

New TV show Roll Play aims to help kids get fit

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Canadian Press: LORRAYNE ANTHONY

TORONTO (CP) - It was the 20 Minute Workout - a show from the early '80s that featured women doing aerobics in bodysuits and come-hither eyes - that inspired the creator of the kids show Roll Play.

"It was a very weird thing to see these women bending around in a white environment. That image has stuck with me ... for whatever reason," said J.J. Johnson, the Toronto-based creator of the new four-minute show aimed at getting kids off the couch and moving their bodies.

His childhood memory of his mom working out in front of the TV made him think that if women on a white screen were enough to inspire adults to get fit, then maybe puppets on a black screen would work for children.

And although it isn't telling kids to turn off the TV and run around outside, Roll Play is the latest in the growing number of shows that try to encourage children to be active - albeit for a short time.

Dora the Explorer and her simian sidekick, Boots, do their "we did it" dance after each completed adventure.

Many stations, including TVOntario, YTV and CBC, have breaks where on-air staff dance and sing, inviting the at-home audience to move along with them.

Dr. Mark Tremblay is the chair of Active Healthy Kids, a national non-profit organization that advocates regular physical activity for kids. He says that since we know kids spend time in front of screens - TVs, computers and hand-held games - anything that gets them moving while watching can only be helpful.

"These types of technology that traditionally have removed activity ... there's opportunity to use them as adjuncts to

physical activity," Tremblay said from Ottawa.

Roll Play, by Sinking Ship Entertainment, premieres Sept. 4 on Treehouse (check local listings). It combines stories and songs about characters with children acting out the movements of animal puppets. The show uses a split-screen to reveal Toronto's Famous People Players' black-light puppets on one side and the children on the other.

Johnson wants viewers to use their imagination as they move their bodies like the animals.

"I like when we have the shots where it's five kids on screen because you'll see them doing completely different things. And it's mostly because we have, you know, from 3 1/2 to six-year-olds in the cast ... someone's watching someone else to see what they are doing and then someone's going completely crazy," he said.

"And that's what it's all about."

Canadian authors including Stephanie McLellan, Frank B. Edwards and Carole Tremblay penned some of the show's scripts, and Broken Social Scene and Patrick Pentland from Sloan contributed original music.

When Sloan was approached by the show's producers, Pentland - who has a toddler of his own - thought his son might enjoy the music. It proved to be a challenge.

"It was tough to write the lyrics ..., summarize three stories in three verses, and at the same time to make it catchy, and it has to rhyme," he said, adding he also had to mention various movements for the kids to do.

"What I normally do is less rigid and less restrictions ... but I enjoyed it."

The Heart and Stroke Foundation is also throwing its support behind Roll Play.

"What made the foundation sit up and take notice was the

emphasis on starting young children and getting them to incorporate physical activity into their daily routine," said foundation spokesperson Elissa Freeman.

While kids may get up and move around for a few minutes, Tremblay worries programs such as Roll Play could encourage more screen time, with parents thinking they are doing well by letting them watch a show that promotes movement.

An Icelandic television program, LazyTown, takes a different approach, providing a role model for kids to emulate after the TV is turned off. The show has a superhero, Sportacus, who fights inactivity. Not only does he make his bed and tidy up, he runs, jumps or flips his way across LazyTown while helping the inhabitants battle the villain's lazy schemes.

The show, which won the Nordic Public Health Prize for motivating children to lead healthier lives, has been in Canada on YTV and Quebec's VRAK for more than a year.

"If we give up and say kids are going to watch some TV ... then I would rather them be watching a program where at least the message is ... go out and be the superhero. That would be better than something that just puts you in a hibernative state and attracts you to stay there," said Tremblay.

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