
Fitness and Your 3- to 5-Year-Old

By the time kids are 3 to 5 years old, their physical skills, like running, jumping, kicking, and throwing, have come a long way. Now they'll continue to refine these skills and build on them to learn more complex ones.

Take advantage of your child's natural tendency to be active. Regular physical activity promotes healthy growth and development and learning new skills builds confidence.

Fitness for Preschoolers

Physical activity guidelines recommend that preschoolers:

- are physically active throughout the day
- move and engage in both active play and structured (adult-led) physical activity
- do activities such as jumping, hopping, and tumbling to strengthen bones

Preschoolers should participate in a variety of fun and challenging physical activities that help build skills and coordination, but aren't beyond their abilities. Preschoolers should be active about 3 hours a day, including light, moderate, and vigorous activities.

Kids this age are learning to hop, skip, and jump forward, and are eager to show off how they can balance on one foot, catch a ball, or do a somersault. Preschoolers also might enjoy swimming, playing on a playground, dancing, and riding a tricycle or bicycle with training wheels.

Many parents look to organized sports to get preschoolers active. But the average preschooler has not mastered the basics, such as throwing, catching, and taking turns. Even simple rules may be hard for them to understand, as any parent who has watched their child run the wrong way during a game knows.

And starting too young can be frustrating for kids and may discourage future participation in sports. So if you decide to sign your preschooler up for soccer or another team sport, be sure to choose a peewee league that focuses on fun and learning the fundamentals.

Family Fitness Tips

Playing together, running in the backyard, or using playground equipment at a local park can be fun for the entire family.

Other activities to try together, or for a group of preschoolers to enjoy, include:

- playing games such as "Duck, Duck, Goose" or "Follow the Leader," then mixing it up with jumping, hopping, and walking backward
- kicking a ball back and forth or into a goal
- hitting a ball off a T-ball stand
- playing freeze dance or freeze tag

Kids can be active even when they're stuck indoors. Designate a safe play area and try some active inside games:

- Treasure hunt: Hide "treasures" throughout the house and provide clues to their locations.
- Obstacle course: Set up an obstacle course with chairs, boxes, and toys for the kids to go over, under, through, and around.
- Soft-ball games: Use soft foam balls to play indoor basketball, bowling, soccer, or catch. You can even use balloons to play volleyball or catch.

When Should I Call the Doctor?

If your child doesn't want to play or join other kids in sports or complains of pain during or after being active, talk with your doctor.

Kids who enjoy sports and exercise tend to stay active throughout their lives. And being active can improve learning and attention, prevent obesity, and decrease the risk of serious illnesses such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease later in life.

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