are highly involved in their children's lifestyle choices; especially, when they are young. Little is understood about the role that the child's beliefs, as opposed to the parent's beliefs, play in healthy behaviour across the developmental span. Therefore, we will also examine how parents perceive their child's activity and nutrition in its association with their child's health behaviour to help us better influence our decisions about optimal treatment. Stay tuned for these results in an upcoming newsletter!\*

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#### References:

1. The Heart and Stroke Foundation's Annual Report Card on Canadian's Health; 2002.
2. Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute website ([www.cflri.ca](http://www.cflri.ca)).
3. King A, Wold B, Tudor-Smith C, et al. *The Health of Youth: A Cross-National Survey*. World Health Organization Regional Series: European Series, No.69. Printed in Canada; 1997.
4. Prochaska JO, Velicer WF, Rossi JS, et al. Stages of change and decisional balance for 12 problem behaviors. *Health Psychology*. 1994;13(1):39-46.
5. Epstein LH. Behavioral economics of obesity: food intake and energy expenditure. In Bickel WK, Vuchinich RE, eds. *Reframing health behaviour change with behavioural economics*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 2000.

#### Pedometers – What You Need to Know

- **How they're used.** Clip onto a belt around the waist to measure hip swings.
- **What they do.** Count steps taken.
- **Additional features.** Distance calculation, calorie calculation, clock, timer, alarm, finger pulse monitor, music, talking.
- **Where to buy.** Local sports, electronics, or department stores; the Internet (most pedometers sold online state prices in American dollars).
- **Cost.** \$15 to \$40

An average pedometer will cost about \$20 and will track steps as well as calculate distance and calories (the basics for most people wanting to increase walking). Extra features like timers and pulse monitors may be more useful to runners. Of course, like anything else, the choice of a specific pedometer is personal. For more information on pedometers and the ten thousand steps program, check out the following web sites:

- [www.bodytronics.com](http://www.bodytronics.com)
- [www.digiwalker.com](http://www.digiwalker.com)