

Physical Activity for Children

Children benefit from exercise and a sense of fitness as much as adults do. They can participate in the same types of fitness—flexibility, aerobic fitness, and muscle strengthening. Experts recommend that teens and children (starting at age 6) do moderate to vigorous activity at least 1 hour every day.¹ And 3 or more days a week, what they choose to do should:

- Make them breathe harder and make the heart beat much faster.
- Make their muscles stronger. For example, they could play on playground equipment, play tug-a-war, lift weights, or use resistance bands.
- Make their bones stronger. For example, they could run, do hopscotch, jump rope, or play basketball or tennis.

It's okay for them to be active in smaller blocks of time that add up to 1 hour or more each day.

Flexibility

Show your children how to stretch their muscles, and let them do stretching exercises along with you. Gently correct their form when needed so that they develop good habits and understand that there is a way to do stretches that makes them most effective.

Aerobic exercise

Children often get aerobic activity without realizing it. Playing tag, having a squirt-gun fight, or playing catch with friends all provide aerobic exercise. Going for hikes and walking to the store also provide aerobic activity. Many schools and communities have programs for soccer, T-ball, and other activities. These are great ways for your children to get aerobic exercise and meet new friends.

Muscle strengthening

Bicycling, swimming, and helping in the yard or garden are just a few examples of activities that strengthen muscles. Many children show an interest in weights. When properly supervised, strength training for children is safe and can be helpful in preparing them for sports and starting good lifetime fitness habits. Talk to your child's doctor before your child starts a strength-training program.² This type of exercise is not right for every child.

When children work with weights:

1. Have an adult present who knows how to use weights.
2. Be sure the children learn the proper form. If they don't, they can hurt themselves. They also probably won't get the full benefit of exercising with weights if their form is wrong.
3. Only use machines if they can adjust to your child's size.
4. Be sure they don't compete with other children or even with their own past efforts. This can cause them to push themselves more than what is safe.
5. Be sure they don't move to heavier weights too quickly. The size of the weight is not important. They will get stronger from weight training by doing the right number of repetitions and sets.

Things for parents to think about

Look for ways to make exercise and fitness more fun. Notice whether your child enjoys a certain activity, and if he or she does not, look for other activities. Make activities more fun, perhaps by making them part of family outings, making up games to do along your route, or inviting friends to go along.

Expose your child to activities they can do for a lifetime. Swimming, bicycling, and hiking are examples of activities many people continue to enjoy until well into old age.

Be a good role model for your children. If you treat your fitness program as an unpleasant chore, your children won't see it as much fun either. On the other hand, try not to emphasize fitness so much that your children feel pressure to keep up with your expectations.

Try to create a home atmosphere that encourages being active. Children who live in a household where both parents are inactive are likely to see themselves as naturally inactive too.

Reduce your child's time in front of the television or computer. There is a direct relationship between reducing these activities and increasing your child's physical activity. Remember that exercise does not have to be complicated. Just sending children out to play is better than having them sitting with the television or computer.

If your child is involved in organized sports:

- Learn about the risks of injuries for that sport (which may be different for children than for adults) and how to prevent them. If you have concerns, talk to your child's doctor.
- Get to know your child's coach.

- Learn about the coach's style for getting children to learn skills and play well. You and your child should be comfortable with the coach's style as well as the coach's skills.

References

Citations

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2008). [2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans](#) (ODPHP Publication No. U0036). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Available online:
<http://www.health.gov/paguidelines/pdf/paguide.pdf>.
2. American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness (2008). Strength training by children and adolescents. [Pediatrics](#), 121(4): 835–840.

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