

In with the diapers, out with the sit-ups. A study shows why new moms are often forced to give up on fitness. **Hayley Mick** reports

Mother load



Dr. Ryan Rhodes says that partner support is key in keeping fit post-pregnancy. Here, Jodi Di Menna kickboxes in her basement while her husband takes on kid-sitting duties. BLAIR GABLE FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The excuses are legit: New moms really don't have time to exercise. A study published recently in the journal *Women and Health*, co-authored by University of Victoria exercise psychologist Ryan Rhodes, shows that mothers of young children had to reduce their physical activity by 80 minutes a week on average.

What's more troubling is that 53 per cent of the 139 mothers from Victoria who were meeting recommended physical activity levels before parenthood were no longer reaching those

levels after having children, points out Dr. Rhodes.

But are there ways to help moms stay on the treadmill? Dr. Rhodes tells *The Globe and Mail* that exercise during parenthood is possible – especially if spouses, communities and even governments share the load.

Were you surprised that so many of your participants drastically reduced their exercise routines after becoming parents?

I think that's alarming, and it also mimics some of the other studies in the United States

and in Australia, suggesting this is a major time where people fall off of their exercise wagon.

So what happened to them?

It wasn't about whether they thought physical activity was good or not. So that's an important distinction. These are people who are giving it up because it's simply beyond their control. And the big factors were issues about time, fatigue, [lack of] childcare and social support – someone who could actually help them get it done

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'Active parents will also raise active kids'

» About half of your participants were stay-at-home moms while about 15 per cent were working full-time. Were the stay-at-home moms better at finding time to exercise?

We didn't see any difference. We would have to get a larger sample to try and figure out why. It may be that the people who are working come home and have to be responsible for the kids right away. And if you're a stay at home parent your job never ends. It may be that neither group has that much disposable time.

But about a third of the women managed to keep exercising after

having a child. What was their secret?

They either had the time, or they had partner support. So this is a potential solution right here. If the spouses agree that a certain time is an exercise time, and one takes care of the child, and then switches off, it's successful.

Fatigue was also an issue. This is a tough one, but the way we try to get around it is: Try and figure out in your day when you're not as tired. Those are the times where one really needs to try and fit in their activity. Little epochs of 30 minutes become really important.

New numbers released by Statistics Canada last week suggest Canada may be headed toward a baby boom. Does this raise any alarm bells in light of your research?

It does. Parents are a young group in the populous. If these habits become well established it can certainly carry on for the rest of one's life. And physical inactivity is linked to all kinds of chronic conditions. Active parents will also raise active kids. So you can see it as doubly important.

What changes would you like to see?

More understanding of the consequences of parenthood.

More funding. More advocacy. Even when you look at the research literature there's not very much on this. Like any underserved population its not surprising. Parents are so busy and so tired that they can't really advocate for themselves.

What sort of interventions might work?

A simple one would be that when parents are going through prenatal programs, there's a section that discusses their own health. There could be physical activity initiatives for parents, much like the ones for children. Things like: exercise equipment in the

home. Perhaps a jogger-stroller subsidy. Or mom-and-dad walking groups. And where possible, grandparent support. Perhaps just even more attention in this area.

I'm curious: Why weren't dads included in this study?

We originally wanted to look at moms and dads, and we had a really big problem with recruiting dads. They did not want to participate. We actually have a study we're working on now where we're looking at dads. The other reason is that moms take more of the traditional role. If we're going to see this effect, we'll see it in the moms first.