



## Encourage your children to get moving

The increase of childhood obesity in America has generated a lot of concern among parents who wonder how they can help instill healthy habits and keep their children fit.

In this age of technology, there are too many ways to avoid good-old fashioned movement. Video games, computers and instant messaging contribute to our inactivity. Prolonged sitting contributes to tight, weak muscles in the back and hips, even in children. Inactivity can lead to other complex problems in addition to obesity such as movement pattern abnormalities, cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

The benefits of regular physical activity for children include healthy weight maintenance, reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, building and maintenance of healthy bones, muscles and joints and promotion of psychological health and well-being. Childhood fitness comes in many shapes and sizes, from organized sports and activities to just moving around and having fun — otherwise known as playing.

Children who play sports are more likely able to meet their suggested exercise needs. However, for those who are not involved in the practice and competition of athletics, figuring out where to start can be a daunting task.

Here are steps to take before beginning an exercise program or sport, and answers to some common questions and concerns parents may have:

**\* Does my child have any medical limitations?** Speak to your child's pediatrician first to see if he or she has any limitations that may affect exercising. This includes pre-sport medical screening when beginning organized athletics. Physical therapists can also be helpful to assess whether your child has any musculoskeletal "red flags" that should be addressed prior to beginning a new routine. Personal trainers can help children develop a sound foundation and improve their fitness in a safe environment. Be sure to check for qualifications and references.

**\* What kinds of activities are best suited for my child?** Proper initial screening as well as your child's interests can help to determine which type of exercise they should choose. After an initial screening, a good place for the novice to begin is a fun activity such as walking, riding a bike, flying a kite, playing tag or just kicking a ball around. Simple and fun activities will keep beginners interested.

For younger children, a trip to the playground can be a great way to learn how to use their bodies and burn up a bunch of calories in the process. Take advantage of the East Bay Bike Path and try in-line skating or jogging. Several local facilities offer group and individualized exercise instruction for children. Organized fitness instruction or classes can be a valuable tool in increasing activity and improving coordination and self esteem. Martial arts, dance and gymnastics are also excellent ways to help your child develop self- confidence, discipline and coordination.

**\* How much time should he or she exercise?** According to The Department of Health and Human Services and The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, it is recommended that children and adolescents participate in at least 60 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity most days of the week, preferably daily. If you cannot fit in the suggested 60 minutes, completing as much exercise as you can is better than doing nothing at all.

**\* Should my child participate in sports?** Playing sports provides many opportunities for physical as well as social benefits. Children participating in team sports can learn the importance of teamwork and where they fit in and how their particular role contributes to the greater good. Individual sports such as golf, tennis and ice skating also help children to improve physical fitness, self-confidence and develop healthy fitness habits.


**\* Should my child exercise in addition to playing sports?** Children who are involved in sports can also benefit greatly from an additional exercise regimen. The exercise program should include exercises to help improve their sport skills and address other needed components of fitness such as flexibility, muscular strength and endurance, joint stability and cardiovascular conditioning. Care should be taken to avoid over-training, however, and a professional can help determine the appropriate exercises to complement the particular sport.

In short, get active! Encourage your children to participate in youth sports, take an exercise class, get out and

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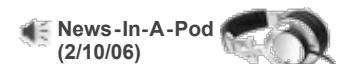
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walk the dog, hit the playground, go for a hike or a bike ride. Watching less television, and playing less video games will decrease sedentary behavior.

The main focus is to just get moving. The rewards of being healthy clearly outweigh the investment. Beginning fitness at an early age can help children establish healthy habits that they can carry on into later life.

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By Doug Perron

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