Encourage Your Child to Be Physically Active

Many powerful benefits come from regular physical activity. Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics to help families live healthy, active lives.

Getting the Entire Family Moving

Because participation in all types of physical activity is declining dramatically as a child's age and grade in school increase, it is important that physical activity be a regular part of family life.

Studies have shown that lifestyles learned in childhood are much likelier to stay with a person into adulthood. If sports and physical activities are a family priority, they will provide children and parents with a strong foundation for a lifetime of health.

For optimal health and well-being, children and adolescents aged 6 and older need at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day, as well as at least a few days per week of bone- and muscle-strengthening exercises. Children younger than 6 years need 3 hours of activity every day.

The Benefits of Physical Activity

Being physically active requires moving enough to breathe heavily, be short of breath, feel warm, and sweat. Exercise is vital to the health and well-being of children, by providing many physical, mental, and behavioral health benefits.

The benefits of physical activity include

Benefits to the Body

- Builds and maintains healthy bones, muscles, and joints
- Controls weight and body fat
- Improves appearance
- Increases muscle strength, endurance, and flexibility
- Improves ability to fall asleep quickly and sleep well
- Reduces the risk of diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease later in life
- Builds and improves athletic skills

Benefits to the Mind

- Increases enthusiasm and optimism
- Fosters teamwork and friendship when it's an organized sport
- Boosts self-esteem
- Reduces anxiety, tension, and depression
- Improves school performance, attention, and behavior

Getting Started

Parents can play a key role in helping their child become more physically active.

Here are 11 ways to get started.

1. **Talk with your child's doctor.** Your child's doctor can help your child understand why physical activity is important. Your child's doctor can also help you and your child identify a sport or activity that is best for your child.
2. **Find a fun activity.** Help your child find a sport that she enjoys. The more she enjoys the activity, the more likely she will be to continue it. Get the entire family involved. It is a great way to spend time together.
3. **Choose an activity that is developmentally appropriate.** For example, a 7- or 8-year-old child may not be ready for weight lifting or a 3-mile run, but soccer, bicycle riding, and swimming are all appropriate activities.
4. **Plan ahead.** Make sure your child has a convenient time and place to exercise.
5. **Provide a safe environment.** Make sure your child's equipment and chosen site for the sport or activity are safe. Make sure your child's clothing is comfortable and appropriate.
6. **Provide active toys.** Young children especially need easy access to balls, jump ropes, and other active toys.
7. **Be a role model.** Child ren who regularly see their parents enjoying sports and physical activity are likelier to do so themselves.
8. **Play with your child.** Help her learn a new sport or another physical activity. Or just have fun together by going for a walk, hike, or bike ride.
9. **Set limits.** Limit screen time, including time spent on TV, videos, computers, and video games, each day. Use the free time for more physical activities.
10. **Make time for exercise.** Some children are so overscheduled with homework, music lessons, and other planned activities that they do not have time for exercise.
11. **Do not overdo activity.** When your child is ready to start, remember to tell her to listen to her body. Exercise and physical activity should not hurt. If pain occurs, your child should slow down or try a less vigorous activity. As with any activity, it is important not to overdo it. If exercise starts to interfere with school or other activities, talk with your child's doctor.

Healthy, Active Living

During well-child visits (also known as health supervision visits), your child's doctor will ask you questions related to nutrition, fitness, and media habits. Remember that health is not about a specific weight, shape, or size. All children, regardless of their weight, shape, or size, are encouraged to live healthy, active lives.

To lead a healthy, active life, families can strive to reach the following goals:

- Eat at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables each day.
- Create a Family Media Use Plan at www.HealthyChildren.org/MediaUsePlan to help balance online and off-line activities.
- Get 1 hour or more of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day.
- Avoid sugary drinks.

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by Philip Remillard

Remember

Exercise along with a balanced diet provides the foundation for a healthy, active life. One of the most important things parents can do is encourage healthy habits in their children early in life. It is not too late to start. Ask your child's doctor about tools for healthy living today.

Resources

American Academy of Pediatrics
www.aap.org and www.HealthyChildren.org

Action for Healthy Kids
www.actionforhealthykids.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention "Physical Activity" Information
www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity

We Can! Ways to Enhance Children's Activity & Nutrition
www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/wecan

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