



Motivating School-Age Kids to Be Active

Sixty minutes. Ideally, that's how much physical activity kids should get each day of the week. But as kids get older, with increasing demands on their time, getting a full hour of exercise can become a challenge. Some kids may gravitate toward sedentary pursuits like watching TV and computer time. Even doing a lot of studying and reading, while important, can result in too little physical activity.

Meanwhile, during these years, kids often come to a fork in the road when it comes to sports. Those who are athletic might end up increasing their time and commitment to sports, which is great for their physical fitness. But the more casual athletes may lose interest and decide to quit teams and leagues. Unless they find replacement activities, their physical activity levels can go way down.

But being active is a key component of good health for all school-age kids. It will strengthen their muscles and bones and ensure that their bodies are capable of doing normal kid stuff, like lifting a backpack or running a race. It also will help control their weight and decrease their risk of obesity-related illnesses. So how do you get kids motivated to be active, especially those who aren't natural athletes?

Your child can be fit even if he or she isn't the type to win sports trophies. The key is finding activities your child enjoys. The options are many — from in-line skating, to bike riding, to tennis, or even badminton. When kids find an activity that's fun, they'll do it a lot, get better at it, feel accomplished, and want to do it even more. Likewise, if you push them into activities they don't like, they're unlikely to want to do participate and will end up feeling frustrated.

Keep to the Basics for 6- to 8-Year-Olds

Expose younger kids to a variety of activities, games, and sports. Keep the focus on fun. A mix of activities at home and at school is often ideal, and be sure to include some free time for kids make their own decisions about what to do.

At this age, kids are still mastering fundamental physical skills, such as jumping, throwing, kicking, and catching. It will take a few more years before most children can combine these skills the way many 11-year-olds can (for instance, being able to scoop up a baseball, run toward the base, and throw the ball — all in one fluid motion). So if your child is on a sports team, make sure you and the coaches are setting realistic expectations.

Reasonable expectations are also important when it comes to how much kids can handle mentally. Younger kids often are not ready for the pressure of competition, nor can they grasp complex strategy. Look for teams, leagues, and classes that stress the basics and provide encouragement and praise for kids as they improve their skills. Done correctly, team sports and other group activities can teach kids a lot about teamwork and good sportsmanship.



9- to 12-Year-Olds Are More Coordinated

Older school-age kids usually have mastered basic skills and can start enjoying the benefits of being more coordinated. That means a kid who likes basketball isn't wildly throwing the ball at the basket anymore, but is perfecting the free throw. Kids this age are also better able to understand the rules. Parents of kids involved in team sports might want to talk about handling setbacks and losses, and remind kids that sports should still be fun even as competition heats up.

Whether it's soccer or dance, if your child doesn't enjoy an activity or feels frustrated by failure, it may be time to switch to something else. That doesn't mean the time spent on those endeavors was wasted. Instead, ask what activities your child would like to try next. Achieving this transition smoothly, without making a child feel like a failure, can prevent negative feelings about sports and physical activity in general.

Help Kids Find Their Niche

If you're trying to help your child choose an activity, consider his or her interests, abilities, and body type. A bigger child might be suited for football because size is an advantage. A smaller child might succeed at baseball or might consider a non-team sport.

Also, consider your child's temperament. A mild-mannered boy who might not be comfortable playing football may like the challenge of karate. Likewise, an active girl may not have the patience and control required for ballet, but is well-suited to a more fast-paced activity, like soccer. Personality traits and athletic ability combine to influence a child's attitude toward participation in sports and other physical activities. Which of these three types best describes your child?

The nonathlete: This child may lack athletic ability, lack interest in physical activity, or both. By this age, children are aware of these differences and some kids may have even been teased about them. The danger for a child like this is not leaving one activity that didn't work out; it's abandoning all physical activity altogether.

The casual athlete: This child is interested in being active but is not a star player and is at risk of getting discouraged in a competitive athletic environment. Most kids fall into this category, but in a culture that is obsessed with winning, it's easy to overlook these kids as athletes. Encourage them to remain active even though they aren't top performers.

The athlete: This child has athletic ability, is committed to a sport or activity, and is likely to ramp up practice time and intensity of competition. Some children are happily settled in a sport or activity by the older school-age years. In this situation, a parent can continue to support the child's efforts while watching for any changes. It's important to ensure that the child manages schoolwork, gets enough rest, and still enjoys the sport. Continue to let your child try out new things and enjoy a variety of physical activities.

Parents Can Make a Difference

No matter what your child's fitness personality, remember that he or she looks to you for guidance and needs your support and encouragement. Also it's important to set a good example, so don't groan about your own exercise, and look for chances to be physically active as a family.

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