

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, during recess, at dance class or soccer practice, while riding bikes, or when 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

Besides enjoying the health benefits of regular exercise, kids who are physically fit sleep better and are better able to handle physical and emotional challenges — from running to catch a bus to 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 extended 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
- ice-skating

- inline skating
- soccer
- swimming
- tennis
- walking
- jogging
- running

Improving strength doesn't have to mean [lifting weights](#) . Although some kids benefit from weightlifting, 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 do a cartwheel.

The Sedentary Problem

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

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, 8- to 18-year-olds watch about 4.5 hours of [television](#) a day. And the average kid spends 7 hours on all screen media combined (TV, videos, and DVDs, computer time outside of schoolwork, and video games).

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. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends these limits on screen time:

- kids under age 2 should watch no TV at all
- kids older than 2 should be restricted to just 1-2 hours a day of *quality* programming

How Much Exercise Is Enough?

Parents should make sure that their kids get enough exercise. So, how much is enough? Kids and teens get 60 minutes or more of physical activity daily.

The National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) offers these activity guidelines for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers:

Age

Minimum Daily Activity

Comments

Infant

No specific requirements

Physical activity should encourage motor development

Toddler

1½ hours

30 minutes planned ~~AND~~ physical activity

60 minutes unstructured physical activity (free play)

Preschooler

2 hours

60 minutes planned ~~AND~~ physical activity

60 minutes unstructured physical activity (free play)

School age

1 hour or more

Break up into bouts of 15 minutes or more

Infants and young children 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.

Raising Fit Kids

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 kids participate in a variety of age-appropriate activities.
- 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 kids to come back for more.