

Physical Activity for Kids

The benefits of staying physically active are clear. Children (and adults) who are regularly active will benefit from:

- stronger muscles and bones;
- lower body fat and lower likelihood of becoming overweight;
- a decreased risk of cancer, heart disease and type 2 diabetes;
- better mood and ability to cope with stress;
- higher academic performance;
- good habits which will last a lifetime.



However, changes in lifestyles mean that a lot of children are not physically active for the recommended 60 minutes per day. Many parents are reluctant to allow their children to play outside, and children are increasingly drawn to screen-based pursuits. Working families are busy, and often children can become demotivated by the competitive element of organised sports.

So how can you encourage your child to be more physically active? First of all, think about your child's 'activity personality'. These fall into three main types:

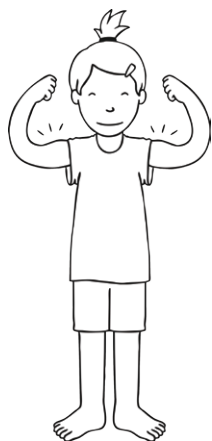


- **The Non-Athlete:** these children are just not interested in most sports, can be reluctant to become physically active, and risk not getting involved in any physical activity at all. They need lots of encouragement to participate, and the activities they do need to be lots of fun.
- **The Casual Athlete:** these children enjoy being active, but tend to dislike the competitive, high-pressure element of organised sport. They love to have a kickabout or throw balls into a hoop, but can become demotivated by team sports as they often feel they are not good enough.
- **The Athlete:** these children tend to be physically confident and capable, and enjoy the competitive element of organised sports. They push themselves and train hard to succeed in competitions.

Obviously, your child's personality will be a huge guide for the type of activity that will interest them. If a child doesn't find an activity fun or enjoyable, they are not going to want to do it. Think also about your child's physical stature – bigger, sturdier children may prefer football whereas smaller, more flexible children might be interested in gymnastics or dancing. Don't let your child's gender be a bar to what they could do – the success and popularity of 'Strictly Come Dancing', the England women's football team and 'Billy Elliot' prove that every sport and activity is open to both boys and girls!



Next think about the three elements of physical fitness and how your child might be working on these in their day to day life.



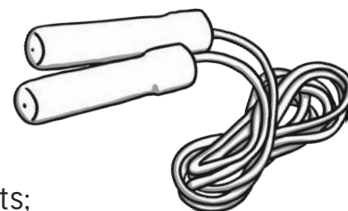
- **Endurance:** getting the heart and lungs working, increasing stamina and fitness. Activities to try include racing and chasing games such as 'tag', cycling, football, swimming, walking or trampolining.
- **Strength:** building the weight bearing capability of the bones and muscles. Activities to try include visiting the playground so your child can climb and swing, doing headstands and handstands or visiting an indoor climbing centre.
- **Flexibility:** children tend to be naturally flexible, and you can encourage this by asking your child to stretch for things, to try cartwheels, the splits, balancing or try some yoga poses – kids love these as many are named after animals.

So, you know your child's activity personality and what they are likely to find fun, but how to achieve that target of 60 minutes physical activity per day? Bear in mind that children, particularly those of primary school age, tend to be quite active during the school day. To top this up, try some of the following ideas:

- **After-school clubs:** most schools offer after-school clubs in a variety of areas, from football to netball, judo to gymnastics. Many will be free, or run at a minimal cost. If cost is an issue, discuss this with the school. Schools receive government funding for children who are fostered or adopted, children entitled to free school meals because their parents are on a low income, and children with one or both parents serving in the armed forces. You may be able to ask the school to contribute towards part or all of the cost of an after-school club, but this will depend on what else the school is spending the funding on to support your child.
- **Independent clubs:** there are clubs out there for every activity you can possibly think of. Active children will enjoy the competitive element of organised sports teams, whereas more creative children may prefer dance or gymnastics. Less traditional activities are also catered for – try a martial art such as judo or taekwondo, indoor climbing, dry ski slopes or trampolining. If cost is an issue, enquire with the organisation whether any support is available. Much equipment you need is available on internet auction sites, or you could ask other parents if they want to sell on outgrown kit. Don't forget that organisations such as Cubs and Brownies, the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme and Combined Cadet Forces offer young people opportunities to get involved in physical activity.
- **Do things as a family:** there are so many ways to get out and about as a family – and they will benefit mum and dad's fitness too! Try a walk or bike ride on a Sunday afternoon – make it more fun by including a scavenger hunt where you all have a list of items that you have to find. Or go to your local park or playground and play on the swings, climbing frame and slide. Most council-run leisure centres offer reasonably priced family activities such as swimming, and again support can be available to people on a low income.
- **Pedometers:** download a pedometer app onto your phone and your child's (if they have one) or buy a cheap pedometer online which clips to your waistband. Set a family challenge to achieve the recommended 10,000 steps per day. Reward the family member who does the most steps in a day/week/month. Don't forget, one of the easiest ways to get your step count up is to walk to and from school. If you can't walk the whole way, park further away and walk from there.

Still in need of ideas? Or maybe you are stuck inside on a rainy day and want something to do. Try these simple ideas:

- play 'pushover parents' - challenge your child to push you over as you stand firm on the floor. If you move your feet, they win. For younger children, you could make it easier by standing on one leg;
- blow up some balloons and play games with them - who can keep theirs in the air longest? Or play indoor volleyball or football with a balloon;
- if you have a parcel delivered in bubble wrap, jump on the wrap to pop all the bubbles;
- try 'crab racing' - racing each other on all fours with your tummy pointing upwards;
- try 'sock skating' - sliding up and down in your socks - on hard floors;
- put on some music and dance, or play 'musical statues';
- have a 'tidy up race' - who can tidy up within a given time?
- buy a cheap skipping rope and look up some skipping games and chants;
- try 'popcorn press-ups' - place a bowl of popcorn on the floor and do press-ups over the bowl, picking up a piece of popcorn on your tongue each time.



Finally, always remember that physical activity should be fun and motivating for children, or they will quickly lose confidence and interest. If you find the right activity, you are helping your child to develop lifestyle habits which will ensure they stay healthy and fit throughout their lives. Have fun!

