

Changing the Trend

Why Physical Fitness is Important for Children

MY GYM CHILDREN'S FITNESS

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The content provided in this column is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, consultation, treatment or diagnosis. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition before beginning a new exercise and/or nutrition regimen.

To increase the amount of exercise your family gets, try playing on the playground at the park.

Photography by Heather L. Evans



RECENT SURVEYS SHOW that one in four, or 10 million children in America, are overweight. In the 3 to 6-year-old range, 30% are overweight, and 20% are clinically obese. Year after year we hear that childhood obesity continues to rise. If the possibility that these preschoolers could be the first generation with a lower life expectancy rate than their parents isn't enough, there are more reasons why physical fitness is important to children.

Even in children, obesity increases the risk of high cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease. The more overweight a child is, the higher his or her risk for adult obesity and type II diabetes. Hypertension, high cholesterol, and type II diabetes—which are typically thought of as adult health concerns—are now becoming health concerns of obese children. At least 30-35% of school-age children will be at risk for heart disease and certain types of cancer as adults.

Infants through teenagers need to be getting sixty minutes of physical activity daily and should not be sedentary for more than one hour at a time except when sleeping. Preschoolers should also get one hour or more of unstructured free play every day.

Improved strength, increased endurance, and healthy bones and muscles are benefits received from regular physical activity. Exercise causes the brain to release endorphins, which give the sensation of well-being. Physical activity releases stress, helps reduce anxiety, and increases self-esteem.

Children are motivated by fun and they exercise all the time without even thinking about it. Everyone can benefit from regular exercise, so make it a family affair. Parents who have healthy eating and exercise habits model a healthy lifestyle for their children that could last into adulthood.

To increase the amount of physical activity your family gets in addition to

regular exercise, take your preschooler for a walk around the neighborhood. Play follow the leader and add skipping, hopping, and jumping into the game. Park farther away from the store in the parking lot. Take the stairs rather than the elevator or escalator. Play on the playground at the park, play tag in your backyard, play *Simon says* in the house, and include hopping on one foot or other active movements. Look into school or community-based activities for age-appropriate activi-

Being Physically Fit Can:

- » Increase self-esteem
- » Lead to better sleep
- » Improve psychological well-being
- » Lead to better academic performance
- » Lead to an active adulthood

ties that might interest your children.

Follow the dietary guidelines for healthy eating from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the USDA. Encourage healthy eating habits for your family. Let your children help you pick out foods from the grocery store and help you prepare nutritious meals and snacks.

If you are concerned about your child's weight, talk with your child's doctor. Children's weight management, including exercise and nutrition, should be closely supervised by a physician.