

Physical Fitness for Toddlers



Toddlers can keep us so busy that we might think they will always be physically fit. But doctors say toddlers who get used to an inactive life style are at risk for obesity later in life. According to the U.S. Surgeon General, daily physical activity is a key to being fit.

What physical activities can you expect toddlers (ages 1½ to 3) to do?

As a general guide, here are some physical skills toddlers at different ages usually have:

By 18 months
most children can:

- walk well (even backwards)
- go downstairs backwards on hands and knees
- roll objects on the floor

By age 2
most children can:

- run
- push a chair in position to obtain out-of-reach objects
- turn handles to open and close doors

By age 3
most children can:

- go up and down stairs by alternating their feet
- jump
- throw overhand

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

Offer toys that encourage toddlers to use their muscles. Provide building toys, riding toys, balls and beanbags, and climbers.

Provide plenty of time for active free play. Experts say toddlers need more than 60 minutes of unstructured physical play in a safe place every day. Morning, afternoon, and evening—let them set their own pace! They can walk, run, roll, climb, slide, pull, push, throw, and jump until they're tired.

Turn off the TV, VCR, and computer. Toddlers should not sit in one place or lie down for more than an hour at a time except when sleeping.


Find ways to make exercise fun. Up to 60 minutes a day of structured physical activities can be good for toddlers:

- Lead them in creative movement. They can pretend to be animals, workers, or machines. Teach them group games like "Follow the Leader" or "Ring around the Rosie." They can practice their skills and learn new ways to move.
- Make an obstacle course. Indoors or out, toddlers can take turns going over, under, around, and through furniture, boxes, and climbing equipment.
- Move to music! Bounce, sway, clap, march, dance, or play rhythm instruments.
- Exercise together. Make it a part of your routine. Do stretches before lunch. Play in the park or take a walk before the sun goes down (but not too close to bedtime!).

Set a good example. Let toddlers see *you* walk, run, bike, build, dance, climb, or play ball.

Share books about people who lead active lives. Stories of athletes, dancers, astronauts, farmers, and other physically fit people show children that exercise is important.

If you have questions or concerns about the physical activities your toddler can do, you may want to check with your health care provider.

 For related Web resources, see "Physical Fitness for Toddlers" at <http://illinoisearlylearning.org/tips.htm>.



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