

Play the Day Away!

Children and Exercise

- Kori L. Propst, MS, LPC

Screaming and laughter pierce the air. Pattering feet, crunching leaves, and the chiming of the recess bell illuminate the school yard. Monkey bars feel the friction of little fingers and chalk lines become blurred as energetic shoes skip across them. Images of children in hot pursuit of each other, chasing, running, rolling, and sliding pass through the alcoves of my mind as I remember when I was young. I would spend hours outside playing hide-and-seek with my sister, building forts, jumping on the trampoline, riding the horses and practicing my gymnastics routines. No such thing as video games existed in our home, television was boring and uninteresting, and the world outside was just too inviting and curious to avoid! We were active and lively, and wanting to drink it all in. And when mom would call us to come in for dinner, we were catastrophically disappointed, "but mom, we're not done playing." "Mom, can we come in later.....? Please...."

Children in 2007 have changed. Many parents have resorted to video games and cable television to keep their kids entertained. Recess, sports, and physical education classes have been cut from many schools' curriculums. And we wonder why so many children are overweight, obese, and developing dangerous diseases like diabetes and heart disease. The activity that I so vividly remember being an every day occurrence in my life has dwindled to next to none for most children. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, children are watching on average 3 hours of television per day. They come home from school, watch television, eat dinner, and go to bed. Where in that sequence of events is there movement, save for the readjustment of the retina and motoring through the meat? The Kaiser Family Foundation reports that the average child spends 5.5 hours on all media combined per day. Sad.

As adults we think often about our health, set goals for ourselves to start working out, eating healthier and losing weight. We imagine exercising at the gym, joining a league sport, or starting a jogging routine. But do we encourage the same with our kids? Are they witnessing in us examples of how movement can be fun, energizing, and motivating?

Children require as much if not more activity as adults, however, exercise for them means playing outside with their friends, kicking the soccer ball at practice, hanging from the jungle gym, and going for their longest hand stand. More structured activities like weight-training can be appropriate for children if monitored appropriately. Regardless, the three primary components of fitness-- endurance, strength, and flexibility--are being addressed.

Encouraging children to remove themselves from that nicely rounded dent in the couch to be active has many benefits. Kids who exercise have stronger muscles and bones, lower body fat levels, less likelihood of becoming overweight, decreased risk of developing Type II diabetes, more energy, stronger immune systems, and possibly lower cholesterol. How familiar do these conditions sound? Over half of the US population of adults is overweight or obese with one or more of these ailments, dangerously increasing their risk of mortality. When children develop healthy habits they are significantly likely to continue practicing them throughout their lives, avoiding the destructiveness of these conditions on their bodies and minds, and more importantly, increasing their self-esteem and feelings of control over their health.

In addition to the health benefits of exercise, children who are active experience more recuperative sleep, better concentration, and the ability to handle the physical and emotional stressors oftentimes present in their daily lives. When regularly active, running to catch the bus won't leave children winded and gasping for air, studying for that spelling test won't seem so taxing, and playing catch with Spike will be considered a "break" rather than a chore!

Children demonstrate cardiovascular endurance, strength, and flexibility components of fitness on the playground in a variety of ways. Playing dodgeball, hanging from and walking across the monkey bars, and bending down to tie a shoe incorporate these aspects of fitness which should be encouraged by parents within a variety of venues. Just as adults are encouraged to choose activities which they find enjoyable to get them moving, the same should be the focus with children. Ideas abound for increasing the heart and breathing rate. Try one of the following with your children: basketball, running, bike-riding, hiking, swimming, soccer, and in-line skating.

We may think primarily of weight-lifting when the goal is to increase strength. Many options exist for improving strength, and weights are not necessary. Get your children involved in your resistance routine by challenging them to do push-ups and sit-ups, wrestle with them, or have a hand-stand contest. If your child is interested in weights, encourage their participation in a formal program with a trained professional who can guide them through an appropriate routine, teach them proper form and execution, and educate them about the benefits of training with weights.

Often forgotten but crucial for physical health is flexibility. Stretching enhances joint range of motion, decreases injury risk, and improves the body's ability to perform activities of daily living without pain. Kids demonstrate and practice flexibility when they practice the splits, do a flip on the trampoline, or reach up to grab their favorite snack from the top shelf of the cupboard.

Because playing should be a child's first priority, getting exercise should not be a difficult task. Whether one, two, or a group of children, plenty of activities are available to get the heart pumping and the muscles moving. Need ideas to encourage your child(ren) to get moving? Try out the following activities:
For solo kids: Bike-riding, skateboarding, or in-line skating; make a game out of jump-roping and have a contest with the number of jumps each of you can get before you miss; have your child practice his/her favorite sport and create a contest to see how many basketballs he/she can sink or the time he/she can keep the soccer ball in the air using only the knees, hit the tennis ball against the wall to practice serving, or wash your neighbor's cars for money AND exercise. If you're in the house, see how many push-ups you can do or bat a balloon around the room.
For a pair: Have a handstand contest, invent a new dance or cheerleading routine, have a sprint contest, or practice hitting the baseball together.
For a group: Play hide and seek, tag, or duck-duck-goose, divide into teams and play kickball, go sledding or ice-skating if it's cold.

Fifteen percent of children are overweight, and another 15% are at risk of becoming overweight. Two-thirds of overweight children will grow up to be overweight adults. Additional bodyfat is often accompanied by diabetes, high cholesterol, and increased risk of heart disease. Michelle Fisher, of Stretch-n-Grow, an international children's fitness organization spanning 11 countries, with programs in Fort Collins, is working to combat the effects of a sedentary lifestyle by designing fun workouts for kids that

not only keep them moving but teach necessary developmental skills in the process. "I teach children from 18 months of age and older," Michelle states. "In our classes we incorporate cardio, strength, flexibility and balance exercises, as well as nutrition. The kids learn proper ways of exercising, how to eat in a healthy way, and develop great attitudes about exercise along the way." Michelle has been involved with Stretch-n-Grow since 1994 and currently teaches over 900 children within the program across Larimer, Boulder, and Weld counties. Once per week children in home-based and community childcare centers are given the opportunity to learn how to live a healthy lifestyle. Their parents or caregivers are educated as well, receiving regular newsletters and handouts in order to support Michelle's work with the children. Approximately 1 million children have received the guidance of Stretch-n-Grow's lifestyle program since its inception in 1992.

Many personal trainers are equipped to work with children also and would be happy to design and implement an exercise and educational program for you and your children to help instill healthy habits.

Healthy children grow up to be healthier adults. Parents, caregivers, and the adults in children's lives are the key to modeling appropriate activity and nutrition. Should adults require education and ideas, professionals are available to assist them. If you have children, be the best parent you can be, and take steps toward becoming a healthier family. When your children are older, they will reminisce about their fun-filled play days and nutritional know-how.

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