
Children and Physical Activity: Have Fun and Be Fit

Children seem to have boundless energy. It's important for them to use a lot of it in lively physical play. Children need at least 60 minutes of moderate physical activity a day for good health.

But many American children don't get that much. With the increasing popularity of computers, video games and television, today's children are increasingly less active. The average American child spends about 24 hours each week watching TV. That's almost 3½ hours per day! Forty-three percent of adolescents watch more than 2 hours of television each day.



Being active is important for children's health. Physical activity:

- helps the body make better use of insulin, which reduces the risk of Type II diabetes. Type II diabetes is often called "adult onset" diabetes, and has more than quadrupled among children.
- burns excess body fat to maintain a healthy weight.
- increases circulation by widening blood vessels and even creating new ones, which reduces the risk of heart attack and stroke when they get older. In fact 40 percent of five to eight year-olds now show at least one heart disease risk factor – risk factors that 10 years ago weren't seen before age 30!
- strengthens bones and improves bone density to lower the risk of osteoporosis later in life.
- helps keep joints healthy.
- improves lung function and physical as well as mental stamina by increasing the amount of oxygen in the blood.
- lowers blood pressure, a major risk factor for heart attack, aneurysm, glaucoma, and stroke.
- helps produce restful and higher-quality sleep.
- improves coordination and balance.
- helps kids blow off steam safely.

Increasing physical activity and exercise can do a lot for your child's lifelong health (and your own). Now is the best time to build the habit of daily physical activity. Only 2 percent of children who are inactive become active adults.

Involve the whole family

Even though exercise experts say periods of 20 minutes or more of continuous activity will produce the most health benefits, children can break that 60 minutes of exercise into increments as small as 10

minutes and still derive good health benefits. For example, a child might walk or ride a bike to and from school, play tag or jump rope at recess and walk the family dog in the afternoon.

Be sure to introduce more physical activity into your children's lives by involving the entire family.

Parents have a huge influence on their children. Your child is likely to adopt your exercise habits, so if you increase your activity level, your children will too. And a family-wide increase in physical activity prevents a child from feeling singled out.

Schedule time for family exercise. Make it fun! Lots of family activities feel more like fun than work:

- Ride bikes together
- Dance
- Go swimming on the weekend
- Explore a new park or back road on foot or bicycle
- Play Frisbee, hoops or catch together
- Play tag, organize a neighborhood jump-rope festival
- Walk the dog together
- Take a family walk after supper before you turn on the TV

Some important safety tips

- Good quality athletic shoes will protect joints and bones during running and jumping activities.
- Make sure your children wear appropriate protective gear for the activities and sports they choose. Outfit young cyclists, skateboarders, inline skaters, snowboarders, downhill skiers and scooter-riders with protective helmets designed specifically for their sport. Let your child pick out a cool style, but insist he or she wear the helmet with the chin strap buckled whenever they are on the bike, board, skates or scooter. Make sure you understand how to adjust the helmet for maximum protection, then teach your child. And parents, model good safety habits by wearing a helmet yourself when you participate in high-risk activities. Isn't your own skull worth protecting?
- Injury-prevention specialists recommend that skateboarders, road skaters and scooter-riders also wear knee and elbow pads and protective gloves.
- Swimming can be a wonderful lifetime fitness activity. But make sure your children learn to swim well before you encourage them to swim as exercise. Many local parks, community recreation programs and fitness facilities offer low-cost swimming lessons and scholarships for lower income families.
- To prevent devastating brain and spinal cord injuries, teach your children about the dangers of diving into waters of unknown depth, diving into backyard swimming pools and hitting their heads while trying to dive from springboards. Young adolescents whose weight may increase dramatically and whose center of gravity may change from one summer to the next are particularly at risk for diving injuries.

Include children in decisions to change

Your children may resist changes you impose on them or plans you make without including them in the planning. But if they are part of the decision-making process they will be more motivated to change their habits. For example, you might take turns choosing the activity the family will do together each day.

Ask each child to make a list of active activities he or she likes to do with you. Post the lists on the

refrigerator door and check them off as you do them. Another strategy: have children make lists of activities they can do by themselves when they feel bored and can't think of anything else to do.

When you and your children talk about ways to increase your physical activity, think about barriers to activity and brainstorm ways to overcome them. These barriers may be as easy to solve as buying a jump rope and as challenging as finding a place to play in an apartment complex with no playground.

Consider your children's feelings about physical activity. Some children feel uncomfortable with certain activities, perhaps because they've been teased by peers and siblings for being awkward or not very good at something. You and your children might work to create household rules about how to treat each other when playing active games, and being patient with one another. Some children feel better once they've had lessons that help them master complex skills, such as swimming, cycling or throwing.



Other children might be self-conscious about their bodies and uncomfortable moving themselves around. Be sensitive to your child's feelings. Ask what physical activities they might enjoy and start with those.

To create more time for physical activity, begin limiting TV time. Experts recommend setting up a TV "budget" for kids. Allow a certain number of hours per week, let them choose when to watch, and keep a log of how much they watch. Some families ask children to earn TV and video-game privileges by accumulating so many minutes of physical activity for each half-hour show.

Increase your family's physical activity level gradually. Physical activity needs to be a lifetime habit. Few adults or children are able to maintain sudden, drastic changes over the long term. You might gradually decrease the amount of TV your kids watch over the course of a few months. If a half-hour family walk after dinner is too long and/or difficult, start it at 10 minutes and add 5 minutes onto the length every week or two. Keeping a log or calendar of what you do can help you keep track of your improvement. Challenge your children to see how many new activities they can add to their lists and aim to try something new once a week.

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