

Increasing Family Physical Activity

by Francesca Zavacky

Parents strive to provide their children with the best of everything. Yet, the rising incidence of childhood obesity indicates that too much of some good things can be a problem. We take for granted that kids are active, but today's busy lifestyles might not necessarily provide children with the physical activity that their growing bodies need. The National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) recommends children get at least 60 minutes, and up to several hours, of physical activity every day.

Deciding to be an active family takes some deliberate actions. Parents must choose to incorporate physical activity into the family lifestyle early in childhood. As children get older, their participation in physical activity declines. It's best to start when children are young and make a commitment to physical activity every day!

With toddlers, encourage active play both indoors and outdoors. Turn daily chores into an activity adventure. Walking to get the mail, pushing a wheelbarrow filled with weeds or laundry and carrying the groceries are tasks that encourage activity as an integral part of daily living. When you model these healthy practices, your children will adopt the same habits.

As children age, provide activities with greater challenge. Hiking in local nature areas can be a great start. Start with timed hikes, gradually increase the duration and adjust the intensity by changing terrain or speed. Brisk walking will elevate the heart rate and provide a great cardio-respiratory workout. Older children can use pedometers, or step counters, which provide a tangible focus on mileage. No nature areas? Urban hiking in a city environment provides the same benefits and exposes your child to the wonderful diversity of your hometown.

Time is the number one cited barrier to physical activity, and many families are challenged to achieve the 60 minutes of daily moderate physical activity recommended for children. Try to infuse small doses of physical activity into your family's daily lifestyle. One approach is to "take ten" — 10 minutes for a brisk walk, 10 crunches or push ups at a time, or 10 minutes of jump roping. All of these little physical activity "snacks" can accumulate throughout the day and become an hour of activity that your child enjoys and that is necessary for good health.

The "take ten" approach works great for adults, too. If your child sees that you are physically active daily, they will try, as well. Create opportunities for lifestyle activity. Take active vacations and aim for balance when scheduling activities, making sure to include plenty of sleep. Explore your community physical activity venues together as a family. For example, visit the local climbing gym, inline skate or bike together — the possibilities are endless. NASPE has a physical activity brochure called "101 Tips for Family Fitness Fun" that can provide your family with some ideas. To receive a free copy of the brochure, send a stamped, self-addressed, legal sized (#10) envelope to: National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 1900 Association Drive, Reston, VA 20191. For more information about youth physical activity and physical education programs for children, visit the NASPE website at www.naspeinfo.org.