And. . . Action!

What Fitness Can Do For Your Children

New research suggests that children do better academically when their bodies are fit. Whether your kids are learning their ABCs or studying for the SATs, adding more physical activities to their schedules could help them on the path to success. Studies show that through its positive effects on alertness[1] and mental health, such as increases in self-esteem and reductions in anxiety and stress, physical activity may actually increase a child's capacity to learn.[2]

Physical activity benefits everyone, and it's never too early to encourage activities for the children in your life. In the last 20 years the number of children in the United States who are physically active has decreased while the number of children who are overweight has doubled.[3] According to the President's Report on Promoting Better Health for Young People Through Physical Activity and Sports, it is recommended that children should have 60 minutes of physical activity a day. If your children aren't getting any physical activity now, help them work up to 60 minutes a day. This does not necessarily mean that kids must have a "workout"; they can accumulate 60 minutes through 10 to 15 minute periods of movement throughout the day to fulfill the recommendation.[4]

There are many ways for children to achieve this recommendation. Healthy kids often travel by foot or bike, participate in school physical education classes, sports and activities like martial arts or dance, and spend their playtime outdoors. Such physical activities help kids build and maintain strong bones, joints and muscles. They also help control weight, lower blood pressure[5], reduce fat and improve psychological well-being by building self-esteem and reducing feelings of depression and anxiety. Team sports also teach skills like self-discipline, teamwork and leadership.[6]

It is important that parents, caregivers, teachers, and others influential in a child's life be positive role models for a physically active lifestyle. Just spending time to play with your kids is a great way to have fun and improve your whole family's health at the same time. Regular family outings, such as walking, cycling, swimming, etc. are great alternatives to sedentary behavior. It is important that your child enjoys these activities and that they are consistent with his or her skill level.[7]

As President Bush unveiled the Healthier U.S. Initiative on June 20, 2002, he emphasized that a healthier lifestyle begins with small, simple changes. "We're living longer than any generation in history. Yet we can still improve. And we can do more. And it's not all that difficult to do. When it comes to your health, even little steps can make a big difference."[8] Considering that 300,000 people die every year from diseases related to inactive lifestyles in combination with poor diet (nearly twice the number from smoking-related causes),[9] a little daily physical activity could spell a longer life.

With regular physical activity, your child will not only be physically healthy, but socially and emotionally, as well.[10] For more information, visit www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa or www.justmove.org/fitnessnews or aspe.hhs.gov/health/reports/physicalactivity.

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1 "The Importance of Regular Physical Activity for Children" Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, May 2002
2 President's Report on Promoting Better Health for Young People Through Physical Activity and Sports, November 2002
3 "The Importance of Regular Physical Activity for Children" Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, May 2002
4 President's Report on Promoting Better Health for Young People Through Physical Activity and Sports, November 2002
5 "Exercise (Physical Activity) and Children", American Heart Association, Inc., 1999
6 President's Report on Promoting Better Health for Young People Through Physical Activity and Sports, November 2002
7 "Exercise (Physical Activity) and Children", American Heart Association, Inc., 1999
8 President's Speech on Health and Fitness Initiative, June 2002
9 President's Report on Promoting Better Health for Young People Through Physical Activity and Sports, November 2002
10 "The Importance of Regular Physical Activity for Children" Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, May 2002