

Physical activity for wellbeing

What are the benefits of physical activity?

Helping children to flourish requires us to encourage their physical activity. Physical activity is healthy, fun, often sociable and can really make them feel good about themselves! It will improve their capacity to learn and enjoy their life. Physical activity is simply about moving – nothing more! Sport is a good form of physical activity but is only one option. It is important to show children that sports are not the only way to stay active. For children who do not enjoy sports or competition, we can show them that there are lots of other ways to keep moving, such as walking, dancing, yoga, housework, gardening, skipping, cycling, action songs - and many more.

Skipping is just jumping for joy, step after step.

Jessi Lane Adams

The evidence for the benefits of physical activity for children's physical health is clear and well-understood. For example, there is strong evidence that physical activity builds strong bones and strengthens muscles, maintains flexibility, maintains and achieves a healthy weight, promotes good posture and balance, improves fitness, strengthens the heart and enhances healthy growth and development.

There is now growing evidence for the direct benefits of physical activity on adults' mental wellbeing. It increases our sense of self-worth, lifts our mood and makes us more able to cope with stress. For children and young people, there is growing evidence that physical activity increases physical confidence, happiness and relaxation and improves body image. There is also evidence that organised physical activity for younger children improves their ability to form good relationships. Also, physical activity has been found to reduce or prevent anxiety and depression in young people.

Walking gets the feet moving, the blood moving, the mind moving. And movement is life.

Carrie Latet

Did you know?



Many children love television and computer games. These activities are often educational and contribute to mental development. However, there is evidence that too many hours spent on these passive leisure pursuits can decrease our wellbeing. This is because these activities are often associated with inactivity, unhealthy snacking and reduced connection with other people. Experts agree that children and young people should be encouraged to have no more than 2 hours a day of 'screen time' (which includes TV-watching, computer use and playing video games).

Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network (2010). Management of Obesity: A national clinical guideline.

How much physical activity?

The current advice on the amount of physical activity depends on the age of the child.

Children under 5

Children under 5 (who can walk unaided) should be physically active for at least 180 minutes (three hours) each day. This should be a mix of:

- light activity (e.g. moving around, walking at a slow pace), and
- more energetic physical activity (e.g. riding a bike, dancing).

Children and young people aged 5 to 18

Children and young people aged 5 to 18 should do at least 60 minutes (one hour) of aerobic activity every day. This should be a mix of:

- moderate intensity activities (enough to raise their heart rate and break a sweat), and
- vigorous intensity activities (where they're breathing hard and fast, and their heart rate has gone up quite a bit).

The physical activity doesn't all have to be done at once, but can be made up of several short periods of activity (e.g. several periods of 15 or 30 minutes). It can be spread throughout the day, and can be indoors or outdoors.

The type of activity that children will do varies with age. Infants will learn basic movement skills, such as rolling, crawling and walking. As they get older, children can be involved in play and action games, then move on to more structured activities, games and sports.

It will help if children can make physical activity part of their daily lives from a very early age, so that it becomes a habit. So, it's good if children can learn to walk as much as possible in their daily routine – to nursery or school, or out to the shops. It's also good to involve children in the physically active daily chores from an early age, such as vacuuming, gardening and tidying up.

Contact with nature

It is suggested that physical activity can be even more beneficial if it's outside. Evidence shows that contact with nature (parks, forests, beaches, mountains) has benefits for our wellbeing over and above the physical activity being done.

More information

Humans have lived in and adapted to the natural environment for thousands of years - our current urban environments are relatively recent. So the outdoors may be a more "natural" place for us to be. Contact with nature has also been shown to literally "clear our heads" by reducing brain activity and helping us to recharge mentally. It is also about having a temporary escape from our normal routines.

Maller, C. et al (2005). Healthy nature healthy people: 'contact with nature' as an upstream health promotion intervention for populations. *Health Promotion International*, 21(1): 45-54.

These benefits include:

- having a more positive outlook on life and higher life satisfaction
- providing stress relief and relaxation
- restoring concentration and improving productivity
- stimulating interest in the natural world and conservation
- improving recovery from illness.

The outdoors also provides opportunities for many activities which can challenge young people mentally and physically, and will therefore help them grow stronger and more confident, for example: rock climbing, kayaking, mountain biking, etc.

In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks.

John Muir

How to encourage children to be more physically active

The majority of children do not appreciate that physical activity has long-term health benefits. So, to encourage them to take part, it is important to make it fun. Evidence shows that children and young people are much more likely to be physically active if they enjoy and are interested in what they are doing and if they get to choose the activity. Also, the activity should not be too hard for the child, or they may experience embarrassment or failure, which could result in negative effects on wellbeing.

- Talk with children about physical activity and make sure they understand that everyone needs physical activity. It is an important part of staying healthy, not only for their body, but also for their mind. Discuss with them how it can help them feel good about themselves and can help them relax and cope better if things are worrying them. And that it can also help them concentrate better on their school work, particularly if they are active outdoors.
- Be careful about what you say to children. Labelling a child as 'not sporty' or 'having no coordination' or 'clumsy' may stay with them for a very long time and may stop them engaging in physical activity. Not all children will be 'sporty', but all children can and should be physically active – and they need to be physically active for the rest of their lives for their health and wellbeing. You can help children to enjoy being active by focusing on what they *can* do and what they *enjoy*. Also help support them to practice and develop their physical skills. Many people can improve their coordination and fitness with practice.
- Become more active yourself and you will set an example to the children around you. It will also help improve your wellbeing. If you haven't been active for a while, start slowly, e.g. 10 minutes of walking on some days in the week. After a few weeks you can build up the time and the number of days. Make sure you are doing something you enjoy - you are more likely to keep it up.
- Give children the opportunity and support to build physical activity into their daily routine, for example walking to school or nursery, using stairs, cycling or active play such as skipping. This will help to create a habit that may stay with them for the rest of their lives.

- Do active things together with the children in your life. You can play active games, for example:
 - throw and catch or kick a ball
 - go swimming or cycling together
 - do some gardening
 - go out for a walk or hike
 - put on some music and dance around the house or classroom.

This will help develop good relationships as well as increasing your physical activity.

- Encourage children to be active outdoors, for example:
 - going for a nature walk or hike
 - playing on the beach and in the sea
 - going to a playground to climb and swing
 - playing hide and seek
 - kicking a ball around in the park or garden
 - throwing and catching balls or Frisbees
 - building a snowman
 - clearing snow or raking leaves
 - walking the dog, or offering to walk a neighbour's dog.

Being outdoors has the added advantage of helping to improve concentration and encouraging learning about the natural world.

- Action songs, (e.g. Hokey Cokey; Heads, shoulders, knees and toes) are a really good way of encouraging children to be more active. These songs will appeal particularly to younger children.
- Find out what physical activities are available in your local community for you and for children, e.g. football, badminton, tennis, yoga classes, dancing classes, etc.
- Try to improve children's motivation to be more active. Children need to be able to believe that they can do it and that's it worth doing. So the activity should be matched to their age and skill level and they need to have some interest or enjoyment in the activity.
- Be aware of different motivations for being physically active at different ages. For example, younger children may be motivated by fun and trying new games. Teenagers may be more motivated by doing what their friends are doing or by the opportunity to make new friends. One of the main motivations for physical activity is the sense of belonging it can offer, through spending time with others. Listen to children and young people, and understand their motivations - this will help you plan activities that they will want to do and continue doing.
- Ask children what physical activities they find interesting or enjoy doing. Remember it doesn't have to be a sporting activity.
- Try to give children and young people several options of organised physical activity such as football, tennis, swimming or dancing and let them choose what they want to do. They are more likely to keep it up and enjoy it if they have been involved in deciding what to do.
- Be aware that different children will prefer different activities. Some children may be put off if the activity is too competitive or if there are too many rules, particularly younger children. Others may be put off by peer pressure, by having to wear a

particular uniform, being embarrassed by their body shape or by previous negative experiences.

- To increase physical activity, set what you believe to be achievable goals that match the age and skills of the child. For example, a goal might be: to be able to run round the park, to learn to play tennis, to swim a length, to get into the school football team or to learn to ride a bicycle. Then encourage small steps towards the goal. Check to find out whether the steps are working or not. If not, you may have to revise the goal or try different steps.
- Give feedback and praise. Talk with children about what they have done to be active and praise or reward small steps. Building children's confidence is very important to keep them motivated to do more.
- Encourage children to be creative and to come up with new ideas about how they could be more active. For example, you might encourage children in your class, family or group to suggest an active game. Let the child explain the game and then all do it as a group. Or you could think up ideas together about how the whole family, class or group could be more active for a week, e.g. by walking up stairs more or running round the playground at break, then report back after a week.
- It can be harder to keep active in winter and when the weather is poor. It is useful to plan in advance how you can help children to keep physically active in poor weather. For example, you could plan to start going swimming or to a dance class in the winter, or ensure that children have good waterproof clothing so that they can continue to walk to school in all weather.
- Try to keep children's screen time (TV-watching, computer use and playing video games) to a minimum – aim for less than two hours a day.
- Ensure that children understand about safety and are careful when they are active. Be sure that they wear any appropriate protective gear such as a helmet for cycling. For vigorous sports activities, e.g. football, squash, etc, they should concentrate on learning the skills first, then gradually build up the intensity.

Activity

Here's an activity to help children be more physically active:

Build your own obstacle course!



Obstacle courses can be a fun way to have healthy exercise together. You can make them wherever you are, and use whatever you can find. Just check that everything is safe before you start racing around the obstacles!

What you need:

- All kinds of things that can be turned into an obstacle course – buckets, planks, hoops, balls, groundsheets, blankets, play tunnels, slides, ladders, bean bags, etc.
- A large, safe outdoor space such as a garden, field, park or beach
- An adult (you need a safety-checker and the grown-up needs to get some exercise, too!)

What you do:

- Work together as a group or family to design an obstacle course using lots of the things that you can find around you.
- You can make your course long, or you can make it circular, so that you can keep running around without having to go back to the beginning again.
- Lay out all the things to make an interesting obstacle course. Try to include balancing on a narrow length of wood or stepping stones; crawling under or through something like a play tunnel or under a blanket; throwing something accurately (such as a ball into a bucket); stretching up high to reach something; or running around obstacles on the ground, such as rocks, toys or plant pots. Also include a few fun things like using a slide, a trampoline or a space-hopper, etc.
- Then race around the course and see who can do it the fastest, or decide that everyone will do it three times and then you'll all have a rest, so it's not a race, but everyone can still have fun together.

Some things to talk about together:

- Which physical activity is the most fun for you?
- What physical activity would you like to do better?
- What physical activity would everyone in your family or group enjoy doing together?

Other ideas:

- Make an obstacle course in a park using the playthings that are already there.
- Make an obstacle course on a beach and draw interesting pathways in the sand to run around. Collect buckets of water from the sea and pour them into a hollow in the sand. Draw 'stepping stones' in the sand and try to jump from one to another. Put seaweed in an area and pretend it's a stream you have to jump across, but be careful not to slip!

Resource

The Scottish Natural Heritage website gives some ideas on enjoying the outdoors:
<http://www.snh.gov.uk/enjoying-the-outdoors/>