

BEING active

Exercise is a crucial part of preventing kids from developing an unhealthy body. Exercise in this context just means being active. An added bonus: kids sleep better when they're physically tired and hey, it makes them happy.

These days kids tend to play indoors and to eat more calorie-rich food than they used to twenty years ago, yet do less exercise. Some of the reasons for this include parents themselves not getting outside or exercising as much, kids watching more TV or spending time on the computer and backyards becoming smaller or non-existent.

All health professionals stress that unless the whole family is willing to get involved in a healthier and more active life, it's almost impossible to help a TV-addicted kid this young learn to enjoy pottering about the garden, climbing trees, playing sport and having other outdoor fun.

exercise that's good for kids

Dr Elizabeth Waters, director of research and public health at the Centre for Community Child Health in Melbourne, says people can get too uptight and formal about exercise for little kids: 'The best thing for parents to do is get out there with their kids and make walking and playing in the park part of normal life . . . The worst thing is to put kids through their paces at clubs or organisations where it isn't family fun and natural play together.' (I just love it when an expert says something sensible like 'Oh, just go outside and play and talk and do stuff that makes you laugh'.) Dr Waters suggests that parents aim to have a chat and a fall-about with their kids every day, but not to freak out if they miss a day here and there. Dads and other blokes, who often get special joy from passing on important ball and balancing skills, might like to know that:

- ★ babies who can't walk can roll balls and move to music
- ★ toddlers can do fun stretches, kick a ball and start to learn to catch (try a balloon first and work up to soft balls)
- ★ little kids can throw a large, light ball with two hands (throwing with one hand began the first time they dropped something on the floor)
- ★ kids who can run can start doing obstacle games and soccer.

Exercise doesn't need to be structured. But to keep it interesting, and to develop different muscle groups and skills, choose one or two age-appropriate activities from the list 'Good Exercise Stuff to Do with Kids' (over the page) to concentrate on each day.

Instead of taking an adult angle and saying kids must exercise for a certain time each day, be guided by your kid: how long are they interested in this exercise or game? When they sit or lie down, get cranky or want to do something else, that's the time to stop. Have another go later or the next day. It's important to remind everyone that it's all about fun and experience, not setting goals: anything that isn't fun is guaranteed to fail.

Keeping exercise varied will give a kid a chance to find out what they like and what they're good at. Training or concentrating on one sport is not good for young children: it's too restrictive mentally and physically, and can lead to injury and underdevelopment in other physical areas. I heard recently of some parents who encourage their 3-year-olds to do laps of a pool equivalent to swimming 1 km:

I would like to slap them. That kind of 'achievement' is not applicable to toddlers. 'The notion of winning doesn't need to emerge at this age', says Dr Waters. (Or at least until they're 32, if you ask me.)

GOOD EXERCISE STUFF TO DO WITH KIDS

- * Ball throwing and catching.
- * Riding a trike, a bike or other wheelie device.
- * Running with paper streamers.
- * Exploring the garden or park, and perhaps having a picnic.
- * Doing exercises in the garden or park.
- * Flying a kite.
- * Balancing.
- * Doing 'acrobatics' (somersaults and cartwheels) on the lawn.
- * Mucking around at the adventure playground.
- * Going to the local swimming pool.
- * Walking to the shop (take the stroller for sudden fades).
- * Playing variations of soccer, Aussie Rules, tennis, handball, baseball, rounders or cricket.
- * Playing kick-to-kick with a footy.
- * Going on a nature ramble or treasure hunt to collect things (find a red leaf, a gumnut, a bent stick).
- * Playing in the sandpit.
- * Making patterns in sand or dirt with a rake, shells, stones or sticks.
- * Dancing.
- * Playing chasey.
- * Running through the sprinkler (but not when there's a drought).
- * Jumping in puddles, wearing gumboots (but not when there's a drought).
- * Pottering in the garden, doing some weeding, planting and picking.
- * Running around with the dog (but always supervised).
- * 'Painting' the fence with water (or not – bloody drought!).
- * Sweeping the paths.
- * Climbing trees or other things.
- * Decorating trees.

- ✦ Playing hide and seek.

• BLAST FROM THE PAST •

'Sea bathing. The best time for a child to take it is two or three hours after breakfast, and before he has taken any sportive exercise out of doors. He should remain in the water not longer than four or five minutes.'

Dr George Austin, *Austin's Indispensible Handbook and General Educator*, probably 1880s, US.

info on getting kids active

- ★ Local councils often have information about hidden opportunities in your area. You might find that even in the inner city, tucked behind a block of flats, there's a ramshackle adventure playground with a real pony in one corner, some live chooks, a trampoline and lots of things to fall off and climb under. These and some other adventure playgrounds can be more dangerous than the pristine, rounded, almost guaranteed no-injury, plastic-moulded climbing equipment made only for the youngest children. (A child of 3 on a flying fox will need to be very closely helped, for example.) But if you're prepared to take a few risks, and supervise properly, they can be so much fun for kids. They can also be hired from the local council for parties.
- ★ Toy libraries may have activity equipment such as balls, trikes, and mats to roll on.
- ★ Parenting magazines and newspapers often have ads for kids' physical activity programs, frequently held during school holidays. These are usually for older kids so be careful.

toddler gyms

Movement-based groups such as these can be fun for kids and can be a sort of parents' group as well. They are held in many areas and can be for babies aged 1 month up to preschoolers. A trained co-ordinator uses songs, bubbles, climbing equipment, exercise mats – all sorts of things – to develop co-ordination, muscles and physical capabilities. Movement programs aim to promote intellectual development too,

which makes sense. But rather than thinking of them as ‘hothousing’ or ‘training’ your child to ‘get ahead’, it’s much nicer to think of them as good fun and good for children.

Gymbaroo, the largest of the organisations, says its main goal is to educate parents. Its handouts provide some useful information on developmental stages, when babies can see and what they love to look at and touch, and the uses and abuses of common baby equipment such as bouncinettes. I wouldn’t take ANY notice of some of the stuff in the handouts: one I saved says of babies ‘do not feed under three hourly by day and four hourly by night . . . only [burp] your baby for 30 seconds halfway through a feed and at the end’. (GAWD!) Statements like these should be seen as one person’s advice in an area that isn’t their specialty and that may actually be, come to think of it, crap.

An organised, gym-style program will not suit many children, especially the ones who don’t like being regimented, and equipment that must all be used and in a certain way can curb creativity. Sometimes a program is held in too small a space, which can be restrictive for kids who need to explore. Gym-style routines shouldn’t be a replacement for kids just having active fun with their family and friends. You can make a DIY physical-fun session.



more info on getting active

raisingkids.net.au

The giant parenting site funded by the Federal Government has good ideas for kids’ activities. From the main page click on ‘Toddlers’ or ‘Preschoolers’, then ‘Nutrition & Fitness’, then choose from the list of ‘Physical activity’ info.

goodforkids.nsw.gov.au

Go to this NSW Government site to download a copy of *The Physical Activity Handbook* for babies, toddlers or preschoolers, for ideas on activities and exercises that will aid development. From the main page, click on ‘Partners’, then ‘Children’s Services’, then ‘Physical Activity’, then ‘I Move We Move’, then the link to the relevant physical activity handbook or search ‘physical activity handbook’ on the main page.

health.gov.au

Download *Get Up & Grow: Healthy Eating and Physical Activity for Early Childhood – Family Book* from the Federal Department of Health and Ageing's website. From the main page, click on 'Publications, Statistics and Resources', then 'G' for Get Up & Grow.

gymbaroo.com.au

One of the privately run, commercial kids' activity companies, Gymbaroo has so far proved a stayer, with requirements for qualified staff and a reliance on childhood development research. Visit the website for info on a group near you. You can also do Gymbaroo by correspondence, which is known by the far posher name of Distance Neuro Education. Merchandise includes a book, a quarterly magazine and DVDs.

movingtolearn.com and robyncrowe.com

Moving to Learn: Making the Connection Between Movement, Music, Learning and Play (Birth to 3 Years) by Robyn Crowe and Gill Connell, book and music CD set

This Aussie-Kiwi collaboration between two early-childhood professionals presents all sorts of info and ideas for fun physical activities. Ideal for parents, playgroups and child-care centres.

playcentre.org.nz

(09) 236 3591

Call the New Zealand Play Centre Federation to find out the groups in your area or for info on parenting classes.

The CSIRO Wellbeing Plan for Kids by CSIRO Human Nutrition

This handbook for raising healthy kids offers good advice for weaning kids off screen time and getting them active on a daily basis. Not preachy or guilt-trippy, just based on sound research and common sense.