

It's child's play!

Leading a physically active lifestyle is important for everyone. Physical activity is particularly vital for children's health and development, and for establishing healthy behaviours that promote enjoyment of childhood and lifelong activity. Play is the best form of physical activity for children.

What is active play?

Active play is essentially physical activity with regular bursts at a moderate to vigorous pace. Active play can occur indoors and outdoors, alone, or with friends and family.

What is structured and unstructured play?

Structured and unstructured play refers to the different types of children's play. Structured play is usually organised; it may have rules, time limits and special equipment. Some examples include your child playing sports, going to play groups or kinder gym and creative movement or swimming lessons.

Unstructured play is less restricted and often 'spontaneous' (made up on the spot by those playing). Unstructured play can include playing alone or with friends and family, imaginative play, going for a walk, dancing to music at home or playing in the park.



**MOVE,
PLAY
AND GO**

Who should be involved in active play?

Active play is for every child. Even before children can walk, they will be active and engage in play. As they get older and learn more skills, opportunities for play should increase.

Why is active play so important?

Active play is important for your child's health, growth and development. Regular activity and play have many benefits for your child beyond just maintaining healthy weight and protection against diseases in later life, these include:

- building strong hearts and bones
- strengthening muscles and developing good posture
- improving sleep
- developing movement skills
- improving concentration
- developing acceptable self-esteem and confidence
- improving physical skills
- providing opportunities to learn social skills of leading, explaining and following.

How much activity?

Active play is essential for all children. International guidelines suggest suitable daily amounts of play for different ages.

Table 1: Physical activity for toddlers and preschoolers

	Structured physical activity (daily)	Unstructured physical activity (daily)
Toddlers	At least 30 mins	60 minutes up to several hours
Preschoolers	At least 60 mins	

Children aged five–12 years

Encourage your child to do at least 60 minutes (and up to several hours) of moderate to vigorous physical activity every day. The 60 minutes of activity does not have to occur all at one time, it can be accumulated through short bursts of activity over the day. Opportunities for movement with stop/start patterns of activity are closest to children's natural play and therefore probably best.

How much sedentary time should children have?

Sedentary behaviour, or inactivity, is time spent on tasks requiring minimal energy expenditure. Many different types of sedentary behaviour exist. For example in older children, sedentary behaviour can be productive (homework, sensible sleeping hours) and non-productive (electronic games and long unnecessary sleep-ins). Reducing sedentary behaviour can provide more time for physical activity. Activities involving 'screens' are the most common forms of sedentary behaviour and include television, DVDs, console games, computers and hand-held electronic games.

Watching too much television is often linked closely with obesity in children.

Generally, when children are watching television, they are not being active and are more likely to see food advertisements that encourage them to eat and drink, regardless of hunger.

Table 2: Daily 'screen time' recommendations for children

Age	Amount of 'screen time'
0-2 years	0 hours
2-12 years	2 hours maximum

If your child is of school age, homework may be a productive use of sedentary time, but check that the tasks are suitable for their age and that recommended homework guidelines are followed.

Active play at different ages

Toddlers

Toddlers are still developing basic motor skills. They enjoy rolling, crawling, standing and exploring new challenges. Simple, free, outdoor play is ideal for toddlers. Play materials such as tyres, large soft beach balls, buckets and spades, and cardboard boxes encourage imagination and provide opportunities for learning and fun. Music and sounds are a great way to encourage movement and play.

Kindergarten children

At kindergarten age, your child should thrive on walking, jumping, running and exploring. Children at this age begin to showcase a variety of styles of play, these may include mimicking others, imaginative play, making up their own games or activities, and they enjoy movements such as climbing, pushing, pulling, spinning and dancing. Try to provide simple, safe toys or props such as large wooden blocks, dress up materials and balls for outdoor play.

Primary school children

At primary school age, your child will be improving basic movement skills via, hand, eye and hand, and foot coordination, balance, speed, and agility. By the middle years of primary school, children can participate in modified sports like 'Auskick' and 'Netta' netball, or attend 'kid's clubs' with an emphasis on fun rather than competition. However, outdoor free play is easy and low cost, so make sure time is still available for free play.

How do I encourage active play?

Role of parents and carers

Parents don't necessarily have to be active with their children every day, but should join in when they can. It is a good idea to plan some active time for the whole family on a weekly basis. Carers and other family members, such as grandparents, can share the responsibility of encouraging and planning for children to be active everyday. Remember parents are role models for children so you should try to be active in your own daily life.

Some parents find that keeping active play items such as a blow up beach ball, a soccer ball, a bat, or a bucket and spade in a handy spot is useful, as a reminder to look for opportunities for play. If your family owns a car, you could keep this equipment in the boot.

The play environment

A positive, safe environment is a very important factor in play. Play can take place both indoors and outdoors, but being outdoors is particularly good because it usually gives children space to perform 'gross motor' activities at different paces. Gross motor activities use large muscle groups during movements such as jumping, running, climbing and leaping. Outdoor spaces help children experience their environment and connect with nature.

Active transport

Where possible, opt to leave the car at home and make active transport an everyday activity. Active transport can involve walking or riding a bike to nearby destinations. Children older than two years should not be completely dependent on a stroller. Whenever possible, young children should be encouraged to walk, gradually increasing the distance. A stroller should be the least preferred transport option for young children, except when they are traveling long distances.

Frequently asked questions

What if my child is overweight or obese?

If your child is overweight, seeking the advice of a health professional is important. Health professionals can help families consider combining a small number of simple changes to family lifestyle. Changes to both healthy eating and activity are often more successful than changing either eating or physical activity alone. Including the whole family in healthy lifestyle changes is most helpful for everyone, not just an overweight or obese child. Try not to compare overweight children with leaner family members or friends. Families are often made up of a range of shapes and sizes.

It is particularly important for your child to feel comfortable being active. Try to find an activity that offers something enjoyable. Select activities that are readily available, affordable and provide opportunities for success. The activity environment should be social, flexible (taking rest breaks when needed), positive and supportive. The aim is to get children to want to include a number of activities as part of everyday life.

If children get hot, puffed and sweaty when active, this is generally a good sign they are working their bodies and benefiting from physical activity.

Remember, activity should be fun and satisfying, without focusing only on competition, fitness or skills.

No matter how active your child is, well-balanced nutrition makes an equal contribution to child health and is an essential part of a child's growth and development.

What if my child does not appear to enjoy activity?

Encouraging 'less motivated' children to be active is not always easy. It is true that some children do not enjoy physical activity as much as peers or other family members. Initially, for these children, encouragement and support of any participation is particularly important. A positive, safe environment is needed to attract 'reluctant' children to physical activity.

Simple, fun activities offering opportunities for achievement in a positive and social way may encourage your child to feel capable of doing the activity and to want to get involved. You might need to try many activities until your child finds one they like.

Children who appear to lack skills often benefit from playing with other children, game-like challenges without too much competition, playing with slower, soft toys for tracking (for example: a beach ball) and repetition. Skills are developed over time through practice in many and varied play opportunities, starting from basic movements (for example, learning to jump on two feet before learning to hop on one foot) and gradually increasing the difficulty.

Important tips for active play

- Encourage your child to be active every day, especially outdoors.
- Limit your child's sedentary time.
- Play environments should be positive, safe and supervised.
- Plan regular activities with the family.
- Walk or ride instead of taking the car, when possible.
- Support and praise your child's activity efforts—not the result of the activity.