

Too much screen time eating into playtime

Deborah Smith

MANY Australian children are too inactive, with more than half of the primary students and almost three-quarters of the high school students in a survey spending more than the recommended time each day in front of a TV, computer or other screen.

As well, the ability to carry out basic physical skills correctly, such as jumping and throwing a ball, has declined since 2004, the survey of more than 8000 students found.

But the consumption of energy-rich food, particularly fatty fried potato products, has remained high, with about one in eight children also consuming

Hardy, of the University of Sydney, said.

The 380-page report will be released today by the Minister for Healthy Lifestyles, Kevin Humphries, and the Minister for Education, Adrian Piccoli.

Mr Humphries said the government would use the report's recommendations to help meet its goal of reducing the prevalence of overweight and obesity in five to 16-year-olds to 21 per cent by 2015.

Dr Hardy said many people were unaware of the recommended maximum of two hours of recreational screen use a day, and only during non-daylight hours. "If it's a beautiful day children shouldn't be in front of a screen," she said.

The survey, carried out last year, found that more than 90 per cent of year 10 boys and more than 80 per cent of year 10 girls, exceeded this usage.

As well, "for at least 60 minutes every single day kids need to be doing a bit of huffing and puffing," she said.

The proportion of years 6, 8 and 10 students meeting this recommendation for physical activity had declined significantly since 2004, with only half the students meeting it in winter.

Dr Hardy said it was "appalling" that fewer than 10 per cent of girls in year 4 and 6 could throw a ball overarm correctly.

A decline in physical skills could be due to parents not having time to play and teach their children these skills. More physical education teachers in schools were also needed, she said.

"If a child doesn't know how to run and catch and throw, they're less likely to engage in those physical activities, plus their peers won't select them to play in team sports."

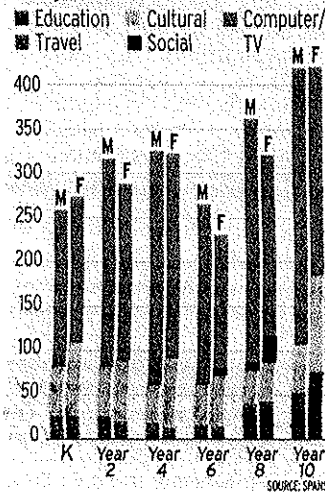
The importance of instilling healthy habits early in life was reflected in the fact that by six years of age, one in six children was overweight or obese, the report found.

"Soft-drink consumption is a real concern," Dr Hardy said.

High-energy foods, such as hot chips and chocolate also needed to be occasional treats, not regular features in the lunch box or rewards for doing homework.

WHAT CHILDREN DO

Minutes spent on activity per day, during weekends



more than a cup a day of a sugary soft drink.

Louise Hardy, the principal investigator of the *NSW Schools Physical Activity and Nutrition Survey*, said the good news was that the proportion of children who were obese or overweight - 22.8 per cent - had not increased since the previous survey in 2004.

This indicated investment in promoting a healthy lifestyle for young people had had an effect.

But more needed to be done to reduce this obesity rate. "We have to target all behaviours - eating, screen time and physical activity. No one action is going to be the panacea to fix this," Dr