



# Physical Activity for Children and Teens

## How Exercise Helps Children and Teens

Children as young as preschool age benefit from exercise and fitness as much as adults do. Experts recommend that teens and children (starting at age 6) do moderate to vigorous activity at least 1 hour every day. And 3 or more days a week, what they choose to do should:

- Make them breathe harder and make the heart beat much faster than normal.
- Make their muscles stronger. For example, they could play on playground equipment, play tug-of-war, do sit-ups, or use resistance bands.
- Make their bones stronger. For example, they could run, play hopscotch, jump rope, or play basketball or tennis.

It's okay for them to be active in smaller blocks of time that add up to 1 hour or more each day.

## Three Types of Fitness for Children

It's important for children and teens to take part in all three types of fitness: flexibility, aerobic fitness, and muscle strengthening.

### 1. FLEXIBILITY

Show your children how to stretch their muscles. Let them do stretching exercises along with you. Gently correct their form when needed so that they learn good habits and understand that there is a way to do stretches that makes them most effective.

### 2. AEROBIC EXERCISE

Children often get aerobic activity without realizing it. Playing tag, having a squirt-gun fight, or playing catch with friends all provide aerobic exercise. Going for hikes and walking to the store also provide aerobic activity. Many schools and communities have programs for soccer, T-ball, and other activities. These are great ways for your children to get aerobic exercise and meet new friends.

### 3. MUSCLE STRENGTHENING

Bicycling, swimming, climbing, and helping in the yard or garden are just a few examples of activities that strengthen muscles.

Many children show an interest in weights. When properly supervised, weight training for children is safe and can be helpful in preparing them for sports and starting good lifetime fitness habits. Talk to your child's doctor before your child starts a weight-training program. This type of exercise is not right for every child.

When children work with weights:

- Have an adult present who knows how to use weights.
- Be sure the children learn the proper form. If they don't, they can hurt themselves. They also probably won't get the full benefit of exercising with weights if their form is wrong.
- Only use machines that can adjust to each child's size.
- Be sure that children don't compete with other kids or even with their own past efforts. This can cause them to push themselves beyond what is safe.
- Be sure they don't move to heavier weights too quickly. The size of the weight is not important. Children will get stronger from weight training by doing the right number of repetitions and sets.

## Tips for Helping Your Child

- **Look for ways to make exercise and fitness more fun.** Notice whether your child enjoys a certain activity. If he or she does not, look for other activities to try. Make activities more fun, perhaps by making them part of family outings, making up games to do along your route, or inviting friends to go along.
- **Expose your children to activities they can do for a lifetime.** Swimming, biking, and hiking are examples of activities many people enjoy until well into old age.
- **Be a good role model for your children.** If you treat your fitness program as an unpleasant chore, your children won't see it as much fun either. On the other hand, try not to emphasize fitness so much that your children feel pressure to keep up with your expectations.
- **Try to create a home atmosphere that encourages being active.** Children who live in a household where both parents are inactive are likely to see themselves as naturally inactive too.
- **Limit TV, video games, and computer time.** There is a direct link between reducing these activities and increasing your child's physical activity. Remember that exercise does not have to be complicated. Just sending children out to play is healthier than having them sitting in front of the TV or computer.

## ORGANIZED SPORTS

If your child is involved in organized sports:

- **Learn about the risks** of injuries for that sport (which may be different for children than for adults) and how to prevent them. Help your child prevent sport injuries. If you have concerns, talk to your child's doctor.
- **Get to know your child's coach.** Make sure that the coach knows something about sports medicine for that particular sport.
- **Learn about the coach's style** for getting children to learn skills and play well. You and your child should be comfortable with the coach's style and the coach's skills.

## Tips for Helping Your Teen

Teens sometimes need encouragement to get active. You can help motivate your teen by setting an example.

If regular exercise is a normal part of family life, teens may see it as natural to start or keep exercising. Household chores count as physical activity too. Talk with your teen about the physical benefits of exercise, such as improved mood or energy level.

## COMPETITIVE SPORTS

Although competitive sports are a great way for teens to be physically active while they learn valuable social skills, be aware that sports are not for everyone.

- Focus on things that your teen enjoys doing, whether it's competitive or noncompetitive sports or personal fitness activities (such as jogging, yoga, or cycling).
- Some teens may prefer individual sports like karate, gymnastics, and swimming rather than group sports like soccer and baseball.

Help your teen avoid competition that stresses winning over everything else, including sportsmanship and schoolwork.

## AVOIDING INJURIES

Many sports require repeated movements or require that bones repeatedly bear weight. Overuse injuries occur from stressing the joints, muscles, or other tissues and not letting them recover.

The growing bones of young athletes may not be able to handle as much stress as the mature bones of adults. Repeated stress on the body may lead to irritation, inflammation, stress fractures, or other conditions. For example, a swimmer may get a rotator cuff injury because he or she doesn't realize that fatigue or poor performance is a sign of overuse.

Teens who take part in endurance events, year-round sports, or weekend tournaments, and teens who diet to stay at a certain weight for a sport (such as gymnastics or wrestling) are also at risk for injuries. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends limiting one sport to no more than 5 days a week, with at least 1 day off each week from any organized physical activity. Also, the AAP suggests that athletes have at least 2 to 3 months off each year from their particular sport.

Anyone who does too much activity without the right conditioning is at risk for injury. Be sure young athletes get enough rest and nutrition.

Some teens think protein powders or shakes are a nutritious snack that can help build muscle. They may cause harm and cost a lot. If your teen wants to try one, talk to his or her doctor first.

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