The importance of exercise for you and your child with special health care needs

Being physically active is one of the most important ways you and your child can be healthy. The benefits of physical activity can be experienced by everyone, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, shape, size, or ability level. These benefits don’t just come from traditional forms of exercise like calisthenics and jogging. Activities of daily living can be beneficial to your health, too. Children and adolescents with disabilities are often less physically active than those without disabilities, but parents can shape their child’s attitude and behavior associated with physical activity. Parental support, encouragement, and your beliefs about the importance of physical activity are very important indicators of physical activity among children ages 4 to 12.

Why is exercise important to consider?

Regular physical activity can:

► Improve bone health
► Improve cardiorespiratory and muscular fitness
► Reduce risk for type 2 diabetes and metabolic syndrome
► Decrease levels of body fat
► Improve mental health and mood
► Reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety

Physical activity may also be related to behaviors associated with academic performance like attention, concentration, and on-task classroom behavior.

Physical activity guidelines for children and adolescents

To gain substantial benefits, children and adolescents should:

► Do 60 minutes or more of age-appropriate physical activity daily.
► Aim for daily activity that is moderate or vigorous in intensity.
► Try muscle strengthening activities like climbing and playing on a jungle gym as a part of the 60 minutes on at least three days of the week.
► Incorporate bone strengthening activities like jumping and running as a part of the 60 minutes on at least three days of the week.

If you and your child are currently inactive, even small increases in physical activity can improve your health. You should work with your child’s health care provider to determine how much physical activity and what types of physical activities are appropriate for his or her condition.
What should families focus on?

Remember to follow the F.I.T.T. principle when planning your family exercise program.

- **F** = Frequency or how often you exercise
- **I** = Intensity or how hard you exercise
- **T** = Time or how long you exercise for
- **T** = Type or the kind of exercise you undertake

Begin by setting a **SMART** goal for your family. **SMART** is an acronym for:

- **SPECIFIC**—To make your goal specific, ask yourself these six “W-questions”:
  - Who is involved? “My child and I will . . .”
  - What do you want to accomplish? “. . . walk briskly . . .”
  - When will you do it? “. . . every day . . .”
  - Where will you do it? “. . . to and from school . . .”
  - Why will you do it? “. . . so that we can be healthy, fit, and energetic.”
  - Which constraints do you need to consider so that you can reach your goal? “. . . when the weather is bad, we will walk at the community rec center.”

- **MEASURABLE**—Be sure you can measure your goal to see how well you are doing. You can measure exercise by:
  - Frequency (how often)
  - Intensity (how hard)
  - Time (how long)

- **ATTAINABLE**—Set targets that you can achieve. Start small and work up to big goals.

- **REALISTIC**—What are the chances you will stick to your plan? Do you have time in the morning to walk to school or work every day?

- **TIME**—Timelines are important. By what date do you want to achieve your goal?

Resources for Families

**http://www.ncpad.org/**

The National Center on Health, Physical Activity, and Disability provides a comprehensive set of resources parents can use to learn more about exercise programming for children with disabilities.

**http://pecentral.com/adapted/kozub/index.htm**

The website includes suggestions for modifying physical activities for children with intellectual disabilities, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, autism, behavioral disorders, cerebral palsy, visual impairments, hearing impairments, and learning disabilities.

**http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/physicalactivity/guidelines.htm**

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) provides resources to support youth physical activity.

References


