

Weighing in on Children's Fitness and Nutrition

by Sylvia W. Lee

Parents notice their children's activity long before birth. As infants, they communicate with their whole body, squirming, kicking, and flailing their arms. Always on the go as toddlers, they love running, jumping, throwing, and striking out with hands and feet. So why are fitness authorities noticing large numbers of American children are unfit?

Unfortunately, biking around the neighborhood, playing basketball or baseball at the playground, enjoying a game of tag in the back yard have been replaced with watching television, playing video games, and spending hours online on Facebook or the Internet.

Participation in [regular physical activity](#) is essential to the health of children and adolescents. Unless the weather is bad, encourage children to play outdoors after school rather than immediately start on homework. [Physical activity](#) helps build and maintain strong bones, muscles, and joints. Added benefits include the reduction of the risks associated with [childhood obesity](#) and diseases such as hypertension, coronary heart disease, and osteoporosis. It also enhances feelings of well-being and reduces symptoms of depression and anxiety. Lastly, when children enter school, physical exercise may increase their capacity for learning.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends the following guidelines for different age groups that are consistent with the developmental level of children:

- **Infants and Toddlers:** Provide children with a safe, nurturing play environment that does not include television, especially for children younger than 2 years. Allow unstructured exploration under the supervision of a responsible caregiver. Develop enjoyment of outdoor physical activity such as walking in the neighborhood, unorganized free play outdoors, and walking through a park or zoo.

- **Preschool-Aged Children (4-6 years):** Encourage free play that emphasizes fun, playfulness, exploration, and experimentation. Provide opportunities to run, swim, tumble, throw, and catch on flat surfaces. Supervise child at all times to ensure safety. Take the child for short walks instead of being transported by car or stroller.

- **Elementary School-Aged Children (6-9 years):** Continue to encourage free play that emphasizes acquiring fundamental skills and allows children to improve their motor skills, visual tracking, and balance. Encourage children to walk, dance, and jump rope. Initiate organized sports such as soccer or baseball that have flexible rules and a short instruction time, including free time during practice. Focus on enjoyment, not competition.

- **Middle School-Aged Children (10-12 years):** Continue to encourage physical activities that focus on enjoyment with family members and friends with the emphasis on skill development and increased concentration on tactics and strategy. Since puberty begins at different rates for children at this age, determine their participation in contact and collision sports on their maturity rather than their chronologic age. This helps lower the risk of injury and increase the chances of success. May start weight training providing the program is supervised well, small free weights are used with high repetitions, proper

technique is followed, and shorter sets using heavier weights and maximum lifts are avoided.

- **Adolescents:** Identify activities that are fun and include friends. Since adolescents are still going through puberty, determine participation in competitive contact and collision sports on their size and ability rather than their chronologic age. Encourage activities such as dance, yoga, running, walking, cycling, and hiking. Even household jobs and yard work have places of importance, especially ones such as vacuuming, sweeping/mopping floors, cleaning windows, mowing the lawn, weeding, etc.

According to the Centers For Disease Control and Prevention, incorporate the following into children's physical activity:

- **Aerobic:** Aerobic activity should make up most of your child's 60 or more minutes of physical activity each day. This can include either moderate-intensity aerobic activity, such as brisk walking, or vigorous-intensity activity, such as running. Be sure to include vigorous-intensity aerobic activity on at least 3 days per week.

- **Muscle Strengthening:** Include muscle strengthening activities, such as gymnastics or push-ups, at least 3 days per week as part of your child's 60 or more minutes.

- **Bone Strengthening:** Include bone strengthening activities, such as jumping rope or running, at least 3 days per week as part of your child's 60 or more minutes.

Along with increased physical activity, the following factors help improve the health and quality of life for children and adolescents:

- The [food pyramid](#) to make healthy meal and snack choices consisting of low-saturated fat, low-cholesterol foods after the age of 2 years; whole grains, [vegetables, and fruits](#).
- An appropriate [weight/height ratio](#).
- A tobacco-, alcohol-, and drug-free lifestyle.
- Mealtimes as a family event, as often as possible. Create a relaxed atmosphere without TV.

It's equally as important for parents to set good examples of healthy eating and make physical activity a priority. "A parent's active lifestyle is a powerful stimulus for a child, says Edward Laskowski, M.D., a specialist in physical medicine and rehabilitation and co-director of the Sports Medicine Center at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota.

Studies show that as a child's age and grade in school increases, participation in all types of physical activity decreases. In order to provide children and parents with a strong foundation of health for a lifetime, it is vitally important that [physical activity](#) be a regular part of family life. Studies have shown that lifestyles learned as children are much more likely to continue into adulthood.

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