

Building Active Habits

As parents, we teach children healthy habits while they are young, habits like brushing their teeth, buckling up in the car and choosing healthy food. Daily physical activity is another habit that we want to become so automatic that children won't feel quite "right" unless they've done it. If your children think that going to play outdoors means taking their pocket video game out on the porch, it may be time to rethink the habits they're forming.

Expect activity

Your expectations send powerful messages. Welcome children's activity and let them know that you expect them to like to move, whether they are two or sixteen years old, girls or boys, talented at sports or not.

Honour individuality

Not everyone can develop a high level of skill. Not everyone wants to be part of a team. But everyone can find a physical activity they enjoy and can practise on a regular basis. That includes children with disabilities. Help your children discover activities that suit their abilities and interests.

Show your approval

Children thrive on positive feedback so give them lots of encouragement for being active. Help them notice how good they feel when they move their body. They don't have to run the fastest or throw the farthest; emphasize their effort and progress instead. Be accepting of the action and noise that comes with physical activity. If you can't allow it indoors, make sure that children get opportunities to run around outdoors or in a gym.

Get involved

Your involvement will make activities more fun for children. Play hide-and-seek with your toddler, throw the ball back and forth with your preschooler, walk the dog with your eight year old, shoot baskets with your teenager. You might decide to take up a sport, like bowling or karate, as a family. Or plan an active family vacation around hiking and swimming. By sharing these fun times with your children, you demonstrate the importance you put on activity at the same time that you strengthen family ties.

Make it easy to be active

You don't have to enroll your children in a course every day of the week to encourage activity. In fact, in the case of young children, free play is more in tune with

their stage of development and they will usually choose to move. However, you cannot count on your older children getting enough physical activity in school, especially if they take the bus or get a ride. Here are some ways you can help children build active habits:

- **Provide suitable space** - Make a safe space in your home where children can play actively. Go often to the park, local rink and swimming pool.
- **Make time** - Leave some time unscheduled so there's room for free, unstructured play. Limit screen time (television, computer, video games). If you can't find a long block of time for physical activity, look for a few ten-minute periods each day.
- **Provide equipment** - Simple, low-cost equipment—balls, skipping ropes, frisbees, etc.—will stimulate active play. An obstacle course, built with boxes, hoops and boards, can also get children moving in different ways. Make sure you supply the necessary protective gear (bike helmet, hockey pads, etc.) for whatever activity they are doing. If your budget is limited, choose a sport, like soccer, which requires minimal equipment.
- **Teach skills** - At a young age, give your children opportunities to learn and practise basic skills like running, jumping, climbing, throwing, catching, biking, swimming and skating. They might be too embarrassed to learn when they're older if everyone else already knows how.
- **Provide supervision** - When you're not doing the activity with your children, you want to be sure they are safe. Get together with other parents to see if you can take turns supervising at the park or walking to school.

Be active yourself

Your example speaks more loudly to children than your words. Show them your commitment to fitness by finding opportunities to be active: take the stairs instead of the elevator, park at the end of the parking lot and walk back, do floor exercises during TV commercials, get up and stretch at the computer. They'll understand that adults like to move too when they see you go for a walk with a friend, take a yoga class or make a date to go dancing.

Have fun

Everyone finds it easier to keep doing something when it's fun. If one activity doesn't work, try another till you find something that suits you and your family. You're building active habits that will last a lifetime.

by Betsy Mann