

Back-to-school with Fun Fitness for Successful Kids

There is no doubt that physical activity is good for children's bodies. Regular activity - at least 60 minutes a day - helps children grow strong, stay well, and maintain a healthy weight. There is mounting evidence that moderate to vigorous physical activity helps children's brains too! Research from several different angles has confirmed that being physically active primes the pump for learning - as measured by critical thinking skills, grade point averages, and standardized test scores. **Bottom line:** Getting your kids off the couch and away from the TV and video games will definitely help them be healthier. Getting up and moving may also help them be more successful at school.

Physical education (PE)

For healthy lifestyles, children need both free play and specific instruction on new physical skills. The ideal place for PE is as part of the regular school day - taught by qualified PE teachers - for at least 30 minutes every day. In addition to supporting daily PE in schools, families can take advantage of quality instruction in the community, like swimming or dance lessons. Quality physical education should be age-appropriate, fun, and continuously active for all students.

Exploratory play

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) believes active play is so essential for kids that they published a ten-page paper on getting families to play together more. According to AAP, play helps children mentally, physically, socially, and emotionally. All you have to do is turn off the TV and go explore the yard, the neighborhood, the playground, or the park. Explore on your feet, on a bike, or in a canoe. Splash in a stream, tumble in the leaves, or do somersaults in the grass.

Organized activities

Active play can be organized - by adults or children. Think about all the "old-fashioned" activities that families enjoyed before everyone was glued to their favorite form of screen entertainment. There are active indoor games such as Simon Says or Twister®. There are dozens of games to play outdoors - from hopscotch, jump rope, and dodgeball to Frisbee® golf (or folf), badminton, and volleyball. You can also organize trips to the bowling alley, skating rink, or swimming pool.

Competitive athletics

Team sports also provide opportunities for physical activity - so long as kids actually get to play sports that they enjoy. Sign your children up for sports that they want to play - rather than the ones you played (or wished you had played) as a child. Different children excel at and enjoy different types of activities; some do not enjoy competitive sports at all. Attend practices regularly to make certain that all children are getting equal chances to play - rather than just sitting on the bench.

Looking for a simple way to fit FITNESS into children's busy days? Establish walking (or biking) to and from school as the normal mode of transportation. Children will get all the physical and mental benefits of being physically active - and you'll save on those very expensive gas tank fill-ups! Walk or bike with your children when you can; organize a neighborhood walking school bus or bike-pool for the days when you are not able to go with them. Find out how to get involved in safe routes to school in your community at www.walktoschool.org/ and www.saferoutesinfo.org/