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# Feds offer tax credit to get children off the couch and into the gym

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By Donna Spencer

CALGARY (CP) - Hockey parent Bob Alexander says the federal government's new children's fitness tax credit will help his three kids try out different sports.

Alexander's children all play minor hockey in Calgary and getting a \$500 tax credit for each one on their hockey registration fees could help expand their sports horizons, according to their father. That would amount to a savings of about \$80 per child.

"This would free up funds to pursue other sports," Alexander said Monday. "We'd like to try downhill skiing."

The federal government's child fitness tax credit kicked in Jan. 1. It's an incentive designed to help make a dent in child obesity and foster a more active lifestyle.

Diane Ablonsczy, Member of Parliament for Calgary-Nose Hill and parliamentary secretary to Minister of Finance Jim Flaherty, has the support of Olympic skeleton racer Mellisa Hollingsworth-Richards and Alberta Ballet principal Murray Kilgour.

"When I was growing up, I know there were some kids with great athletic ability and they didn't necessarily have the means to get into club sports and be able to participate," Hollingsworth-Richards, an Olympic bronze medallist, said during a news conference at Canada Olympic Park.

"You see their drive and desire to participate is gone after they're not able to get there. Now they're fighting weight challenges and health issues. I think this will help in the end. If the parents can say 'We've got this \$500 tax credit, we can put that towards this or save up for it' it will make it a lot easier."

The credit applies to registration or membership fees for an activity that is ongoing, meaning it's a minimum eight weeks long and a minimum of one session per week. In the case of a camp, it must be at least five consecutive days to qualify.

The program has to be supervised and the activity must contribute to cardio-respiratory endurance and include one or more of the following: muscular strength, muscular endurance, flexibility and balance.

Hockey, soccer, karate, football, skiing, ballet, folk dancing, swimming, hiking, horseback riding and sailing are among the sports eligible.

But the Canada Revenue Agency will be the ultimate authority on what activities qualify when people file their 2007 tax returns next year.

The credit applies to children 16 and under.

Another separate tax credit is available to children with a disability who want to enrol in sport or dance. An additional \$500 credit is available to them - which translates into a total saving of about \$160 - and they are eligible for it until the day they turn 18.

Ablonszczy said the credit's cost to the federal government will be \$160 million per year.

"That may increase as children become more active," Ablonszczy said.

While embraced by sport and dance groups, the tax credit has created some hard feelings in the arts community.

An online petition to the Government of Canada, signed by more than 35,000 people, says the credit is unfair and places a higher value on fitness than on music or visual and dramatic arts.

The Canadian Conference of the Arts urged the government to include a variety of arts activities, including music, theatre and visual arts, in the tax credit.

"This particular initiative is targeted to alleviating the growing concern about childhood obesity and wanting encourage physical activity," Ablonszczy said. "There may be other programs down the road for development of children, but this one is particularly for physical activity."

Kilgour said the dance community lobbied hard to be included.

"Parents were very determined to make it understood that dance was a physical activity," he said. Families with multiple children involved in sport and dance will feel the benefit of the tax credit the most, he added.

"We have some with three or four children in it," Kilgour said. "That becomes a huge expense. That would be a great help for them to start and to keep them in it."

A three-person panel came up with the definition of an eligible activity for the credit.

It included Dr. Khristinn Kellie Leitch, chair of pediatric surgery at the Children's Hospital of Western Ontario, Michael Weil, head of YMCA Canada and David Bassett,

a co-chair of Sports Break, an organization that promotes a tax credit for organized youth sports.

While their report was comprehensive, the list of eligible activities is not complete, Ablonsczy said.

"There may be some grey areas that need to be discussed down the road," she said. "For the vast majority of parents, they have quite a bit of certainty as to what will qualify."