Physical Activity in Children

While the benefits of exercise for physical and mental health are well-known, your child may not be meeting their daily activity goals.

The US received an overall grade of D− for physical activity in children, with only about 1 in 4 children meeting the daily recommendation of 60 minutes or more per day. With the recent COVID-19 pandemic, this has worsened because children are even less active, missing out on daily activities and group sports, and increasing screen time.

Being inactive has numerous harmful effects on health and well-being. It is linked to many chronic diseases and conditions, such as obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, cancers, and early death. In contrast, there are numerous benefits to physical activity for children, including decreased risk for developing all of these diseases and conditions. Physical activity can also help to decrease stress and improve school performance, sleep, and mental health.

US physical activity guidelines recommend that children aged 3 to 5 years be physically active throughout most of the day and that children aged 6 to 17 years have at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity daily. Moderate to vigorous activity means the heart rate is raised higher than the normal resting range and is associated with sweating and deeper breathing.

Not all exercise is the same, and it is important that the activity your child is doing is appropriate for their age. For example, weight lifting is not appropriate for younger children because the strain may be too high for developing muscles, tendons, and bones. There are different types of exercise including aerobic exercise, muscle strengthening, and bone strengthening that all have different benefits. It is important to include all 3 types of exercise in your child’s routine with each done at least 3 days per week as part of at least 60 minutes per day. Aerobic exercise should be the majority of the physical activity and can include walking, running, swimming, dancing, cycling, and jumping rope. Muscle strengthening is also important and can include climbing trees, ropes, or playground equipment, doing push-ups, or participating in gymnastics for young children. Bone strengthening exercises include jumping, playing hopscotch, or playing sports such as tennis, basketball, and gymnastics.

How can you help your child meet these goals? First, be an example. Children copy you, so if you make exercise a part of your routine, they are more likely to follow in your footsteps. You can also help by making physical activity a part of your whole family’s daily routine by setting a time every day, especially when your children are young. In addition, try to make activity fun. If your child enjoys physical activity from an early age, this will likely continue as they grow older. It can also be helpful to make a list of physical activity options, both for outside and indoors for when the weather is not appropriate. Try new things and remember to always keep in mind safety. Think about what protective equipment might be needed for the activity (for example, a helmet for cycling) and about the location where the activity is occurring. Keeping your child active will help your whole family be healthy and happy!