

Kids and Exercise

When most adults think about exercise, they imagine working out in the gym on a treadmill or lifting weights.

But for kids, exercise means playing and being physically active. Kids exercise when they have gym class at school, soccer practice, or dance class. They're also exercising when they're at recess, riding bikes, or playing tag.

The Many Benefits of Exercise

Everyone can benefit from regular exercise. Kids who are active will:

- have stronger muscles and bones
- have a leaner body because exercise helps control body fat
- be less likely to become overweight
- decrease the risk of developing type 2 diabetes
- possibly lower blood pressure and blood cholesterol levels
- have a better outlook on life

In addition to the health benefits of regular exercise, kids who are physically fit sleep better and are better able to handle the physical and emotional challenges that a typical day presents — be that running to catch a bus, bending down to tie a shoe, or studying for a test.

The Three Elements of Fitness

If you've ever watched kids on a playground, you've seen the three elements of fitness in action when they:

1. run away from the kid who's "it" (**endurance**)
2. cross the monkey bars (**strength**)
3. bend down to tie their shoes (**flexibility**)

Parents should encourage their kids to do a variety of activities so that they can work on all three elements.

Endurance is developed when kids regularly engage in aerobic activity. During aerobic exercise, the heart beats faster and a person breathes harder. When done regularly and for continuous periods of time, aerobic activity strengthens the heart and improves the body's ability to deliver oxygen to all its cells.

Aerobic exercise can be fun for both adults and kids. Examples of aerobic activities include:

- basketball
- bicycling
- dancing
- ice-skating
- in-line skating
- soccer

- swimming
- tennis
- walking
- jogging
- running

Improving strength doesn't have to mean lifting weights. Although some kids benefit from lifting weights, it should be done under the supervision of an experienced adult who works with them. But most kids don't need a formal weight-training program to be strong. Push-ups, stomach crunches, pull-ups, and other exercises help tone and strengthen muscles. Kids also incorporate strength activities in their play when they climb, do a handstand, or wrestle.

Stretching exercises help improve flexibility, allowing muscles and joints to bend and move easily through their full range of motion. Kids look for opportunities every day to stretch when they try to get a toy just out of reach, practice a split, or flip over the couch.

The Sedentary Problem

The percentage of overweight kids has more than doubled over the past 30 years. Although many factors contribute to this epidemic, kids are becoming more sedentary. In other words, they're sitting around a lot more than they used to.

The average child is watching about 3 hours of television a day. And the average kid spends 5½ hours on all media combined.

Young kids should not be inactive for prolonged periods of time — no more than 1 hour unless they're sleeping. And school-age children should not be inactive for periods longer than 2 hours.

One of the best ways to get kids to be more active is to limit the amount of time spent in sedentary activities, especially watching TV or playing video games. Children under the age of 2 years shouldn't watch TV at all and that screen time should be limited to no more than 1 to 2 hours of quality programming a day for kids 2 years and older.

How Much Exercise Is Enough?

Parents need to ensure that their kids get enough exercise. So, how much is enough? According to dietary guidelines children 2 years and older should get at least 60 minutes of moderate exercise most days of the week. In addition to providing more practical advice on providing a healthy, balanced diet, the dietary guidelines also suggest that kids eat more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

Here are some activity recommendations for kids:

Infant

No specific requirements

Physical activity should encourage motor development

Toddler

1½ hours

30 minutes planned physical activity AND 60 minutes unstructured physical activity (free play)

Preschooler

2 hours

60 minutes planned physical activity AND 60 minutes unstructured physical activity (free play)

School age

1 hour or more

Break up into bouts of 15 minutes or more

Raising a Fit Kid

Combining regular physical activity with a healthy diet is the key to a healthy lifestyle.

Here are some tips for raising fit kids:

- Help your child participate in a variety of activities that are age-appropriate.
- Establish a regular schedule for physical activity.
- Incorporate activity into daily routines, such as taking the stairs instead of the elevator.
- Embrace a healthier lifestyle yourself, so you'll be a positive role model for your family.
- Keep it fun, so you can count on your child to come back for more.