Pairing exercise with online entertainment could keep children healthy amid COVID-19

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The explosion of streaming entertainment has been both a blessing and a curse. While online content can connect us to others, educate us, and provide a welcomed distraction from everyday life, it also keeps us sedentary.

This is becoming an increasing concern for children amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which has closed schools and playgrounds, stopped PE, and discouraged group activities, including sports.

Even prior to the pandemic, the average amount of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity among children and adolescents was between 20-30 minutes per day, well below the recommended 60-minute minimum.

Children need activity for normal bone and muscle growth as well as brain development. And, routine activity supports many metabolic functions in the body, from controlling blood sugar, preventing diabetes, reducing inflammation, and lowering the risk of heart disease. Physical activity also eases depression and elevates mood.

Most adults also fail to meet the recommended physical activity guidelines of 150 minutes of weekly moderate-to-vigorous physical activity. If achieved, this modest level of activity would not only reduce the risk of multiple chronic diseases like hypertension and certain types of cancer, but also lower the incidence of osteoporosis and improve weight control.

The pandemic presents us with an opportunity to bring together what at first glance may appear like an odd couple: online entertainment and exercise.

Nearly, 80-percent of consumers now subscribe to at least one paid streaming video service, a 7% jump since the onset of COVID-19. Many of these services also offer a variety of online class instruction in exercise, dance, and physical activity. Unfortunately, these different types of media are offered by competing companies, which means entertainment companies have no motivation to encourage viewers to switch to physical activity classes.

By creating a bridge between the media that keep us sedentary and the media that get us moving, we could potentially boost the physical activity of children, adolescents and adults.

Currently, entertainment media moves seamlessly from one movie or episode to the next. What if, after each program, viewers were offered an activity break before they started the next episode?

A link could send the viewers to an exercise break organized by time—5 minutes, 10 minutes, 20 or more. Schools should be building these into their school day. In fact, if children took just three, 20-minute breaks while on their computer, they could meet the recommended physical activity guidelines of 60 minutes per day.

Workplaces could do the same, and those working from home could also schedule brief 10- minute exercise breaks into their days. Three 10-minute exercise breaks, morning, afternoon and evening, just 5 days per week, would allow adults to meet physical activity guidelines.

January is typically the month we make resolutions to adopt healthy habits. But this new year, let's ask all streaming companies to collaborate with the producers of exercise videos and insert the option for exercise breaks into their streaming content. Sadly, one in 5 children and 2 in 5 adults in the United States are obese. It's clear that both children and adults need multiple reminders of the importance of being active, as well as convenient and timely opportunities to help them get moving – especially amid physical distancing and stay-at-home orders.

Technology has long encouraged physical inactivity. Instead of seeing it as the problem, why don't we look to it for a solution? Let's find ways to leverage technology to fight obesity and other conditions that compromise our health and well-being.

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