

Physical Fitness for Preschool-Age Children



Healthy habits, such as fitness, are the building blocks of lifelong well-being for children. Physical activity is important for children's growth and development. Preschool-age children should have opportunities to be active throughout the day.

What physical activities can you expect preschool-age children to do?

During the preschool years, children will learn a variety of physical activities, including going up and down stairs by alternating their feet, jumping in place, throwing overhand, catching a bounced ball, jumping with a running start, pedaling a tricycle, skipping by leading with one foot, rolling like a log, and pumping on a swing.

What can you do at home or in childcare to help young children be physically fit?

- **Encourage them to get moving.** Make positive comments that focus on effort: “Wow, you zoomed down the slide!” “You almost made a basket!”
- **Provide opportunities for active free play.** Offer riding toys, balls, beanbags, climbers, balance beams, and obstacle courses. Let children pedal, throw, roll, climb, run, skip, dig, and jump in a safe space until they are tired.
- **Plan for structured physical activity each day.** Families and caregivers can teach creative movement, dance, and game-playing skills. Many park districts offer classes in swimming, group games, or ballet for young children. Classes should focus on skills and fun, not winning and losing. In most cases, organized sports are more appropriate for older children.
- **Think about safety.** Help children remember hats and mittens during cold weather. In hot weather, see that they cool off in the shade and drink plenty of water. Whatever the weather, help them avoid too much exposure to direct sunlight.
- **Reduce screen time.** Leave more time for active play. In children, too much screen time is associated with poor sleep, lower grades in school, and poor mental health. Preschoolers should not sit in one place for an extended time unless they are sleeping.
- **Set a good example.** Let children see you eating healthy food and being active. Start adding physical activity or try something new, such as yoga or strength training, to your daily routine and watch your child imitate you. It is better to talk about becoming strong and healthy than being thin or losing weight.
- **Exercise together.** Try sledding, hiking, gardening, and games such as catch or tag. Some preschoolers may enjoy a few minutes of playing two-player video games with you that are based on being active together. Stress cooperation and fun rather than winning.
- **Share books that show the importance of fitness.** Offer children books about dancers, athletes, construction workers, farmers, and other physically active people.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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