



All in the family

Starting a family and staying fit shouldn't be mutually exclusive

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Rhodes

by Jessica Gillies

We all have the best of intentions when it comes to getting active. But for new parents, those intentions are often swept aside by a tidal wave of late-night feedings and dirty diapers.

"They're really struggling," says Dr. Ryan Rhodes, an exercise psychologist in the University of Victoria's School of Exercise Science, Physical and Health Education.

Preliminary research in Victoria suggests that 50 per cent of physically active women who become mothers drop below Health Canada's recommended physical activity guidelines after the birth of their first child, says Rhodes. He's leading three studies to further analyse the health behaviours of mothers and fathers.

One study will compare couples expecting their first child to couples not expecting children by tracking them for two years. A second, two-year study will compare couples expecting their first child to those expecting their second.

"Parents say going from one child to two isn't double the work, it's exponential. We're putting that to the test," says Rhodes. "We do these kinds of

studies so we can understand why there is a decrease in physical activity. Once we know that, we can work to prevent it."

Because the research takes place over two years, the team will follow parents as they deal with many stages of their changing lives, including heading back to work after the birth of their children.

"These are the most detailed studies ever done on this subject," he says. The research team, which includes specialists in fields such as kinesiology, social psychology, obstetrics, nutrition and sociology, is carefully monitoring the nutritional and physical activity behaviours of participants. It is also tracking their environments, social conditions and motivational characteristics.

For the third study, the team is tracking about 100 families with children between the ages of two and seven for one month to see if there are simple ways to increase family activity. The participants are separated into three groups. One group simply tracks physical activity. The second group is learning about the benefits of physical activity. And the third group is having physical activity scheduled for them.

"When people's time is so constrained, everything

has to be scheduled," says Rhodes. "Physical activity is often the first thing to leave the schedule, so the intervention is attempting to put it back."

So far, the research team has found that availability of child care is one of the main predictors of parental activity levels.

"Child care is important for so many reasons, but especially for parental health," says Rhodes. "Parents have long lives ahead of them, and obviously we want to keep them healthy. Changing their behaviours at this point to make them more active is very important."

Of course, says Rhodes, the studies aren't intended to dissuade people from having kids.

"We're looking at how we can get the whole family active," he says. "It's very important to look at motivation, because there may be very real struggles that are beyond the capacity of the individual to deal with."

The research team is still looking for volunteer participants. For more information, call 250-472-5488 or email rhodes@uvic.ca.

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What can parents do to stay healthy while dealing with the challenges of raising kids? UVic's Ryan Rhodes has a few suggestions:

- Take time once a week to figure out how to fit family physical activity into your schedule
- Be aware that having children is a big transitional time, and make an extra effort to get some physical activity
- Keep your physical activity close to home
- Keep it fun.

Rhodes is a Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research Scholar and a Canadian Institutes for Health Research New Investigator. He is also the 2008 winner of Early Career Award from the North American Society for the Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity.

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UVic researchers were awarded more than \$106 million in outside research grants and contracts in 2007/08. This more than doubles the research support of the previous five years.



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