

## Expert Answers to your Questions about Fitness

**Q:** How much physical activity should my child get each day?

**A:** For good health, children need at least 60 minutes of physical activity most days of the week but ideally, every day. This total can include a variety of activities such as participating in sports, dance or martial arts classes, biking, running, swimming, walking and even "active chores" such as raking leaves, vacuuming and dusting. In addition, for healthy muscles and bones, kids should participate in strengthening exercises twice each week. These activities include push-ups, pull-ups, gymnastics or playing on a jungle gym or other playground equipment.

Kids can accumulate their 60 minutes in shorter chunks such as 30 minutes of walking, 10 minutes of bike riding and 20 minutes of active play such as jumping rope or playing tag. You play an important role in helping your child to be active by being active yourself, finding fun ways for the family to be active together, and setting limits on "couch potato" activities such as watching TV, playing video games and using the computer. When it comes to being active, kids take their lead from you!

**Q:** Why is it important for kids to be physically active?

**A:** There are several reasons why children need plenty of physical activity every day. Being active promotes healthy bones, muscles and joints, builds endurance and muscle strength, makes it easier to maintain a healthy weight, increases energy, and even fosters self-esteem. In addition, regular physical activity helps ward off chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease and certain cancers. Encouraging your children to develop the habit of daily physical activity today lays the groundwork for a lifetime of good health.

**Q:** What can I do to encourage my children to be more physically active?

**A:** Start to get them moving in "everyday ways." For example, ask your children to do active errands such as walking to the store (if it is safe for them to do so), sweeping the sidewalk or helping to clean out the garage. When kids complain that there's "nothing to do," suggest active games such as jumping rope or riding bikes. Encourage them to sample activities in different settings and with different people. For instance, they might enjoy swimming with a best friend or hiking with a community youth group.

Support children who are involved in sports or other physical activity programs. Offer to help them practice or encourage them to show you their new moves or techniques. Provide or arrange their transportation to practices, games or activities. Whenever possible, attend their events to cheer them on. Perhaps most important, provide positive reinforcement by praising their accomplishments and hard work, rather than focusing on what they do wrong.

And remember, when it comes to healthy habits, kids take their lead from you. Make sure that regular physical activity tops your own "to do" list. Displaying the attitude that being active is fun and helps you feel good rubs off on your kids, too. Get the whole family moving by regularly planning enjoyable events

such as a bike ride, a hike in the woods or a trip to the neighborhood "Y" or recreation center. Playing with your kids can be the best exercise of all!

**Q:** My children don't want to join a sports team or organized classes such as dance or gymnastics. How else can they get enough physical activity?

**A:** Playing sports or attending classes is not required for kids to be physically active. Many kids just aren't interested in these organized approaches, but do enjoy less structured activities. Children are active enough if they accumulate at least 60 minutes of physical activity most days of the week but ideally, every day. These activities can include walking, biking or rollerblading around the neighborhood, to school or to a friend's house, jumping rope or shooting baskets with friends, practicing dance steps to their favorite music or swimming. Encourage your children to participate in whatever physical activities they like best.

**Q:** My kids hate the idea of "exercise." How can I change their attitude and get them to be more physically active?

**A:** Many people are turned off by the thought of "exercise" because they picture time spent being bored or sweaty. Strike "exercise" from your vocabulary and talk about physical activity in terms of "fun" and "play" instead. Adults and kids alike are more eager to get moving when it's enjoyable. Playing with your kids can be the best exercise of all!

Encourage your kids to do the activities they love most and to do something fun on a daily basis, if possible. Riding a bike, tossing a Frisbee or jumping rope is fun and good for them, too. Make sure you get into the act! Lead them on a "nature walk" around the neighborhood to identify plants and birds or just to talk about their day. Romp with them in the backyard or turn on some old rock and roll and teach them the twist. Remember to let kids pick things they like to do. Soon they'll ask you to schedule the next "play date!"

**Q:** My kids' schedules are jam-packed with school, homework and after-school activities. How can we squeeze physical activity into an already overcrowded schedule?

**A:** There's no doubt that kids today are in a time crunch. In fact, "real" free time among children ages 12 and under has declined from 40% of their day to 25% of their day. And yet, kids are spending more time than ever in sedentary activities. On average, children and adolescents between 8 and 18 years of age spend more than 7 ½ hours watching TV or movies, listening to music, playing video games, or on the computer. How much screen time do your kids log each day? If it's more than an hour or two, they can spare some time for physical activity!

The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommend that children get at least 60 minutes of physical activity daily. Every kid needs to do some aerobic, muscle strengthening, and bone strengthening activities – each at least 3 times a week. Before you protest that your kids don't have a free hour, be reassured that accumulating activity in shorter chunks of 10 minutes or more benefits them, too. Even the busiest kids can work in a few daily "take 10" breaks to walk the dog, make the

beds, shoot some baskets, pedal an exercise bike or do some stretches and jumping jacks. I think you'll find that your children do have time to move when you set limits on TV time and encourage short bursts of physical activity.

Another option is to ask your child to choose some type of physical activity as one of his/her after-school activities. This needn't be a team sport but should be something they enjoy such as ice skating, martial arts or dancing. Also, try freeing up a day or two after school for active play such as jumping rope or riding bikes.

**Q:** What are some physical activity ideas for my kids that don't cost a lot?

**A:** There's a world of free or low-cost activities your kids and the whole family will enjoy. Here are just a few ideas to get you started:

Start in your own backyard:

Plant and tend a vegetable garden together—and then reap the delicious rewards at the family dinner table.

On hot days, run through the sprinkler or stage a water balloon toss.

Play tourist:

Take a weekend walking tour to see the sights in your own town.

Check for free or reduced admission days at walking-friendly attractions such as local museums or zoos.

Options for outdoors or indoors:

Hit the walking or bike trails at a nearby park.

Train together for a charity walk-a-thon.

Play a round of miniature golf.

Borrow a group fitness or kickboxing tape from the library to try together.

Contact your community recreation center for free or low-cost options such as swimming or basketball.

Get out in the fresh air and do some good by volunteering to help clean up a park or your neighborhood.

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