

## Media Release

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### REPORT SHOWS PARENTS CAN HELP PREVENT OBESITY IN CHILDREN

Children who have more than two hours screen-time a day and children who frequently eat dinner in front of the TV are more likely to be overweight or obese, according to a VicHealth report published today (14 April).

As children return to school this week and next, the VicHealth research, conducted by Associate Professor Anna Timperio from the Centre for Physical Activity and Nutrition Research at Deakin University, focuses on understanding the factors which lead to children becoming overweight or obese.

With almost one in four Australian children overweight or obese and one in three expected to be by 2025, [Influencing Children's Health: Critical Windows for Intervention](#) looks at the key moments for developing healthy habits in children and adolescents.

VicHealth CEO Jerril Rechter said some of the key risk factors that may lead to Australian children becoming overweight or obese are inadequate fruit and vegetable intake and lack of physical activity.

“Children often eat less than the recommended amount of fruit and vegetables,<sup>i</sup> only one in five get the recommended hour of physical activity every day, and fewer than one in three meets the recommendation for daily screen time limits.<sup>ii</sup> This report reveals that over-use of electronic devices such as televisions, computers and electronic gaming consoles are linked to negative health consequences for children. In disadvantaged communities, having a TV in a child’s room and using it as a reward has been linked with children being more overweight.

“Children who are obese are more likely than other children to develop asthma, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular conditions and some cancers. Kids who are overweight are more likely to carry their excess weight into adulthood, placing them at increased risk of chronic diseases. They may also be subjected to discrimination and bullying, which can harm their mental wellbeing,” Ms Rechter added.

Assoc Prof. Anna Timperio said that while many parents are concerned about the amount of time their children spend watching TV their parenting strategies are sometimes inconsistent with their concerns.

“For example, parents might allow children to eat in front of the TV or use screen-time as a reward for good behaviour. These strategies are likely to be counter-productive if they are trying to reduce screen-time.

She said important transitions in a child’s life can present opportunities for maintaining healthy lifestyle habits.

“As children move from primary to secondary school they’re less likely to be physically active during lunch and recess, outside school hours, and on weekends. Children spend a significant amount of their time at school, so school is an important setting in which to tackle declines in physical activity as they move from primary to

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secondary school. But there is also much to be done outside of schools. As children move into adolescence, opportunities for active transport through walking, riding, or skating to school, to public transport and other places increases.”

Parents also set an important example for their children.

Ms Rechter said: “Children whose parents eat breakfast, and girls whose parents report high levels of physical activity, are more likely to eat fruit and vegetables at least five times a day. Also, boys in particular are more likely to develop healthy eating habits if they get involved in planning and preparing meals and if the family eats meals together.

“Parents’ behaviour is also important in influencing physical activity. For both boys and girls, the children of parents who are very physically active are more likely to also be very physically active and eat lots of fruit and vegetables.”

Ms Rechter said healthy eating and daily activity should be considered an essential part of a healthy lifestyle for all children and adolescents and suggested parents include some of the following in their daily routines:

1. Keep TVs and other electronic entertainment devices in communal family areas rather than in children’s bedrooms
2. Turn the TV off before family dinners and eat family meals together daily
3. Introduce rules regarding children’s screen time, e.g. not during meals, set TV-free times
4. Involve children in providing family meals including meal planning, shopping and food preparation
5. Use rewards other than unhealthy foods or screen-based entertainment to promote good behaviour
6. Eat breakfast – this research shows children are more likely to eat the recommended amounts of fruit and vegetable if their parents eat breakfast
7. Encourage physical activity, e.g. keep sporting equipment near the back door rather than packed away in cupboards
8. Model healthy lifestyle behaviours and support children’s physical activity; encourage children to choose a physical activity they enjoy
9. Use active transport such as walking or riding whenever possible, e.g. short trips to buy milk, walking or cycling to school
10. Support children’s independent play and travel; encourage children to have unstructured physical activity and play alongside organised physical activity and sport

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<sup>i</sup> Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend 4.5–5.5 serves of vegetables and 1.5–2 serves of fruit daily for children aged 4–18 years (NHMRC 2013b)

<sup>ii</sup> Australian Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines suggest no more than two hours of screen-based entertainment per day for children aged five to 12 (Dept. of Health 2014)

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