

Keeping Active

Everyone agrees on the importance of physical activity for children, but translating theory into practice can be a problem. Parents and caregivers can play an important role in encouraging a variety of activities that will get kids moving.

Benefits

Young children explore the world through their whole body. They naturally want to run and jump, climb and balance. Apart from the obvious health benefits of stronger muscles and denser bones, such activities also improve coordination, making it less likely that children will fall and injure themselves.

Being in good physical shape influences mental performance. Studies show that children who are physically active tend to concentrate better and have increased creativity and problem solving skills.

Emotional well-being is also affected. Vigorous exercise helps get rid of tensions resulting from stress or anger, and an improved body image increases self-esteem. When you make activity a family affair, having fun together enhances the bonds between family members.

Barriers

Certain elements of modern family life create barriers to getting enough exercise. In many circumstances, parents are afraid to let their children just “go out to play” without close supervision. Children in apartment buildings need someone to take them to the park, which may not be near by.

Not all child care settings have indoor spaces large enough for running and jumping. Schools, under curriculum pressures, have often reduced the time and resources allocated to quality physical education.

Meanwhile, adults and children both spend more time going places in the car instead of walking. In addition, television, video games and computer games take up more and more of children’s free time. Not only are they not building muscles (other than in their fingers), but they also are frequently snacking on fatty foods while they’re sitting there. Obesity in children and youth has increased 50 per cent in the last 15 years.

Lack of space, equipment, time, money, good weather (“it’s too hot/too cold out!”) — it takes energy to get past these excuses, energy that physical activity will itself contribute to building.

Encouraging activity

Here are a few ways to provide opportunities for children to follow their natural urge to move.

- Be a positive model by staying active yourself: regular exercise will help your stress level too.
- Make a family activity out of a game of catch, a bike ride in the neighbourhood, playing tag in the park.
- Minimize competition. When they lose the game or the race, many children lose their motivation to participate.
- Provide access to spaces, both indoors and outdoors, with room to move and with play equipment that challenges children at the level of their age.
- Learn about what activities are appropriate for your children’s ages. In general, younger children need less structured activities, played for shorter periods. Older children will appreciate working on the skills and rules of particular games.
- Allow for children’s different interests, talents and rates of development.
- Use your imagination: an obstacle course in the basement or backyard (overturned chairs, tunnels made from cardboard boxes); a game of catch with bean bags (dried beans in an odd sock, tied off with an elastic).
- Consider the exercise potential in activities like gardening, shovelling snow and washing the car.
- Find out about programs available in your neighbourhood: family swim times, kiddy gymnastics, sports programs during school breaks.
- Choose child care that devotes adequate time and space to developing children’s big muscles, not just fine muscle control. This means 30 to 60 minutes per day of moderate to vigorous play. Pressure your children’s school to offer a minimum of 2½ hours a week of quality physical education.
- Limit time on the TV, computer and video games.

Most of all, have lots of fun working up a sweat together.

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This resource sheet was prepared in part with information from the Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance.