



## Food for thought: Raising an active child

If you've ever tried to keep up with an active toddler, you know you had better be in good physical condition. Toddlers are on the go from the time they wake until they collapse into little exhausted piles, often mid-activity or mid-sentence. Thank goodness this frenetic state of activity isn't maintained forever, but you do have to be careful that your children don't go too far in the opposite direction and become miniature "couch potatoes".

Regular exercise helps kids control their weight and build strong bones. It protects their heart, and it may benefit their mental health as well. Active children are healthier, stronger, do better in school, sleep better and generally grow up to be fit adults. Despite this knowledge, almost half of the children between the ages of 12 - 21 report that they don't regularly engage in vigorous activity. One-quarter admit they don't participate in any vigorous activities at all. And the rates of childhood obesity have more than tripled over the past 30 years.



So, what can you do to keep your child from joining those sedentary statistics? Follow these six steps to raising an active child:

### Step 1: Shut off the television

There are a lot of reasons why children are less active today, but the biggest culprit is the television set, followed closely by video games and computers. These activities encourage a sedentary lifestyle. Numerous studies over the past 20 years have shown a direct relationship between obesity in children and hours of television watching. More than 60 percent of childhood obesity is directly linked to too much television. As hours of viewing increase, so does weight - the rate of obesity rises 2 percent for each hour of television watched a day. In contrast, children who reduce their television viewing gain less weight. Since the average child spends about 24 hours a week in front of the TV, limiting the amount of time your child spends watching television, playing video games or surfing the Internet will free up a lot of time for physical activities.

### Step 2: Get moving yourself

If you want an active child, be active yourself. Children of parents who both exercise are about six times more likely to be active than are children whose parents are sedentary. In addition, obese parents are more likely to have children who are obese. If both parents are obese, your child has an 80-percent chance of being obese, compared with a 50- percent chance if only one parent is obese and a 10-percent chance if neither parent is obese. One recommendation for increasing your and your child's activity is to make it a joint effort. If mom and dad exercise, it's a very powerful stimulus for a child to exercise. In addition to getting you active, exercising together gives you good family time. Activities such as family

bike rides, walks or doubles tennis are excellent choices. Also, try to model active behaviour throughout your day - take the stairs instead of the elevator and park the car farther away from the store. Thus, double the benefit – for you and your child!

### **Step 3: Promote exercise (PE) in school**

Research shows a direct relationship between the amount of time spent in physical education classes and activity levels among middle school and high school students. Schools and parents should work together to increase the number and hours of physical education classes and to encourage more activity among students. If you believe that PE classes in school are not enough then promote afternoon exercise classes – ballet, martial arts, basketball, tennis etc.

### **Step 4: Promote activity, not exercise**

Many adults associate the word *exercise* with a form of physical punishment. So do some children. By promoting activity rather than exercise, you might see your child's enthusiasm grow. Just getting kids moving is the key. Free-play activities such as playing tag, hide-and-seek, hopscotch or jumping rope can be great for burning calories and improving fitness. Having an active child doesn't necessarily mean he or she must be enrolled in sports or dance classes. Although children who are interested in sports should be given the opportunity to become involved, if your child isn't interested or inclined, many other options are available. Every kid is wired differently and you have to remember that we all have certain strengths and certain anatomical features and characteristics that permit us to do certain things better than others. The key is to find things that your child likes to do. For instance, if your child is artistically inclined, go on a nature hike to collect leaves and rocks that your child can use in a collage. If your child likes to climb, head for the nearest neighbourhood jungle gym or climbing wall. If your child likes to read, walk to the neighbourhood library for a book. If your child is interested in an organized sport or activity, you'll want to consider the time commitment, cost, characteristics of the sport, your child's physical maturity level, the quality of instruction, and what you hope he or she will get out of it.

### **Step 5: Start them young**

Remember your energetic toddler? Direct that mania into a lifelong love of physical activity. Channel that activity into more structured games. For instance, have your child show you how bunnies hop, eagles fly or dogs wag their tails. Have contests to see how far or high your child can jump. Mark the distance or height on a floor or wall and use that mark the next time you play, to see if your child can improve on the first effort. By observing toddlers in action, you should be able to find things they like to do and that can be incorporated into a game. By incorporating physical activity into our children's lives at an early age, we are setting the foundation for good fitness habits in the years to come.

### **Step 6: Encourage a lifelong love of activity**

An optimal exercise plan for children and adults must:

- Be fun
- Be readily available every day

- Be part of your daily life
- Incorporate variety
- Include activities that can be done independently
- Include an aerobic exercise, like running or walking, as the major form of activity 4 or 5 days a week

When encouraging your child to be active, the trick is to keep it fun and to not make it a chore. In fact, turning some chores into fun, active adventures may not only increase exercise but also install some other good habits, like cleaning, raking, lawn care and snow shovelling!

Some other suggestions for keeping kids interested include:

- Use your creativity.
- Play games your elementary school child loves, like tag, cops 'n robbers, Simon says and Mother may I? Older kids might still enjoy playing games like Manhunt or Capture the flag. If you don't remember the rules for these games, walk to your local library and check out a book on games or use the internet as a source of information for this matter – you may even [contact us](#) and we will send you the rules.
- Let your toddlers and preschoolers see how much fun being active can be. Don't just run with them. Run like a gorilla. Walk like a spider. Hop like a bunny. Stretch like a cat.
- Plan your family vacations around physical activities — hiking, skiing, snorkelling, swimming or camping. Take along a ball or Frisbee to sneak in some activity at rest stops.
- Make chores a family affair. Who can pull the most weeds out of the vegetable garden? Who can collect the most litter in the neighbourhood? Have your kids help shovel the snow off the driveway and use that excess snow to build a huge snow fort.
- Vary the activities. Let each child take a turn choosing the activity of the week. Batting cages, bowling and fast-food play areas all count. What matters is that you're doing something active as a family.
- Explore opportunities your community offers.
- The benefits of getting your child to be active can be far-reaching. Raising a child who incorporates physical activity as part of their lifestyle can have a ripple effect on future generations and contribute to overall enhancement of public health.