



Fitness and Your 2 to 3 Year Old

Fitness that starts in childhood is a lifelong investment. Studies have shown that children who participate in fitness activities continue to stay active throughout their lives. Developing the habit of fitness promotes healthful behaviors, improves self-esteem, and decreases the risk of serious illnesses such as heart disease and stroke later in life. In addition, regular physical activity at any age helps your child to play and meet challenges. Part of committing your child to fitness may include limiting your own excessive computer or television time, as well as becoming a role model by getting regular exercise on your own or with your children. Remember that you are your child's best role model, so always pay attention to safety in sports and recreation.

Physical Fitness and Chronic Health Conditions

Children with chronic health conditions and disabilities should not be excluded from fitness activities; they receive the same positive benefits from exercise. Some activities may need to be modified or adapted to your child's disability. Certain activities are dangerous for some health conditions. Consult your child's doctor about the safety of fitness activities for your child with a disability.

What Exercises Can Kids in This Age Group Do to Stay Fit?

Toddlers use play to explore and learn about the world. By encouraging even the youngest child to engage in active play, parents prompt a child's exploration and natural curiosity about how his body works.

Two- and 3-year-olds thrive on unstructured play. To help toddlers develop skills, running, swinging, climbing, playing in a sandbox, and carefully supervised waterplay are all fun and healthy. By age 2, active, fit children should be able to jump with two feet, skip and run. By age 3, they should be able to change directions (from left to right, from forward to backward) comfortably.

Although there are a number of programs to teach toddlers how to swim, do gymnastics, or even begin to learn baseball basics in peewee leagues, parents should carefully investigate these programs, with an eye toward safety, philosophy, and age-appropriateness. Most children this age are not developmentally ready to play in organized sports or to be involved in competitive activities. If your child doesn't want to participate in an activity for any reason, don't force your child. Try to find out if there are any fears or reasons why your child is reluctant to join in the play. If necessary, postpone the activity, and introduce it later. Waiting a few years and then suggesting the activity again is probably the wisest course.

What Should Parents Do if They're Concerned About Their Child's Fitness?

If your toddler refuses to play or interact with peers, it can be an indication of a physical or psychological problem. Children who complain of pain when they play or consistently refuse to join other children in outdoor play may need to be seen by a health care professional. Even a shy child needs to play with other kids. Socialization skills are important to future functioning. You may want to seek out child play groups to give your child more opportunities for peer interaction.

Family Fitness Tips

Any number of activities can be incorporated into family fitness. Walking, playing and running in the backyard or using playground equipment at a local park can be fun for the entire family.

Always keep safety in mind. Small fingers can get easily caught in playground equipment, and wheeled objects such as tricycles or bicycles can promote sudden twists or falls. One common activity that is not recommended is the use of trampolines. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that all trampolines, including home trampolines, be avoided due to the high number of injuries at all ages.

When engaging in family fitness outings, remember these tips:

- All children and adults should always wear helmets when on tricycles, bicycles and big wheels; wearing a helmet will become a lifelong habit if started early.
- Monitor children when they cross streets; even if your child has been instructed to "look both ways," kids engrossed in a neighborhood game can easily dash after a ball without thinking.
- Safety is a particular concern when it comes to water sports. Never let your toddler around a pool without your constant supervision. It takes very little time for a toddler to slip beneath the water. Swimming programs for young children have an eye on safety and teach valuable skills.
- Use sunscreen whenever your child is playing outdoors, even on overcast days, to prevent sunburn and decrease the risk of developing skin cancer at a later age.

Last Reviewed: August 2007 by Nancy Dickey, M.D.

© Copyright American Medical Association. All rights reserved.