

Keeping Kids Active

Anyone who's seen kids on a playground knows that most are naturally physically active and love to move around. But what might not be apparent is that climbing to the top of a slide or swinging from the monkey bars can help lead kids to a lifetime of being active.

As they get older, it can be a challenge for kids to get enough daily activity. Reasons include increasing demands of school, a feeling among some kids that they aren't good at sports, a lack of active role models, and busy working families.

And even if kids have the time and the desire to be active, parents may not feel comfortable letting them freely roam the neighbourhood as kids once did. So their opportunities might be limited.

Despite these barriers, parents can instil a love of activity and help kids fit it into their everyday routines. Doing so can establish healthy patterns that will last into adulthood.

Benefits of Being Active

When kids are active, their bodies can do the things they want and need them to do. Why? Because regular exercise provides these benefits:

- strong muscles and bones
- weight control
- decreased risk of developing type 2 diabetes
- better sleep
- a better outlook on life

Healthy, physically active kids also are more likely to be academically motivated, alert, and successful. And physical competence builds self-esteem at every age.

What Motivates Kids?

So there's a lot to gain from regular physical activity, but how do you encourage kids to do it? The three keys are:

1. Choosing the right activities for a child's age: If you don't, the child may be bored or frustrated.
2. Giving kids plenty of opportunity to be active: Kids need parents to make activity easy by providing equipment and taking them to playgrounds and other active spots.
3. Keeping the focus on fun: Kids won't do something they don't enjoy.

When kids enjoy an activity, they want to do more of it. Practicing a skill — whether it's swimming or riding a tricycle — improves their abilities and helps them feel accomplished, especially when the effort is noticed and praised. These good feelings often make kids want to continue the activity and even try others.

Age-Appropriate Activities

The best way for kids to get physical activity is by incorporating physical activity into their daily routine. Toddlers to teens need at least 60 minutes on most (preferably all)

days. This can include free play at home, active time at school, and participation in classes or organized sports.

Here's Some Age-Based Advice:

Preschoolers: Preschoolers need play and exercise that helps them continue to develop important motor skills — kicking or throwing a ball, playing tag or follow the leader, hopping on one foot, riding a bike, freeze dancing, or running obstacle courses.

Although some sports leagues may be open to kids as young as 4, organized and team sports are not recommended until they're a little older. Preschoolers can't understand complex rules and often lack the attention span, skills, and coordination needed to play sports. Instead of learning to play a sport, they should work on fundamental skills.

School-age: With school-age kids spending more time on sedentary pursuits like watching TV and playing computer games, the challenge for parents is to help them find physical activities they enjoy and feel successful doing. These can range from traditional sports like baseball and basketball to Scouting, biking, camping, hiking, and other outdoor pursuits.

As kids learn basic skills and simple rules in the early school-age years, there might only be a few athletic standouts. As kids get older, differences in ability and personality become more apparent. Commitment and interest level often go along with ability, which is why it's important to find an activity that's right for your child. Schedules start getting busy during these years, but don't forget to set aside some time for free play.

Teenagers: Teens have many choices when it comes to being active — from school sports to after-school interests, such as yoga or skateboarding. It's important to remember that physical activity must be planned and often has to be sandwiched between various responsibilities and commitments.

Do what you can to make it easy for your teen to exercise by providing transportation and the necessary gear or equipment (including workout clothes). In some cases, the right clothes and shoes might help a shy teen feel comfortable biking or going to the gym.

Kids' Fitness Personalities

In addition to a child's age, it's important to consider his or her fitness personality. Personality traits, genetics, and athletic ability combine to influence kids' attitudes toward participation in sports and other physical activities, particularly as they get older.

Which of these three types best describes your child?

1. **The non-athlete:** This child may lack athletic ability, interest in physical activity, or both.
2. **The casual athlete:** This child is interested in being active but isn't a star player and is at risk of getting discouraged in a competitive athletic environment.
3. **The athlete:** This child has athletic ability, is committed to a sport or activity, and likely to ramp up practice time and intensity of competition.

If you understand the concepts of temperament and fitness types, you'll be better able to help your kids find the right activities and get enough exercise — and find enjoyment in physical activity. Some kids want to pursue excellence in a sport, while others may be perfectly happy and fit as casual participants.

The athlete, for instance, will want to be on the basketball team, while the casual athlete may just enjoy shooting hoops in the playground or on the driveway. The non-athlete is likely to need a parent's help and encouragement to get and stay physically active. That's why it's important to encourage kids to remain active even through they aren't top performers.

Whatever their fitness personality, all kids can be physically fit. A parent's positive attitude will help a child who's reluctant to exercise.

Be active yourself and support your kids' interests. If you start this early enough, they'll come to regard activity as a normal — and fun — part of your family's everyday routine.