

## **Children - getting them active**

Around one-quarter of Australian children are either overweight or obese. Children with weight problems tend to become obese adults, so it is important to encourage physical activity in young people if they are to avoid obesity-related conditions (such as heart disease) later in life.

Trying to force your child to be physically active 'because it's good for them' may not work. However, there is a range of things you can do to help your child enjoy an active life.

### **The benefits of physical activity**

Some of the benefits of physical activity and exercise for children include:

- Cardiovascular fitness
- Healthy weight
- Improved posture
- Reduced blood cholesterol
- Better sleep
- Boosted self-esteem and confidence
- Improved concentration
- Reduced stress, depression and anxiety
- Enhanced social skills.

### **Set a good example**

Children learn by example, which is why sedentary children tend to come from sedentary families. Research shows that the involvement of parents in physical activity can increase a child's participation.

Set a good example for your child in the following ways:

- Regularly participate in physical activity yourself.
- Allow your child to choose the type of activity they are interested in.
- Promote acceptance of different body shapes and ability levels.
- Reinforce the social benefits as well as the physical.
- Help your child develop skills and strategies for coping with different physical activity environments.
- Involve your child in physical activities around the home such as gardening, washing the car or house cleaning.
- Walk short distances instead of taking the car.
- Take your child for regular walks around the neighbourhood. Babies and young children can be pushed along in prams – once they get older, encourage them to walk part of the way.
- Restrict television watching and other screen-based activities (for example, computer games) to less than two hours per day. Limit viewing to programs that family members specifically want to watch. When the program is finished, turn the television off.
- If your local neighbourhood does not provide safe, affordable access to physical activity opportunities, contact your local government authority and voice your concerns.

### **Start early**

Good habits are best started early. A young child is naturally active, so build on their inclinations to use their body.

Suggestions include:

- Whenever possible, indulge your child's interest in physical activity – for example, kick the ball with them when they ask.
- Show your child how to perform basic sporting skills, such as ball throwing, skipping and jumping. Research suggests that children whose basic skills are poor tend to avoid sports.
- Take them to the local playground and help them to use the equipment. Have a go yourself – slides and swings are fun, and you are likely to play for longer with your child if you are enjoying yourself too.
- Try out different sports in age-appropriate classes. Many activities have been adapted for toddlers, including gymnastics, football and dance.
- Make sure that some family outings are physically active. For example, you could go on bushwalks together.

### **Alternatives to structured exercise**

Many adults view exercise as a necessary evil, rather than an enjoyable activity. It must be remembered that any physical activity, not just structured exercise classes, is beneficial to health and wellbeing.

Some fun activities for the family that don't feel like exercise include:

- Fly a kite in the park or at the beach.
- Dance to favourite music.
- Ride bicycles along the river or use bike paths.
- Play a family game of table tennis.
- Swim and splash about at the local pool.
- Walk the dog.
- Throw a frisbee.
- Rollerskate, rollerblade or skateboard (insist that everyone wears appropriate safety equipment).
- Jump on a trampoline.

### **Experiment with different activities**

Expose your child to as many different types of sports and physical activities as you can. You may discover they have a passion or natural talent for at least one, if not more.

Different types include activities that involve balance and grace (such as drama, dance and gymnastics), sports that require hand-to-eye coordination (such as cricket or football) and those that rely on muscular power (such as running).

Consult with your child's physical education teacher – they may have noticed a natural skill or talent that you can help your child to develop. Make sure the activity is related to your child's interests and not yours.

### **Support your child's sporting efforts**

Some children enjoy organised sports such as basketball and netball. A sporting passion is one of the easiest ways to continue exercising into adulthood.

Ways to encourage your child's sporting interests include:

- Help them to practise their sport-specific skills.
- Attend as many matches as you can.
- Praise them for their efforts – whether they win, lose or draw.
- If possible, take them to professional matches so they can be inspired by watching their sporting heroes in action.

### **Staying physically active in the colder months**

Being active on sunny days is easy, but most of us tend to stay indoors over winter.

Suggestions for staying active in colder months include:

- Rug up and explore the outdoors on cold, wet days. Give your child the opportunity to see what places look like when not bathed in sunshine. For example, the beach in winter is definitely worth seeing.
- Splashing through puddles is fun. Put on gumboots and raincoats, and go puddle-jumping with your child.
- Many activities can be performed indoors such as swimming, trampolining, table tennis and cricket. Explore different options in your neighbourhood.
- Some sports, such as Australian Rules football, are traditionally played during the winter months.

### **Things to remember**

- Set a good example for your children by being physically active yourself.
- Incorporate fun physical activities into family outings, such as frisbee throwing, bushwalking or flying a kite.
- Expose your child to as many different types of sports and physical activities as you can.