



Living Well Newsletter

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Motivating Your Child to Exercise

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As we near summer, many parents fondly remember summers past spent playing outside. Unfortunately, for many children, an active summer spent playing outdoors is no longer as common. While the benefits of exercise are well known and include stronger and healthier bones and muscles, lower body fat, decreased risk of diabetes, lower blood pressure and higher levels of self-esteem, there is increasing evidence that children are becoming less active and spending more time in sedentary activities.



A January 2011 study showed that most 7 to 9-year olds are only getting about 25 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity daily, despite the recommended amount being 60 minutes per day. According to this study, only about 6% of children in the U.S. are getting the recommended amount of exercise on a daily basis. By comparison, the average preschooler in the US gets 4.1 hours of screen time (TV, video game and computer time) daily.¹

If you are not sure if your child is getting the 60 minutes of recommended physical activity a day, it is never too late to make changes. The goal of any activity regimen for children should be to create a habit of active living. The activity patterns your children practice when they are young tend to be the same patterns they practice as they get older. Bodies in motion tend to stay in motion while bodies at rest tend to stay at rest.

Here are a few tips that parents can follow to help establish this pattern of healthy activity levels:

1) Begin an activity log. It is important for parents to know what activity level their child is achieving. A child who is far below the recommended daily activity level, particularly if he/she is an adolescent, may find it frustrating to make a dramatic increase in activity. Knowing the starting point for your child can allow a family to increase that level gradually in a way that a young person may find more sustainable. A good rule of thumb when deciding if an activity is moderate to vigorous is that a vigorous activity will make a child breathe fast, his/her heart should beat faster and he/she should sweat.

1 Pediatrics Vol. 127 No. 1 January 1, 2011
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(doi: 10.1542/peds.2010-1935)

2) Model a healthy and active lifestyle for your children. Lifelong patterns of active living are hard for a child to sustain if they do not see their parents living this way. If you are not sure you are getting enough moderate to vigorous physical activity, take assessment of yourself as well and then try to make the changes necessary to live an active lifestyle.

3) Get the entire family involved. Physical activity can partner very well with fun family activities. Weekend bike rides, family hikes or events like a community fun run can get bodies moving while also creating lifelong memories.

4) Make activity fun. Remember, the ultimate goal is to create habits of healthy living. This will be much easier if the child enjoys the activity. Sit down with your child and find out what activities he/she is interested in doing. Then do your best to create a supportive environment to do those activities.

5) Always think two seasons ahead. Families will often get a seasonal plan for activity, such as enrolling in soccer in the fall. This may result in a good activity level during this time but when the season ends and the weather gets too cold to be outside, activity level will frequently drop significantly. I always encourage families to think two seasons ahead so that changes in temperature or time of year do not surprise them and lead to inactivity. When it is fall, think about what activity you are going to do in the winter and spring. When it is winter, begin planning for spring and summer.

6) Don't be afraid to motivate your children to exercise. An example of this is using screen time to motivate for exercise time. This can be done by allowing a child 60 minutes of free screen time a day. Every minute above this, has to be earned with one minute of active time. This provides an incentive to get active and it also takes the responsibility of achieving the 60 minutes of active time off of the parents and gives it to the child. If a child chooses to have a less active day, then he/she has made the choice to have less screen time as well. I highly recommend that families that do this apply the same rule to the parents as well.

For more ideas about how to create a more active and physically healthy family, there are many great resources, including www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/physicalactivity/guidelines.htm.



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