Let’s get Physical, Physical ...

In many countries the level of childhood obesity is rising. Statistics indicate that one-third of children in Australia are classified as overweight or obese. Rates of childhood obesity are now increasing with each generation. There has been much talk in the press of late about this issue. Children today not only will, on average, be heavier than their parents but also, for the first time in recorded medical history, will potentially face a reduction in average life span, meaning they will live shorter lives than their parents’ generation. Did you know that obesity increases the risk of death far greater than does smoking? Perhaps we need to look at plain paper packaging for some of our junk foods.

I also read recently that inadequate sleep for children is directly linked to obesity. In children each one-hour reduction in sleep was associated with a 40 percent increase in the risk for obesity. Although average sleep varies by age, approximately ten and a half hours sleep a night is required by primary school-aged children; around nine hours for a teenager.

There is a myriad of causes for childhood obesity ranging from cultural influences, socio-economic status, genetics, nutritional knowledge and parental disengagement to the lack of physical activity. Many people would argue that the lack of physical activity is the most significant factor - the growth of couch potatoes. In an article titled Diet, Physical Activity, and Sedentary Behaviours as Risk factors for Overweight Adolescence they indicated that overweight boys reported watching more minutes of television than normal weight boys. This is probably too simplistic an overall cause but an obvious contributing factor.

For young people, being physically active and limiting sedentary behaviour every day is not easy but is important, so what should they be doing? The Department of Health recommends that teenagers should be undertaking at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity each day. And this should include a variety of aerobic activities. On at least three days of the week, teenagers should engage in activities that strengthen muscles and bones. They must also minimise the time they spend being sedentary - limit their use of electronic media for entertainment (television, electronic games, computer use) to no more than two hours a day (I would suggest even less than this).

At All Saints’ we are trying to do our best to engage students in physical activity. Physical Education (PE) is part of the weekly curriculum as is Health. Sport is compulsory and training for each activity runs two afternoons a week. It is somewhat disappointing that a few students try to avoid sport often with the assistance of their parents. Our Outdoor Education programmes (camps) are also a source of physical activity. Then there are the sporting carnivals where active participation is encouraged.

As far as the food side is concerned, fruit is on the menu for recess three times a week and is also available at lunch. Our caterers, Alliance, also have their menus approved by a dietician.

To conclude, I think I must practise what I have just been preaching - so it is off to the gym I go.