

10 ways to keep your kids active

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The challenge of keeping kids healthy and physically active gets tougher for parents every day.

In an age where the Internet, social media, computer games and hundreds of TV channels rule, children tend to spend less time outdoors and moving around than previous generations. Why ride a bike several blocks to a friend's house when it's so easy to text or chat with them on Facebook? Why play sports if you have the choice of a Madden football game over actually being pummeled in real life by some kid who already weighs 200 pounds by middle school age?

Many parents believe their child can get all the physical activity they need at school during P.E. Sadly, according to Healthychildren.org, less than half of time spent in physical education class and games and sports practices involves actual physical activity. No wonder nearly 1 out of 3 children in the United States is either overweight or obese.

Steve Ettinger, kids fitness expert and author of the children's book "Wallie Exercises" (available on Amazon), says safety is a major reason parents are reluctant to let their children play outside. "When I grew up, if you (had) nothing to do, you were sent outside to have your own fun," said Ettinger, who uses the character of a dog in his book to encourage kids to be physically fit. "Now, it's a pretty easy thing for parents just to give them a tablet or an iPhone. Technology makes it so much easier to be distracted.

There are things you can do as a parent to reverse this disturbing trend. Here are 10 ways you can help your kids stay active:

1. Talk with your child's pediatrician. Doctors are not only great resources for recommending a suitable exercise program, but can give guidance on specific sports or other fitness activities to fit his or her physical condition and abilities.
2. Keep activities simple. Sparkpe.org recommends at least one hour a day of physical activity to stay healthy. Not everyone is cut out to play organized sports or be a star. Riding a bike, running, or just shooting hoops are simple things that will keep anyone in good shape. If a straight 60 minutes isn't always practical, break activities up into parts.
3. Do your homework. Healthychildren.org recommends your child pick an activity that is appropriate for his age group. You wouldn't, for example, want him lifting weights if he's only six years old. Find a safe environment and a convenient place and time for activities.
4. Set a good example by keeping yourself fit. According to Ettinger, this is especially important for younger children, when they're still at an impressionable age. A child's activity level often reflects who they spend time with. Since many kids spend time with their families outside of school, it's important for parents to lead the way in making sure everyone in the family gets the proper diet and exercise they need.
5. Pick a sport or activity that interests your child. Ettinger doesn't subscribe to the idea that certain kids are natural athletes and others are not. Certain sports and activities can be beneficial to most, if not all, children. Gymnastics is an excellent choice for younger kids, since it teaches body control, awareness, and proper form. It can even help develop skills in other sports as they get older.

6. Monitor their down time. Watching television or hanging out on social media is fine, as long as it's done in moderation and doesn't become a dominant lifestyle. Keep track of how much time they spend on sedentary activities, keeping them to no more than two hours a day, if possible.
7. Advocate for children's activities in your community or school. Since safety is a major concern for parents, talk to leaders in your town or city about creating safer routes to parks, community centers and playgrounds. Urge your child's school to add more physical activity during P.E. time or after-school programs, where appropriate.
8. Don't be too restrictive of activities. Not all children enjoy team sports, says Ettinger. Like adults, kids don't all gravitate toward the same interests, so expose them to a wide variety of activities, such as dance, hiking, or even simple exercises like pushups.
9. Join in the fun. Whether you have a single- or two-parent family structure, it's not easy for everyone to spend quality time together. But set aside some time each week and pick an activity everyone can participate in. Jogging, roller skating or taking a brisk walk are fun ways for whole families to stay fit together. Ettinger recommends yoga as a great way for the whole family to keep both mind and body healthy. "Because of the nature of what yoga is, it's available to people of all different levels and ages," he explains.
10. Choose an activity for a cause. Encourage your kids to join you in a community Fun run or charity walk. In some cases, you could even bring your pets and give them exercise. You'll not only be helping your body, but your community as well.

Your kids don't have to be held captive by the many distractions that call for their attention. As a parent, it's important to lead the way to better physical fitness by helping them choose the best activities, lead with your own example, and involve the entire family when possible. Let's do our part to take back control of their health and win the war against obesity.