

## Children - getting them active

A child's job is to play. They love to be active. Making physical activity a part of their daily routine is not only fun, but also healthy. Encouraging kids to be active when they are young establishes a routine that could stay with them throughout their life.

### The benefits of physical activity for children

Some of the benefits of physical activity for children include:

- improved cardiovascular fitness (heart and lungs)
- maintenance of a healthy weight
- improved posture
- better sleep patterns
- increased self-esteem and confidence
- improved concentration
- help with relaxation
- building stronger bones and muscles
- improved balance
- skills development
- increased flexibility
- opportunities to make friends and enhance social skills.

### Recommended amount of physical activity for children

*Australia's Physical Activity Recommendations for 5–12 Year Olds* states that kids need to do at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day, but can benefit from up to several hours of physical activity over the course of each day. This activity can be a combination of moderate to vigorous activities.

### Adult physical activity sets a good example for children

Children learn by example. Research shows that the involvement of parents in physical activity can increase a child's participation.

Set a good example for your child in the following ways:

- Modelling – show your child you regularly participate in physical activity yourself.
- Allow your child to choose the type of activity they are interested in.
- Promote acceptance of different body shapes and ability levels.
- Reinforce the social benefits of physical activity as well as the physical.
- Help your child develop skills and strategies for coping with different physical activity environments.
- Restrict television watching and 'screen time' (such as surfing the internet and playing computer games) to less than two hours per day. Limit viewing to programs that family members specifically want to watch. When the program is finished, turn the television off. Remember you are always modelling, if you use your screens less – so will your children.

### Introduce physical activity early in your child's life

Good habits are best started early. A young child is naturally active, so build on their inclinations to use their body.

Suggestions include:

- Whenever possible, indulge your child's interest in physical activity – for example, kick the ball with them when they ask.
- Show your child how to perform basic sporting skills, such as ball throwing, skipping and jumping. Research suggests that children whose basic skills are poor tend to avoid sports.
- Take them to the local playground and help them to use the equipment. Have a go yourself – slides and swings are fun, and you are likely to play for longer with your child if you are enjoying yourself too.
- Try out different sports in age-appropriate classes. Many activities have been adapted for toddlers, including gymnastics, football and dance.
- Make sure that some family outings are physically active.
- Involve your child in physical activities around the home such as gardening, washing the car or house cleaning.
- Walk short distances instead of taking the car. Encourage and support walking and cycling to school.
- Take your child for regular walks around the neighbourhood. Babies and young children can be pushed along in prams – once they get older, encourage them to walk part of the way.

## **Alternatives to structured exercise for children and families**

Any physical activity, not just structured classes, is beneficial to health and wellbeing.

Some fun activities for the family that don't feel like exercise include:

- flying a kite in the park or at the beach
- dancing to your favourite music
- riding bicycles along the river or using bike paths
- playing a family game of table tennis
- swimming and splashing about at the local pool
- walking the dog
- throwing a frisbee
- rollerskating, rollerblading or skateboarding (insist that everyone wears appropriate safety equipment)
- jumping on a trampoline.

## **Physical activities for children in the colder months**

Being active on sunny days is easy, but most of us tend to stay indoors over winter. Suggestions for staying active in colder months include:

- Rug up and explore the outdoors on cold, wet days. Give your child the opportunity to see what places such as the beach look like in a different season.
- Splashing through puddles is fun. Put on gumboots and raincoats, and go puddle-jumping with your child.
- Many activities can be performed indoors such as swimming, trampolining, table tennis and cricket. Explore different options in your neighbourhood.
- Some sports, such as Australian Rules football, are traditionally played during the winter months.

## **Where to get help**

- Local council
- Local sporting associations

## **Things to remember**

- Set a good example for your children by being physically active yourself.
- Incorporate fun physical activities into family outings, such as frisbee throwing, bushwalking or flying a kite.
- Expose your child to as many different types of sports and physical activities as you can.

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Bluearth Foundation

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