

A group of children are jumping joyfully in a grassy field under a blue sky with light clouds. The child in the foreground is wearing a green jacket and blue jeans. Other children are visible in the background, also jumping. The overall scene is bright and cheerful, representing physical activity.

All children need physical activity on a regular basis to grow up healthy in every way. But what physical activities are best for your child? Here's how to make the choices that make the most sense for your youngster.

Physical Activity

Make the **Right Choice** for Your Child

by Deanna A. Stephens

When cold, rainy weather prompted my 2-year-old son and me to stay indoors for days on end, Finn whipped through the house like a tornado. Puzzles, books, crayons, and cars were everywhere. The dog and cats were exhausted from being chased all day, and my energy was drained from keeping up with everyone. In other words, all was well in our active home. If this scene sounds familiar, now is an excellent time to start fostering your child's natural tendencies to run, jump, tumble, and in general, play harder than ever. The prevailing recommendation is for all children and adolescents to participate in some form of physical activity for at least 60 minutes every day.

As chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness, Teri McCambridge, M.D., FAAP, contributed to the organization's policy on active healthy living. She says, "[That] does not need to be continuous exercise, but rather bouts of exercise."

Practical Matters

Promoting an active lifestyle is the ideal way to encourage healthy habits that last a lifetime. Meeting our children's physical needs also fits right into the fold of working towards their total well-being.

"Physical activity is important in the development of stronger muscle and bone density," says Eric Small, M.D., FAAP, clinical assistant professor of pediatrics, orthopedics, and rehabilitation medicine at Mount Sinai School of Medicine. "It's especially important for kids to exercise in order to promote heart and lung fitness, not only to regulate obesity, but also to prevent diabetes and cholesterol in children with a genetic disposition to those health problems."

Estimates place more than 15 percent of the American children in the category of obese, and up to 80 percent of these will remain obese as adults.

Dr. Small, who also serves on AAP's Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness, points out the boost in brain function as another benefit of getting children to participate in at least 20 to 30 minutes of vigorous activity each day.

"Studies show that IQ will suffer if a person is not active during his or her first five years, so we're really talking about physical and intellectual development," he says.

Ages and Stages

Attention span, motor skills, and emotional maturity are significant factors to consider before jumping into a new routine.

Quick Tips: Motivation

Give your child a gentle nudge off the couch with some tips from the experts (the AAP):

- **Lead by example:** Your activity level sets a powerful example in the home. Parents who make exercise a priority in their own lives will significantly increase the chance that family members will do the same.
- **Get involved:** Participating in family games and activities makes for solid bonding time — and the stuff of good memories. Sharing enthusiasm and a light-hearted challenge will get them moving; having fun will keep them moving.
- **Limit screen time:** Restrict to two hours a day the number of hours your child is allowed to watch TV, play video games, and use the computer. Interactive video games that require the player to perform dance or sports moves can ease the blow of stricter guidelines and help kids transition from low to moderate levels of activity while in a somewhat private setting.
- **Hang loose:** Keep the emphasis on fun and enjoyment. The more flexible you can be, the more your child will feel a sense of choice and control.
- **Eat well:** Make the most of the benefits of physical activity by providing good nutrition and well-balanced meals at home.
- **Spread the word:** Share your expectations with grandparents, teachers, and other caretakers to help reinforce healthy activities when your child is away from home.





Team Sports

Around the time children turn 10 years old, most have a refined understanding of tactics and strategies. The ability to understand verbal instruction and what their own senses tell them makes this age group prime for entering organized activities and team sports. Middle-school kids become even better candidates for team players as they age and become more social.

It's an exciting time for parents just as much as kids, but consider the practicalities before signing up.

- **Body type:** Height, weight, and strength are serious contenders when it comes to reducing risk of injuries. Look for groups that are arranged by skill versus age.
- **Emotional maturity:** The ability to handle ups and downs of competition, stick to routine, endure physical stress, and display sportsmanship are essential for a winning situation.
- **Cost:** Equipment, uniforms, initiation fees, transportation, and medical care really add up. It's not worth the expense if the strain on your budget creates stress at home, or if your child decides to try a new sport mid-season.
- **Leadership:** Team with an instructor or coach whose experience, attitude, and values meet your approval.

"It needs to be age appropriate," says Dr. McCambridge, who is also an assistant professor of pediatrics at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. "Children under the age of 7 to 8 have not fully developed their hand eye coordination or balance, so their exercise should be on flat surfaces, with few directions, and should not require a lot of complex maneuvers."

Both AAP and the Mayo Clinic offer excellent general guidelines for age-appropriate activities:

- **Toddlers (ages 2 to 3):** Supervised, unstructured play should allow him to explore a variety of safe environments. Watch him master basic movement as he runs, walks, swings, tumbles, and swims.
- **Preschoolers (ages 4 to 6):** She can walk greater distances, and also runs, dances, jumps rope, and plays ball with improved motor skills. Supervise playtime and keep it mostly unorganized. Introduce some structure through games like tag or hopscotch.
- **Elementary school (ages 7 to 9):** Walking, running, playground time, gymnastics, and biking are popular for this age group, along with simple organized activities such as miniature golf. He can handle more sophisticated movement patterns while incorporating advanced visual tracking and balance. Let your child participate in a beginning team sport so long as it's enjoyable, flexible, and low-pressure.

While supervision is essential for safety reasons, it's also a great way to show your support and interest. Plus, spending time as an observer will allow you to evaluate whether or not to increase the challenge.

"I think oftentimes the child will tell you or you will notice their need

to progress when they get bored," says Dr. McCambridge. "However, I think it is important for parents to realize the importance of success. So sometimes holding a child back in the age appropriate group and allowing a child to excel will help with his confidence level."

The "You" in Youthful

Fun is the name of the game for all kids. Pressure to participate in activities that don't match a child's interests and skills, or trying to enforce mandatory "exercise" rather than play, can easily sap the joy out of physical activity.

Dr. Small, who is the founder and director of Family Sports Medicine & Fitness of Westchester, in Mount Kisco, N.Y., emphasizes joy as the key to long-term success. "The child completely loses natural interest if an activity is too structured. If it's fun for them, they're going to want to do it more."

It's likely that you will draw inspiration from your natural surroundings and by watching other parents, in addition to trying variations on your own favorite sports and activities. Children relate to their care providers' enthusiasm and you can bet they will follow the lead.

Choosing the right activity will be an ongoing process of trial-and-error as you uncover the individual preferences of your child. The intuition you have developed as a parent along with routine observation will help you figure out the best way to keep your youngster healthy and active. ●