

# Physical Activity

## What You Need to Know

Studies show that when children's exercise and fitness needs are met, children are more able to learn and achieve. Given the growing epidemic of obesity and the link between physical activity and academic performance, parents and schools must work together to make quality daily physical education a priority in schools and to give children more opportunities to be physically active throughout the school day.

Unfortunately, the trend is that children are becoming less physically active:

- \* In 1969, 42 percent of children ages 5 to 18 walked or biked to school; in 2001, only 16 percent did.<sup>1</sup>
- \* Almost all public elementary schools schedule physical education for their students, but only 17 to 22 percent (depending on grade level) provide physical education on a daily basis.<sup>2</sup>
- \* About two-thirds of young people in grades 9 to 12 are not engaged in recommended levels of physical activity. Daily participation in high school physical education classes dropped from 42 percent in 1991 to 33 percent in 2005.<sup>3</sup>
- \* In 2005, only about half of students in grades 9 to 12 attended physical education classes on one or more days in an average week when they were in school.<sup>4</sup>
- \* In 2005, more than a third of high schoolers reported watching three or more hours of television per day on an average school day.<sup>5</sup>

This inactivity is not only harming children's health but affecting children's academic success. Physical activity improves children's academic performance.

- \* Studies show that providing more time for physical activity (by reducing class time for academics) can lead to improved test scores, particularly in the area of mathematics.<sup>6,7</sup> Physical activity programs have also been linked to stronger academic achievement, increased concentration, and improved reading and writing test scores.<sup>8</sup>
- \* Children who have daily physical education classes exhibit better attendance and have a more positive attitude about school.<sup>9</sup>
- \* Children who spend less time in other subjects in order to allow for regular physical education have been shown to do *equally well or better* in academic classes.<sup>10</sup>

*Adapted in part, with permission, from Action for Healthy Kids, "Building the Argument: The Need for Physical Education and Physical Activity in Our Schools," [www.ActionForHealthyKids.org](http://www.ActionForHealthyKids.org).*

Children need to be physically active not only at school but also at home. Demonstrate the importance of physical activity by making exercise both a personal and a family habit. Take a family walk around the block each night after dinner. Schedule a weekly game of touch football in the park. Encourage your children to take advantage of local sports facilities. Or simply park as far away from store entrances as possible. Regular exercise will make the whole family healthier. Plus, exercising as a family is a great way to spend time together. Below is some advice to keep in mind as your family increases its daily physical activity.

## Setting Realistic Goals

Setting goals is an important step in starting a fitness program. Keep in mind that the goals you set should be reasonable and realistic. Using the SMART system will help you set reachable goals.

### Example of Setting a SMART Goal

<b>S</b> pecific	Be able to run three miles
<b>M</b> easurable	Log activity each week
<b>A</b> ction-oriented	Run/walk for 30 minutes three times a week
<b>R</b> ealistic	Run a 10-minute mile by the end of the month
<b>T</b> imely	I want to be able to do this by the end of the month

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## Phases of Exercise

**1. Warming up:** Before you exercise, you should always warm up your body. When you warm up your body, you increase your blood flow and get your muscles and joints ready to exercise. Most people are warmed up when they begin to sweat and breathe heavier. Warming up makes your muscles more limber and decreases your chance of being injured during exercise.

**2. Stretching:** Once you have warmed up, you can complete stretching exercises that will prepare your whole body. You should specifically target the muscles that will be used while you are actively exercising.

**3. Exercising:** Complete the exercise activities in which you choose to participate. Always make sure to take appropriate safety precautions (e.g., wear protective gear) and to exercise for a duration and at an intensity that is appropriate for your fitness level.

**4. Cooling down:** Once you have finished exercising, you are ready to cool down. It is just as important to cool down after exercise as it is to warm up before exercise. When you cool down, you should let your breathing return to normal. It is best to walk around for a few minutes to make sure your breathing is normal and to let your heartbeat slow down. After you have walked around for a few minutes following vigorous exercise, you are ready to begin your cool-down stretches.

Stretching again after you have cooled down will help prevent injuries, help increase your range of motion, and prevent soreness. You should complete the stretches you did before the exercise and add more stretches for the specific muscles worked.

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### **Bike Safety Tips**

Bicycling can be a great way for families to increase their amount of physical activity—and it's fun. The following tips can help you and your family stay safe on your bikes:

- Be sure to fix anything that might be broken or wrong with your bike.
- Always wear a bicycle safety helmet.
- Wear brightly colored clothing so that others can see you better.
- Remember: One seat = only one rider!
- Keep both hands on the handlebars.
- Walk your bike across busy intersections.
- Look left, right, left for traffic at stop signs and on driveways before riding out into the street.
- Obey traffic signs and lights.
- Ride on the right-hand side of the street in the same direction as the flow of automobile traffic.
- Always use hand signals when stopping or turning.
- Be aware of surrounding traffic.
- When riding with others, ride single file.

You should wear a helmet on every bike ride, no matter how short or how close to home. In the event of a fall or crash, bicycle helmets reduce the risk of brain injury by almost 90 percent. Nearly 75 percent of bicycle-related fatalities among children could be prevented if the children wore helmets.

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### Walk or Bike to School

Leading a “walking school bus”—walking groups of students to school—on a rotating basis with other parents can be a great way to help your kids increase their daily physical activity, especially if you have concerns about their safety. Also consider organizing a Safe Routes to School program to create a safer environment for children to walk and bike to and from school. Launch your program, or gauge your school community’s interest, with an event for Walk to School Day (observed in October). For more information about these programs, visit [www.walktoschool.org](http://www.walktoschool.org).

### What You Can Do

- \* Schedule regular times throughout the week for your family to be physically active. Help everyone find something active that they enjoy and feel successful doing.
- \* Have everyone write down personal goals; then track everyone’s progress. Place a chart on the refrigerator and update it regularly as a family.
- \* Use a pedometer to determine which activities require the most steps.
- \* Give physical activity–oriented gifts; keep the recipient’s skills, interests, and/or objectives in mind.
- \* Always use the stairs.
- \* Play upbeat music while you twist and shake through your chores.
- \* Discover what free and low-cost physical activity areas are near your home (e.g., parks, bike trails, hiking trails, tennis courts, swimming pools).
- \* Start a garden. Have family members plant vegetables, fruits, and flowers.
- \* Walk, jog, or run on a family treasure hunt.
- \* Host a sports party where you play traditional games like basketball, softball, volleyball, tetherball, etc.

*Adapted with permission from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 101 Tips for Family Fitness Fun, [www.aahperd.org/naspe/](http://www.aahperd.org/naspe/).*

## Where You Can Go

- \* Action for Healthy Kids, [www.ActionForHealthyKids.org](http://www.ActionForHealthyKids.org)
- \* National Association for Sport and Physical Education, [www.aahperd.org/naspe/](http://www.aahperd.org/naspe/)
- \* The President's Challenge Physical Activity and Fitness Awards Program, [www.presidentschallenge.org](http://www.presidentschallenge.org)
- \* PTA Parent Resources, Health and Wellness, [www.pta.org/parent\\_resources.html](http://www.pta.org/parent_resources.html)

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Then and Now—Barriers and Solutions," *KidsWalk-to-School*, [www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/kidswalk/then\\_and\\_now.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/kidswalk/then_and_now.htm) (accessed April 23, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> B. Parsad and L. Lewis, *Calories In, Calories Out: Food and Exercise in Public Elementary Schools, 2005* (NCES 2006–057), U.S. Department of Education (Washington DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Physical Activity and Good Nutrition: Essential Elements to Prevent Chronic Diseases and Obesity," *At a Glance*, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Youth Online: Comprehensive Results," *Healthy Youth!*, <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/yrbss> (accessed April 23, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Youth Online: Comprehensive Results," *Healthy Youth!*, <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/yrbss> (accessed April 23, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> R.J. Shephard, M. Volle, M. Lavalee, R. LaBarre, J.C. Jequier, and M. Rajic, "Required Physical Activity and Academic Grades: A Controlled Longitudinal Study," in *Children and Sport*, ed. Limarinen and Valimaki, 58–63 (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> R.J. Shephard, "Curricular Physical Activity and Academic Performance," *Pediatric Exercise Science* 9 (1997): 113–126.

<sup>8</sup> C.W. Symons, B. Cinelli, T.C. James, and P. Groff, "Bridging Student Health Risks and Academic Achievement Through Comprehensive School Health Programs," *Journal of School Health* 67, no. 6 (1997): 220–227.

<sup>9</sup> National Association for Sport and Physical Education/Council of Physical Education for Children, *Physical Education Is Critical to a Complete Education* (2001).

<sup>10</sup> James R. Morrow, Allen W. Jackson, and V. Gregory Payne, "Physical Activity Promotion and School Physical Education," *President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports Research Digest*, September 1999.