

Launching a Lifetime of Healthy Habits

How Starting Physical Activity Early Sets the Tone for Years to Come

Encouraging exercise and physical activity in the routines of children not only offers immediate benefits, but also has long-term impacts on their wellbeing as adults. To help form healthy habits, parents can seek out opportunities to help children develop a love for an active lifestyle, such as age-appropriate physical development programs like those offered by The Little Gym.

One of the best things you can do for your children is to establish the habit of being active right from the get-go. But for all the benefits of exercise that they can enjoy today, the most important reasons to encourage your kids to be active now will manifest tomorrow, years down the road in their own adulthoods.

The long-term benefits of childhood fitness will help keep your children healthy long after you stop tucking them in at night. And, the most current research shows that the best way to help your kids enjoy a healthy life for decades to come is to establish active habits as early as possible.

Sowing the Seeds of Health

There is no doubt that exercise offers immediate benefits for children. Aerobic activity improves mood and helps kids maintain a healthy weight. Being physically active can also help form a positive self-image in children.

But perhaps even more important than the immediate benefits of physical activity are the long-term ones. For example, studies suggest that if started before puberty, exercise that emphasizes speed, agility and muscular strength will maximize bone mass and promote skeletal health.¹ And, even moderate, weight-bearing physical activity in the preteen and teen years reduces the risk of osteoporosis in older women.²

The evidence is especially clear in the case of heart disease, where there is a direct link

between children who are inactive and obese, and their increased tendency to develop full-blown heart disease as adults. The news isn't all bleak, however. Experts agree that if children developed heart-healthy habits and carried them into adulthood, we could eliminate up to 90% of coronary disease.³

Getting Kids Moving!

We don't need to create a generation of elite child athletes to achieve these health benefits. The goal is simply to get kids up and moving, and keep them moving. In the recent past, studies focused on exercise primarily as a way to prevent childhood obesity. While this is still important, new studies are finding even more essential health benefits to getting kids out of their chairs and onto their feet.

Reducing sedentary time in children enhances their cardiorespiratory fitness well into adulthood.⁴ Kids who move more and sit less enjoy healthier adult cholesterol and blood pressure levels, as well as decreased risk of Type 2 Diabetes.⁵

Unfortunately, most children today in developed, western nations are less active than ever before in history. And, studies show that the drop in physical activity is happening earlier and earlier in childhood.⁶ We know without a shadow of a doubt that children who emphasize exercise in their weekly routines are likely to continue that behavior as adults. So, what can you do as a parent to help keep your children physically active?

How Parents Can Help Form a Habit of Active Fun

Making physical activity fun is the best way to encourage children to form healthy habits. A longitudinal study of middle- and high-school students found that their adolescent attitudes about sports, exercise and fitness predicted their involvement in exercise as adults.⁷ Multiple studies all identify some common factors surrounding ways to help kids get and stay active that the kids themselves reiterate again and again⁸:

- Feeling confident about physical skills
- Having opportunities for active play with peers
- Developing a sense of belonging to a group
- Being supported in an encouraging environment
- Seeing physical activities as an expected and regular part of life

How can parents like you help to make exercise fun? Here are some tips to help launch a lifetime of healthy habits.

1) Play with your kids. Whether it's a game of tag, taking a neighborhood walk together or tossing around a ball in the park, family play sets the expectation that physical activity is a part of life and that adults enjoy it, too.

2) Stay positive. Praise your children's physical efforts, as well as their actual accomplishments. Offer suggestions in a supportive way and never criticize or compare their efforts to another child's.

3) Change it up. Getting involved in multiple, structured physical activities (rather than just a single sport) seems to increase the odds of staying active into adulthood.⁹

4) Add some structure. Especially for younger children, access to facilities is a positive link to an active lifestyle.¹⁰ Seek out

child-specific physical development centers like The Little Gym that offer a variety of fun programs in a noncompetitive, nurturing environment.

We know that exercise patterns formed in preschool tend to persist among preteens and beyond.¹¹ So, the earlier you help your children establish healthy, active habits, the better their odds of a healthy future.

Research compiled and reviewed by Dr. Cheryl K. Olson, a public health researcher and former Harvard Medical School faculty member who specializes in child development and health behaviors.

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³ McGill, H.C., McMahan, C.A., & Gidding, S.S. (2009). Are pediatricians responsible for prevention of adult cardiovascular disease? *Nature Clinical Practice Cardiovascular Medicine*, 6:10-11.

⁴ Martinez-Gomez, D., Ortega, F.B., Ruiz, J.R., Vicente-Rodriguez G., Veiga, O.L. et al. (2011). Excessive sedentary time and low cardiorespiratory fitness in European adolescents: the HELENA study. *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 96:240-246.

⁵ Patel, A.V., Bernstein, L., Deka, A., Feigelson, H.S., Campbell, P.T. et al. (2010). Leisure time spent sitting in relation to total mortality in a prospective cohort of U.S. adults. *American Journal of Epidemiology* 172:419-429.

⁶ Craggs, C., Corder, K. van Sluijs, E.M.F., & Griffin, S.J. (2011). Determinants of

change in physical activity in children and adolescents: A systematic review. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 40(6): 645-658.

⁷ Graham, D.J., Sirard, J.R., & Neumark-Sztainer, D. (2011). Adolescents' attitudes toward sports, exercise and fitness predict physical activity levels 5 and 10 years later. *Preventive Medicine* 52:130-132.

⁸ Cox, A.E., Smith, A.L., & Williams, L. (2008). Change in physical education motivation and physical activity behavior during middle school. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 43, 506-513.

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⁹ Kjønniksen, L., Torsheim, T., & Wold, B. (2008). Tracking of leisure-time physical activity during adolescence and young adulthood: a 10-year longitudinal study. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 5:69.

¹⁰ Sallis, J.F., Prochaska, J.J., & Taylor, W.C. (2000). A review of correlates of physical activity of children and adolescents. *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*, 32:963-975.

¹¹ Hallal, P.C., Wells, J.C.K., Reichert, F.F., Anselmi, L., & Victora, C.G. (2006). Early determinants of physical activity in adolescence: Prospective birth cohort study. *BMJ*, 332:1002-1007.