

Fitness for kids: Getting your children off the couch

Direct your child's energy into a lifelong love of physical activity.

For many children, biking to the playground and playing kickball in the backyard have given way to watching television, playing video games and spending hours online. But it's never too late to get your kids off the couch. Use these simple tips to give your kids a lifelong appreciation for activities that strengthen their bodies.

Set a good example

If you want active kids, be active yourself. Take the stairs instead of the elevator. Park the car farther away from your destination. Talk about physical activity as an opportunity to take care of your body, rather than a punishment or a chore.

"A parent's active lifestyle is a powerful stimulus for a child," says Edward Laskowski, M.D., a specialist in physical medicine and rehabilitation and co-director of the Sports Medicine Center at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn. "Set a good example for your children by making physical activity a priority."

Limit screen time

A surefire way to increase your children's activity levels is to limit the number of hours they're allowed to watch television each day. You might limit screen time — including television, video games and computer time — to two hours a day. To make it easier, don't put a television in your children's bedrooms, and keep the computer in a family area. Also limit other sedentary activities, such as text messaging or chatting on the phone.

If your children play video games, opt for those that require movement. Activity-oriented video games — such as dance video games and video games that use a player's physical movements to control what happens on the screen — boost a child's calorie-burning power. In a Mayo Clinic study, kids who traded sedentary screen time for active screen time more than doubled their energy expenditure.

Establish a routine

Set aside time each day for physical activity. Get up early with your children to walk the dog or do jumping jacks together after dinner. Start small, gradually adding new activities to the routine as you — and your children — become more fit.

Let your children set the pace

For many kids, organized sports are a great way to stay fit. But team sports or dance classes aren't the only options. If your child is artistically inclined, take a nature hike to collect leaves and rocks that your child can use to make a collage. If your child likes to climb, head for the nearest neighborhood jungle gym. If your child likes to

read, walk or bike to the neighborhood library for a book. Or simply turn on your child's favorite music and dance in the living room.

"Every child is wired differently," Dr. Laskowski says. "We all have certain strengths and characteristics that influence our interests. The key is finding things that your children like to do."

Promote activity, not exercise

To keep your kids interested in fitness, make it fun.

- **Be silly.** Let younger children see how much fun you can have while being active. Run like a gorilla. Walk like a spider. Hop like a bunny. Stretch like a cat.
- **Get in the game.** Play catch, get the whole family involved in a game of tag or have a jump-rope contest. Try classic movement games such as Simon says or red light, green light. If you don't remember the rules, make up your own!
- **Count your chores.** You might even make it a friendly challenge. Who can pull the most weeds out of the vegetable garden? Who can collect the most litter in the neighborhood? Who can shovel the craziest path in the snow?
- **Try an activity party.** For your child's next birthday, schedule a bowling party, take the kids to a climbing wall or set up relay races in the backyard.
- **Put your kids in charge.** Let each child take a turn choosing the activity of the day or week. Batting cages, bowling and fast-food play areas all count. What matters is that you're doing something active.

"Incorporating physical activity into your children's lives does much more than promote a healthy weight," Dr. Laskowski says. "It sets the foundation for a lifetime of fitness and good health."