

Healthy Living

Patient Information from the American Chiropractic Association

Help Your Child Get Fit

When children are overweight, it's best to focus on becoming healthy rather than on losing weight. Experts agree that increasing physical activity is the No. 1 way to battle childhood obesity. Don't expect schools to provide all the necessary physical activity for your child. Help your kids find exercises they enjoy, and encourage them to workout—or, even better, workout with them.

Remember, however, that activities that adults may prefer—such as working out on a treadmill for 30 minutes—may not excite a child. Experts say that children engage in physical activity for three reasons: to have fun, make friends and learn something new. They will not run for 30 minutes without stopping. Instead, they play in short bursts of activity, stop, recover and then run again.

Use the following tips to help your kids get and stay fit.

1. Find Activities Appropriate for Your Child

Some experts have found that aerobic exercise—running, playing, dancing, skipping or swimming—is a source of frustration, not fun, for overweight and obese children. As a result, they associate exercise with thoughts such as “I don't like physical activity,” “I am the slowest kid in class,” “People make fun of me on the playground,” concluding that exercise “sucks.”

Some experts found strength training programs to be popular with overweight children. These kids can lift considerably more weight than other children, which makes them feel good about themselves, earns them appreciation from peers and encourages them to continue exercise. Building on this foundation, children can be gradually engaged in aerobic activity by incorporating games into their resistance-training programs. Be aware, however, that strength training programs require appropriate technique and precautions—so be sure to find appropriate coaching for your children.

Remember that people generally don't appreciate being told what to do—and your child is not an excep-



tion. Help your kids find physical activities that can help them gain self-respect and confidence—and that will be enjoyable. Be sure to engage them in finding the activities they like.

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Consider programs at the local YMCA or recreation center, signing your child up for classes he or she would like to try. Some have found that computer programs such as Wii Fit can help children increase their physical activity. No matter the program, be sure that your child is engaged in finding it.

2. Involve Your Kids in Preparing Meals

In many families, planning and preparing meals can help children buy into weight management. Involve children in shopping and food preparation. Have the child start thinking, “I am doing this to be strong and healthy; I am accepting responsibility for my own health and growth.” Give your children a choice of several appealing healthy foods.

3. Keep Up a Positive Attitude

Remember that the key to any change is repetition accompanied by positive reinforcement. Experts agree that creative, integrative and nonjudgmental approaches, which actively involve children in finding solutions, work because they aim to change behaviors—the strategy that will reap long-term rewards.

Praise your children for small steps and help them to stay on track. Do not show frustration if the progress is slow. Set realistic goals, and remind your child that getting fit is a process. The key is to get started and make appropriate modifications as you go along.

Healthy Choices from the Start

Especially with young children, it's possible to teach them to like healthy, low-calorie foods. Here are a few suggestions:

- *Introduce new foods in small amounts, many times.* Ask your child to try a small bite. Research shows that it may take up to 10 times for your child to try a new food before he or she gets used to it and starts liking it.
- *Recognize your own frustration.* When you invest time, money and effort in making the food and the child rejects it, it is frustrating. Do not take it out on the child. Step back, and recognize your frustration. Ask the child to try the food, but don't insist. Avoid a power struggle.
- *Win the war, not the battle.* Your main goal is to teach your children to eat a wide variety of healthy foods, not to force them to eat any one particular food. ■

Preventing Emotional Eating

Our relationship with food starts in childhood. In addition to modeling healthy behaviors, help your children develop healthy eating habits and avoid power struggles over food.

DO:

- Trust your child to listen to his or her own internal cues about eating
- Encourage your child to eat when hungry
- Serve a wide variety of food
- Allow your child to stop eating when he or she feels full
- Teach your child to love his or her body
- Facilitate physical activity for pleasure
- Help your child to deal with boredom or negative feelings without using food

DON'T:

- Use food as a reward
- Force your child to eat foods he or she doesn't want
- Forbid any foods, such as sweets
- Restrict the amount of food your child needs to satisfy hunger
- Criticize your child's or your own body size
- Promote dieting



For more information on prevention and wellness, or to find a doctor of chiropractic near you, go to the Patient Information section on ACA's Web site at www.acatoday.org or call 800-986-4636.

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