

# Sedentary Behaviors and Youth



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

**Active Living Research**

Using Evidence to Prevent Childhood Obesity and Create Active Communities

National guidelines recommend at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity every day for children and teens, but the majority of young people do not meet that goal. Spending excessive time engaging in sedentary behaviors, such as watching TV, playing video games, and other screen time activities, contributes to the problem. Moreover, youth who are sedentary have greater fat mass, higher body mass index (BMI), and greater risk of being overweight or obese, regardless of how much physical activity they get when not being sedentary. Efforts to reverse the nation's childhood obesity epidemic should include a focus on reducing kids' sedentary time, especially time spent viewing TV.

## THE EVIDENCE

- Sedentary behavior, primarily assessed as time spent viewing TV, increases risk for overweight and obesity in childhood and adolescence.
- Children and adolescents spend an average of 6 and 8 hours per day, respectively, in sedentary behaviors, both during and outside of school.
- The amount of time children and adolescents spend daily in sedentary activities, and the percentage of youths engaging in excessive sedentary time, have both increased in recent years. A dramatic increase in screen time, which includes new ways to consume TV content, appears to be driving the increase in kids' sedentary time.
- African American children report spending more time in sedentary behaviors than do White children, and children from lower-income families report more sedentary time than children from more affluent families, but those differences are not based on objective measures.
- Children who do not have limits on screen time, and children who live in homes with multiple TVs and/or TVs in bedrooms, are at greater risk for sedentary behavior.

## CONCLUSIONS

More and more young people are spending an excessive amount of time in sedentary behaviors. On average, children and teens spend 6 to 8 hours per day watching TV, playing video games, and using computers. Relatively strong evidence links TV viewing with obesity, as well as increased fat mass, higher BMI, and decreased academic achievement. Strategies for reducing the amount of time young people spend in sedentary behaviors include targeted interventions and policies that support walking, biking, and active play in schools and communities.



Schools are the most common setting for programs that help children learn about the need to reduce time spent watching TV at home, but these typically do not specify which physical activities should replace sedentary time. Electronic TV monitoring devices are the most effective way to limit children's TV time at home, but little is known about that the best ways to limit TV time in other settings (i.e., in preschool, in school, or during car travel).

Neighborhoods, parks, and schools can help children and their families be more active and reduce sedentary time by providing safe, appealing, and convenient places to walk, bike, and play. For example, children are more physically active when they live in neighborhoods perceived as being free of crime, and that have sidewalks and destinations, such as parks, schools, and shops, within walking distance. Being able to walk or bike to school can help counteract sedentary time spent riding in a car and contribute up to 26 percent of a child's daily recommended physical activity. Parks in particular encourage physical activity, especially when they are safe, and contain trails and playgrounds. Access to programs and facilities, including ball fields and schoolyards, after school hours can also help kids be more physically active.

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This issue brief is based on a research review written by Deborah Lou, Ph.D., during her time with Active Living Research. Active Living Research is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, with direction and technical assistance provided by the University of California, San Diego.

The full research review, which includes citations, is available at <http://activelivingresearch.org/sedentary-behaviors-and-youth-current-trends-and-impact-health>