

## **Leading expert on children's active living comes to London**

**By Todd Devlin, Special to The Londoner**

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All well-meaning parents want to raise healthy and active children. But for a number of reasons, including the overwhelming number of sedentary activities available to children today, the task has perhaps never been more difficult. The results are worrisome, as childhood obesity is increasing at a rapid rate, and, generally speaking, children are far less fit today than they were a generation ago.

The good news, at least for parents in the London region, is that helpful advice is on its way -- and it will come from one of Canada's leading experts on the topic of childhood health and active living. On Wednesday, October 13, the city will welcome Dr. Mark Tremblay for a free information session starting at 6:30pm at the Boys and Girls Club. The event is being jointly sponsored by Middlesex-London in motion, along with London's Child and Youth Network and the University of Western Ontario.

"We're really excited to have Mark here," said Jim Weese, Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences at Western. "Health promotion is such a big part of what we're doing at Western."

The Faculty of Health Sciences at Western has a distinguished lecture series that routinely welcomes internationally-renowned experts. But while Tremblay will give a lecture the following day on campus, Weese wanted to do something a little different.

"Mark has such a good topic, and a timely topic, that we thought it would be great to get him in the community," he said.

Tremblay, who serves as the Director of Healthy Active Living and Obesity Research (HALO) at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) Research Institute, will also give a presentation targeted at health service providers at Carling Heights Optimist Community Centre. But the information session at the Boys and Girls Club will be the best opportunity for parents to gain some valuable knowledge and insight into the difficult task of raising a healthier and more active child.

"I think that the session will help parents understand more about the national situation," Weese said, referring to recent worrisome studies that found that one-third of children in Canada today are overweight or obese, and that only one in eight is achieving the minimum level of physical activity as recommended by Health Canada. Incidents of Type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure, meanwhile, are also increasing among youth.

But make no mistake, the presentation at the Boys and Girls Club is not meant to instill fear. On the contrary, the hope is to convey the message that the situation can be changed -- and often, the answers to getting children more fit and active can be simple.

"[Parents] will hear that there are answers," Weese said. "There are solutions, and we're in this together. We want to help people make the changes they want to make. We appreciate our parents coming out to this session, and we want to encourage and inspire them."

When it comes to the ‘epidemic’ or ‘crisis’ of childhood obesity, as Dr. Tremblay has alternately referred to it, getting support at the community level is vitally important. That’s because, he says, it’s certainly not coming from the federal government.

“Our federal government leaders are failing us all,” he said matter-of-factly. “They’re absent at the wheel. The support that the health ministers are providing to the physical education [system] is abysmal. It’s an embarrassment to our country. I haven’t seen any political will to deal with [the issue] on the level that we need to.”

Because that federal support isn’t there, and won’t be for the foreseeable future, solutions to childhood obesity will have to come on an individual and community level. It may not be an ideal situation, but it’s one that Weese thinks can still be embraced.

“I don’t want us to have to wait for government to respond,” he said. “My personal belief is that we need to take more responsibility for our own health. We need to make better choices about what we eat and how we move.”

In that vein, Weese helped launch Middlesex-London in motion, a community-based initiative that promotes healthy and active living. Beginning last winter, the organization began a media and social networking campaign to promote its vision of making London ‘Canada’s Healthiest Community.’

Now, the organization is set to host one of the country’s leading health and active living experts. And though he’ll discuss the current sobering statistics, Tremblay, who has made over 350 similar presentations in 13 different countries, will spend plenty of time talking about solutions.

“The question is always, so who do we blame?” Tremblay said. “We’re all to blame, and we’ve got a war against things that are seducing us to moving less and less, especially among the younger generation. But there are ways out.”

With this message, and his plethora of helpful advice, tips and suggestions, Tremblay has found that his audience is left inspired to make real change.

“I think they get pumped up,” he said. “And if I can plant a seed inside their brain so they’re at least starting to think about movement on a regular basis, I think that’s a good thing.”