



# Working Together for Healthy Kids

Thunder Bay District Health Unit Strategy

# Message from the Medical Officer of Health

For kids to thrive, they need communities that support them to eat well, be active every day and feel good about themselves. Parents in Thunder Bay and the District are doing the best job they can to raise healthy kids, but many barriers in the community make healthy living difficult. Processed, low-nutrient foods are abundant, heavily marketed and cheaper to purchase. It is easier, safer and often necessary to drive to destinations rather than walk or cycle. Kids spend many hours sitting at desks and in front of screens. Families are busy and have limited time to prepare healthy meals and play outside.



It is concerning that nearly one in three children in Ontario is at an unhealthy weight. The risks to physical and emotional wellbeing are well documented and increase as children grow into adulthood. Currently, our region has among the highest rates of heart disease, type 2 diabetes and certain cancers in Ontario. Without action, we will see these rates of preventable chronic illness climb even higher and afflict residents at younger ages.

In 2012, the Ontario government set a target to reduce childhood obesity by 20 per cent in five years. Reaching this target requires thinking beyond personal habits. Community environments and social structures actually have an even greater role in affecting health.

Therefore, the Thunder Bay District Health Unit's (TBDHU) Healthy Kids strategy focuses on building the skills, environments and policies needed to support the behaviours that reduce the risk of chronic disease. This includes promoting healthier eating, increased physical activity, decreased sedentary behaviour and positive mental wellbeing. It shifts the focus away from weight and on to wellness for all children.

The strategy acknowledges that the choices people make are determined by the options they have. TBDHU will continue to

build the knowledge, skills and confidence of individuals to make the healthiest choices possible within their circumstances.

However, a stronger focus will be on improving community environments and policies to support healthy living and build health equity. This way, success will be sustained into the future.

Shifting trends will take time and coordinated community action. Through strong community partnerships, great strides have

been made over the last few years to support healthy living. For example, the Thunder Bay Food Strategy is well underway, more streets are accommodating walking and cycling, and schools are embracing gardens as a way to build

food skills. There is much more to be done, however. We must continue to work across sectors to make health a priority and help our kids reach their full potential.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "D Williams".

Dr. David Williams  
Medical Officer of Health

**The goal of this strategy is to enhance the health and wellbeing of children and families where they live, learn, work and play in Thunder Bay and District.**



# Guiding Principles

## Comprehensive.

Recognizing that healthy children cannot be achieved through one approach alone, this strategy aligns with the Ontario Public Health Standards and integrates a variety of health promotion approaches including creating supportive environments, strengthening community action, developing personal skills, re-orienting health services, and building public policy.



## Evidence-based.

All programming and services within this strategy apply best practices that are informed by research, expert consensus and community knowledge. Evidence-based innovation is also encouraged.

## Equitable and inclusive.

With social and economic factors making healthy living more difficult for specific populations, the programs and services within this strategy promote equity and inclusivity with special attention paid to low-income people and Aboriginal people, and equal programming for girls and boys.



## Accountable.

To ensure efficient implementation and effective results, this strategy will include a strong evaluation plan. Measurable process and outcome indicators will be established which will be monitored and used to assess and report on progress.



## Collaborative.

Promoting healthy children is reliant on action by multiple sectors and therefore partnerships will be built and sustained to assist in the effective and efficient delivery of services. This includes internal, community and private partnerships.

## Local.

This strategy is informed by local needs, strengths and opportunities. Communities in the Thunder Bay District will be supported to adopt programs and services related to the strategy that are relevant to their communities.



## Balanced.

This strategy integrates a *Balanced Approach* philosophy into programs and services, which encourages adopting behaviours that lead to positive wellbeing, such as eating well, enjoying physical activity and being satisfied with one's body.

## Transparent.

All processes related to this strategy will be clear and appropriately communicated to stakeholders and the public, especially with regard to private partnerships.

## Sustainable.

Understanding that promoting healthy children will require a long term societal shift, this strategy will ensure that programs and services are sustainable and will be adaptable to the future needs of our community.

# Exploring the Evidence

In May 2012, the Ontario government convened the Healthy Kids Panel to put forth recommendations on how the province could best promote the wellbeing of children and youth. The resulting *No Time to Wait: The Healthy Kids Strategy*<sup>1</sup> served as a primary document to inform the TBDHU strategy.

## No Time to Wait: The Healthy Kids Strategy

The Healthy Kids Panel report suggests that interventions to improve children's health must begin even before a child is conceived and continue through to adolescence. It urges parents, health care providers, daycares, schools, government and others to work together at multiple levels to make children's health a priority. In summary, the report makes the following recommendations:

1. **Start all kids on the path to health** by improving preconception knowledge of women of reproductive age; providing a standard pre-pregnancy health check; encouraging breastfeeding for at least the first six months; standardizing accessible and affordable prenatal education; and leveraging health services to promote healthy weights and enhance surveillance and early intervention.
2. **Change the food environment** by banning the marketing of low-nutrient foods and beverages to children; improving food retail and restaurant settings to support healthy eating; addressing food deserts and providing incentives to enhance community-based food distribution programs, establishing universal school nutrition programs and supporting the use of Canada's Food Guide and the nutrition facts panel.

3. **Create healthy communities** by developing a comprehensive healthy kids social marketing program utilizing coordinated and community-driven approaches; supporting children's health in preschool and school settings; developing the knowledge and skills of key professions; implementing Ontario's Poverty Reduction and Mental Health and Addictions strategies; and improving access to specialized obesity programs.

Throughout the development of the TBDHU strategy, scientific evidence was reviewed and similar health strategy documents from other jurisdictions were examined to ensure that all programming and services within the strategy would apply best practices informed by research, expert consensus and local need. Documents reviewed included pre-appraised syntheses of the evidence and government published reports that were considered relevant to informing a comprehensive public health approach to promoting healthy children<sup>2-7</sup>.

**"Everyone has a role to play in supporting parents' efforts to ensure their children grow and thrive. We need action everywhere ...and a willingness to take risks."**

Healthy Kids Panel Report



Also informing the TBDHU strategy was the 2013 Healthy Kids Parent Focus Group Findings<sup>8</sup>.

## Healthy Kids: Parent Focus Group Findings Report

To ensure that this strategy would reflect local needs and priorities, TBDHU sought input from local parents. Through a series of focus groups, parents identified the facilitators and barriers for children to grow up healthy, particularly related to healthy eating, physical activity and healthy weights. Special effort was made to engage parents living on a low-income, parents of Aboriginal children and parents of boys since research identified that these children are at a higher risk for chronic diseases later in life, including obesity. Out of the focus groups, the following themes emerged.

### The Need to Fit In

Parents consistently expressed concern regarding children's need to fit into ideals of body shape, size and weight. They reported that their children are aware of and concerned about their weight and image even at a young age. These feelings are being influenced by social ideals created by toys, games, media, music, videos, as well as parents and friends.

**“They want to fit in. That’s the main thing – they want to fit in, and they find they’re not fitting in because of all the media, all the dolls. Everything has got to be skinny to be perfect.”**

Focus Group Parent

### Affordability

Participants spoke frequently of the issue of affordability and the barriers this creates in raising healthy children. The cost of food is a major factor influencing parents' food choices. They identified that although processed foods are higher in salt and sugar, they're more affordable. Less processed food was seen as less affordable and less accessible. For a family relying on public transportation, the cost to go to an activity was also seen as a barrier preventing them from being more active.

**“By the time you get where you’re going, you’ve got 20-30 minutes left on the transfer...”**

**I want to go to Centennial Park with three kids. No way. That’s \$25 just right there.”**

Focus Group Parent

### Schools

Many parents commented on the need for improved communication regarding school food programs. Some also spoke of the connection between schools cutting back on offering various sports as part of the curriculum and how this results in their children having fewer opportunities to be exposed to different activities. They could not afford to enroll their children in sports outside what the school offered.

### Strategies to Address Barriers

Parents identified these strategies to address barriers and build supports:

- Increase accessibility to programs by offering free family programs and changing access for financial supports for children to participate.
- Address the cost of transportation and develop alternatives to city transit.
- Lower the cost of and increase the accessibility to healthier food.
- Enhance government regulation related to how food is grown, processed and labelled.
- Increase information dissemination with the use of flyers and with people to answer phones.
- Increase teaching and activities in school related to physical health.



# Commitment #1: Start as early as possible to promote healthy children.

Even before a child is conceived, a parent's health and health behaviours can have a large impact on their child's future health. Young men and women who eat well, are active, avoid smoking and have positive mental health are better able to give their baby a healthy start in life. A child's health can be especially affected if a mother is overweight or obese before conceiving, if she gains too much weight or smokes during pregnancy.

**77.8% of pregnancies in Thunder Bay & District are unplanned,<sup>9</sup>**

making it especially important to promote preconception health to all individuals regardless of intent to have children.

Recent data shows that

**95% of local women begin breastfeeding their babies<sup>10</sup>**

but only about 1/4 are still exclusively breastfeeding at 6 months.

Once a child is born, breastmilk offers the best nutrition for healthy growth and development. Exclusive breastfeeding for at least the first six months of life is recommended. Collective efforts must continue to assist breastfeeding women with accessible services at critical times and to create community environments where it is comfortable to breastfeed. Pre and post-natal education and services are also important to support moms and dads in their parenting journey.

## TBDHU Areas for Action:

### Help adults of reproductive age be healthier.

- 1.1 Encourage individuals of reproductive age to make positive lifestyle changes through the "What's Your Plan?" campaign.
- 1.2 Deliver high school health promotion activities focused on building food skills, educating about sexual health and preventing tobacco use.
- 1.3 Support provincial advocacy for women planning a pregnancy to have access to a standard pre-pregnancy health check and wellness visit.

### Encourage women to exclusively breastfeed their babies for at least the first six months of life through timely resources, services, education and supportive environments.

- 1.4 Maintain TBDHU's Baby Friendly Initiative (BFI) designation.

- 1.5 Encourage other community organizations to implement BFI standards.
- 1.6 Provide lactation consultant services.
- 1.7 Promote breastfeeding with clients and through community events and resources.

### Offer prenatal and post-natal education and support.

- 1.8 Provide family-centred support to priority parents through the Healthy Babies Healthy Children program.
- 1.9 Offer early prenatal education and develop an online program to improve access and reach.
- 1.10 Provide consultation services and education on current infant feeding guidelines.
- 1.11 Provide smoking cessation counseling.
- 1.12 Leverage well-baby and immunization visits to promote healthy eating, physical activity, reduced screen time, mental health, healthy sleep habits and positive parenting.
- 1.13 Conduct NutriSTEP screening to assess eating habits and identify nutritional risk of children ages 18 months to 5 years and refer children as needed to family physicians or community support services.

## **Commitment # 2: Encourage and support schools to enhance children's health.**

Healthy children are better able to learn and reach their full potential. A healthy school environment that supports eating well, regular physical activity and feeling good about oneself is essential to help children develop habits for lifelong wellness.

**Only 11% of 3-4 year olds get 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous activity each day.**

This drops to 7% for 5-11 year olds and again to 4% for youth aged 12 to 17.<sup>11</sup>

Local parents say that at a very young age,

**their children have concerns about body image and fitting in with their peers.**

This influences how they feel about themselves and their health behaviours.<sup>8</sup>

Creating healthy schools is a shared responsibility and strong partnerships have already been established between TBDHU and area school boards. Recognizing that schools have multiple priorities, TBDHU will continue to support school communities to integrate wellness into classroom instruction and physical and social environments.

### **TBDHU Areas for Action:**

#### **Encourage and support schools to implement comprehensive school health.**

- 2.1 Support school nutrition programs with training for coordinators, menu reviews, participation in Food for Learning partnerships, and encouragement to provide parents with more information about the programs.
- 2.2 Work closely with school partners to offer programs, resources, training and consultation services to support healthy school environments and policy. This will include such initiatives as Healthy Schools Clubs, Nutrition Tools for Schools, Active Playgrounds, school council events, teacher training and much more.
- 2.3 Intensify efforts to support comprehensive school health programming beginning with six designated schools in Thunder Bay.

#### **Promote healthy body image.**

- 2.4 Provide curriculum resources and presentations to school partners that encourage children to be confident in themselves regardless of their shape, size and interests.
- 2.5 Promote a positive school climate that fosters a healthy body image.
- 2.6 Provide healthy body image information to parents.

#### **Support transition from preschool to Kindergarten.**

- 2.7 Provide families with nutrition and physical activity resources through daycares and at "Welcome to Kindergarten" events.



## Commitment #3: Improve the food environment.

Many factors influence what children and families eat. The rising cost of groceries, housing, transportation and child care often makes it difficult to afford nourishing food. Further complicating matters is the impact of marketing to children which shapes their food desires and undermines parents' efforts to encourage healthy eating. From a broad perspective, our current food environment is flooded with processed foods that are often low in nutrients and high in sugar, sodium and fat. Busy families are turning to this type of food out of convenience.

**Almost 14% of households in Thunder Bay are food insecure**

compared to the provincial average of 11.7%.<sup>12</sup>

The cost for a family of four to eat well for a month is typically

**\$60 more than the provincial average.**<sup>13</sup>

Improving the food environment requires positive action on all levels and across all sectors. Our region is fortunate to have several community partners already working together to address food issues. TBDHU will continue to support the collective efforts that aim to make the healthy choice the easy choice for all children and families where they live, learn, work and play.

### **TBDHU Areas for Action:**

#### **Increase access to affordable, fresh, healthy foods.**

- 3.1 Work closely with community partners on the Thunder Bay and Area Food Strategy.
- 3.2 Support the completion of a community food assessment.
- 3.3 Advocate for policies that facilitate food access, such as encouraging new food retailers in neighbourhoods and improving public transportation.
- 3.4 Support food security programs such as the Good Food Box, gleaning, community kitchens and community gardens.
- 3.5 Use the results of the Nutritious Food Basket survey to advocate for adequate incomes and housing to enable individuals and families to afford healthy food.

#### **Encourage food retail outlets and restaurants to support healthy eating.**

- 3.6 Promote the "Making the Winning Choice" and "Eat Well at Work" programs at recreation centres and worksites.

- 3.7 Promote the "Get Fresh" certification that recognizes restaurants for using local foods.
- 3.8 Encourage grocery stores to implement initiatives that support families to eat well.

#### **Advocate for a ban on marketing to kids.**

- 3.9 Work locally to increase community awareness of the effects of marketing to kids.
- 3.10 Support provincial advocacy efforts to move such a policy forward.

#### **Enhance the preschool environment.**

- 3.11 Work with daycare partners to enhance their environments and policies to support healthy eating among preschool children.





## Commitment #4: Enhance community environments to support active living.

Healthy kids are active in many ways throughout the day. Regular activity is important not only for a healthy body, but for a healthy mind and overall quality of life too. The benefits of physical activity have been touted for a long time, yet only 5% of Canadian children aged 5-17 meet the current recommended guidelines of 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity every day.<sup>11</sup> Continuing to encourage families to move more is futile unless the community they live in makes it easy, safe and affordable to integrate activity into daily life.

**Approx. 75% of preschoolers in Thunder Bay spend an average of 2 or more hours each day watching TV.<sup>14</sup>**

Community design is an important consideration for this. Features like sidewalks, bike lanes and recreation trails encourage active transportation. Streets in Thunder Bay are already undergoing a transformation to better support walking and cycling. This momentum must be maintained.

Local parents suggest that affordable recreation programs offered in their neighbourhood would encourage their family to be more active. By reducing the barriers of cost and transportation for participating, more children would have the opportunity to build physical literacy, social skills and community connectedness.

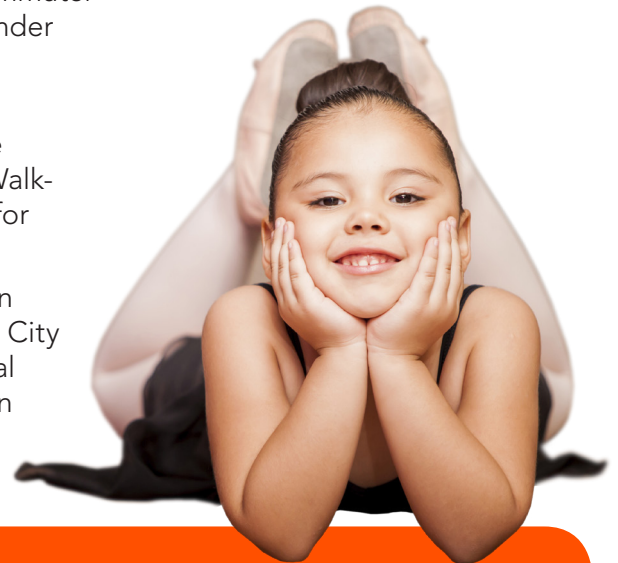
### TBDHU Areas for Action:

#### Facilitate active transportation.

- 4.1 Support the annual commuter challenge and the Thunder Bay Bike Summit.
- 4.2 Lead the Thunder Bay Walkability Committee and work towards a "Walk-Friendly" designation for Thunder Bay.
- 4.3 Support the integration of active living into the City of Thunder Bay's official plan and transportation master plan.

#### Increase affordable physical activity opportunities in neighbourhoods.

- 4.4 Initiate a mapping study to examine where recreation programs are currently offered and work with partners to fill identified gaps.
- 4.5 Support the Thunder Bay Open Streets initiative.



### What is physical literacy?

Physical literacy is the mastering of basic movement and sport skills, enabling a child to move confidently and with control in various physical activities. It is essential for helping children to enjoy being active, to maintaining an active lifestyle into adulthood and for performing to the best of their ability.

## **Commitment #5:** Raise awareness, build skills and increase confidence among children and parents to make positive changes that enable healthy growth and development.

Living well requires an understanding of what the healthy options are, having the skills to act on that information and the self-confidence to believe there will be a success in trying. TBDHU has several initiatives underway to educate children and parents with the needed knowledge and skills for lifelong health. These efforts will continue with a focus on reaching priority groups and encouraging them to make the healthiest choices possible.

### **TBDHU Areas for Action:**

#### **Build skills that encourage healthy eating, physical activity, mental health and positive parenting.**

- 5.1 Equip families with food and nutrition knowledge through current resources and support programs that build basic food skills, such as the Cooking with the Box program.
- 5.2 Offer safe cycling courses for children and distribute resources that encourage active living and reduce sedentary behaviour.
- 5.3 Provide programs that promote healthy living and positive parenting, such as Babies' Day Out and the Triple P seminar series.

#### **Promote healthy living through positive community messages using appropriate media.**

- 5.4 Extend the reach of the Healthy, Happy Kids social marketing campaign by distributing materials through various TBDHU services and partner agencies that serve families.
- 5.5 Ensure all TBDHU communications promote positive and balanced messages around health and weight by encouraging eating well and daily activity for the purpose of achieving good overall health without a focus on weight loss.
- 5.6 Utilize a mix of traditional and social media as appropriate.



# Looking Ahead to a Healthy Future

This Healthy Kids strategy outlines how TBDHU will invest its resources in the coming years to promote children's wellbeing in Thunder Bay and nearby communities. However, the factors affecting children's health are far too complex to be addressed alone. Making a positive difference will require coordinated and sustained action across all sectors. Only by working together will it be possible to support parents in raising healthy children wherever they go in our communities.



The Ontario government has committed special funding and support to the City of Thunder Bay and communities in the District to implement the provincial Healthy Kids Community Challenge. The goal of this project is to unite partners from multiple sectors to plan and deliver local activities that encourage healthy behaviours for children and youth. TBDHU will be a key partner in supporting these municipalities to implement the Challenge.

Public health is committed to working together with all partners in taking ambitious action on evidence-based solutions that address the underlying barriers to good health. Improving community environments and shifting cultural norms may be challenging. However, children's health must be made a top priority.

Everyone has a role to play in transforming the future. All stakeholders, from caregivers to community leaders, are encouraged to become informed and take action now to build communities where all children and families have equal opportunity to thrive today, tomorrow and in years to come.

**To learn more, share ideas, access resources or become involved, contact the Thunder Bay District Health Unit at:**

☎ 807-625-5900

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