

Physical Fitness for Preschool-Age Children

Childhood obesity has tripled in just 20 years. Preschool children who are inactive risk becoming overweight later in life. The U.S. Surgeon General says daily exercise is a key to being fit.

What physical activities can you expect preschool-age children (ages 3-5) to do?

- By age 3 most children can:**
 - go up and down stairs by alternating their feet
 - jump in place
 - throw overhand
- By age 4 most children can:**
 - catch a bounced ball
 - jump with a running start
 - pedal a tricycle
- By age 5 most children can:**
 - skip, leading with one foot
 - roll like a log
 - “pump” on a swing

What can you do at home or in child care to help young children be physically fit?

- **Encourage them to get moving.** Make positive comments that focus on effort: “Wow, you zoomed down the slide!” “You almost made a basket!”
- **Provide at least 60 minutes a day for active free play.** Let them run, climb, march, pedal, throw, roll, skip, dig, and jump in a safe space until they are tired. Offer riding toys, balls, beanbags, climbers, balance beams, and obstacle courses.
- **Think about safety.** Help children remember hats and mittens during cold weather. In hot weather, see that they cool off in the shade and drink plenty of water. Whatever the weather, help them avoid overexposure to direct sunlight.
- **Plan an hour or more of structured physical activity each day.** Families and caregivers can teach creative movement, dance, and game-playing skills. Some park districts also offer classes in swimming, group games, or ballet for young children. Classes should focus on skills and fun, not winning and losing. In most cases, organized sports are more appropriate for older children.
- **Turn off the TV and computer.** Experts say preschoolers should not sit in one place or lie down for more than an hour at a time unless they are sleeping. Limiting “screen time” provides more opportunities for active play.
- **Set a good example.** Let children see you eating healthy food and being active. Note: Doctors say it is better to talk about becoming strong and healthy, rather than about “being thin” or “losing weight.”
- **Exercise together.** Try sledding, hiking, gardening, and games like catch or tag. Stress cooperation and fun rather than winning.
- **Share books that show the importance of fitness.** Offer children books about dancers, athletes, construction workers, farmers, and other physically active people.

For related Web resources, see “Physical Fitness for Preschool-Age Children” at <http://illinoisearlylearning.org/tips.htm>.



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