

**HEALTHY MINDS**  
**A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS**  
**Elliott B. Sewell, MAE, LPCC, NCC**

**Couch Potatoes Start Young**



Children are getting less and less exercise as they get older, to their great detriment. The sedentary lifestyle will negatively affect them for the rest of their lives. Research reported in the Journal of the American Medical Association, studying over 1000 children between 9 and 15, done over time, showed that nine-year-olds who get abundant physical activity lose interest or lose the opportunity for exercise by the time they reach fifteen years of age.

The decline worked out to a loss of 38 minutes per day each year. At age nine the average time for moderate to energetic exercise was about 3 hours, but by age 15 it dropped to less than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an hour – only one fourth as much. This decline is not only during the week but on weekends as well. These figures point out a dangerous trend for the health of our population and our nation.

More research is being done as to the reasons for this decline. However, there is a lot of informed speculation as to why physical activity severely declines by the time children enter their teens.

Physical education has been eliminated or reduced in many of our schools. In some parts of our country the dangers of crime make the outdoors less safe for children who are not supervised. As children become older their interests turn towards more passive activities like television, computers, and listening to music. People drive short distances when they can walk

The research I mentioned above, done by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's Study of Early Childhood and Youth Development was carried out by outfitting the children with devices, called accelerometers, which measured physical activities. At age nine the daily level was about 191 minutes a day for boys and 173 for girls. At age 15 the times had dwindled to 58 minutes for boys and 39 for girls

The exercise standard set of the USDA for 15 year-olds of 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise per day was met by only 31% of children during the week and only 17% on weekends. Figures were worse as family incomes were reduced or for those with the highest body mass index (obese).

Declines were faster in the Midwest and South, than in the Northeast and West – significant but not very different.

It is essential to encourage your children to get out and play. You can take them hiking or swimming, and the exercise will do you good as well. I believe that TV is the worst

culprit and the most destructive and addictive activity available, for the body and for the mind.

For those of you with a sense of adventure in attempting something new, I urge you to try a television-free week or two weeks. The first two days may be difficult, as you feel a bit lost in your habitual activity. However, you will find other healthier activities to replace TV watching. Your energy level will go up, you may very well reduce your intake of unhealthy empty-calorie food, and you may decide to reduce or eliminate TV watching on a permanent basis.

Remember, TV exists as a commercial enterprise in order to sell products, including pharmaceutical drugs. The programs are filler to hold your interest so that you will see the ads that are the business of the television industry. The corporations who pay the bills control the editorial policy of TV (and all other commercial media) and the media will never bite the hand that feeds it.

**TIP OF THE WEEK:** If our ancestors could have seen how their descendents would turn out they would be incredulous and shocked. Those of you who read this column probably watch less television than those who don't, so you may be freer to try this exercise. On a sheet of paper, divide it into two columns. On the left jot down briefly 10 ways in which our ancestors might see an improvement in our lives over theirs; on the right jot down 10 ways in which they might see a decline. This list may be the start of a conversation that everyone in this nation should be engaging in, as economic uncertainty and political and social dangers seem to be on the rise. Neither Obama nor McCain will save us, no matter what they say. We have to save ourselves, and we have to change our behavior by choosing more carefully what we put into our bodies and our minds, and more importantly, into our children's bodies and minds. We must educate ourselves, speak out against and resist destructive evil behavior at the lowest and at the highest levels.