HEALTH BASICS

Raising fit kids

A practical guide to helping children build fitness through safe, enjoyable movement.

WHAT IT IS
Everyday movement that builds children's fitness and movement skills

WHERE IT COMES UP
Home, school, childcare, playgrounds, and organised sport

WHY IT MATTERS
Supports physical health, confidence, sleep, and lifelong activity

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or athletic training programme

WHO TO ASK
Paediatrician, family clinician, physiotherapist, or qualified activity professional

HOW IT IS CHECKED
Activity, movement skills, growth, and wellbeing over time

Overview

Raising fit kids means helping children move regularly, develop physical skills, and enjoy being active. It is not a disease, diagnosis, or demand that every child become an athlete.

Fitness includes several abilities. These include stamina, strength, balance, coordination, flexibility, and confidence in movement. Running, climbing, dancing, swimming, wheeling, active games, and household tasks can all contribute.

Children do not need formal workouts to become fitter. Younger children often get most of their activity through play. Older children may also enjoy sport, active travel, exercise classes, or outdoor activities.

The aim is not a particular body shape or weight. A child can benefit from movement at any size and at many levels of ability. Disability, illness, access to safe spaces, culture, and family finances can affect which activities are practical.

How it works

Children build fitness when their bodies regularly do more than they do while resting. Moderate

activity makes the heart beat faster and breathing become harder, while still allowing conversation. Vigorous activity requires more effort and usually makes talking difficult.

For children and teenagers aged 5 to 17, the World Health Organization recommends an average of at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous activity each day across the week. Most should be aerobic activity, which works the heart and lungs. Vigorous activity and activities that strengthen muscle and bone should be included on at least three days each week.

Running and cycling can develop aerobic fitness. Jumping, climbing, gymnastics, and many sports help strengthen bones and muscles. Play often combines several types of movement without needing a planned routine.

Recommendations for children younger than 5 differ by age. They focus on frequent activity and active play spread throughout the day. Babies need supervised floor play, including time on their stomach while awake when they can safely do so.

Rest also matters. Fitness develops through a cycle of activity, food, fluids, sleep, and recovery. Children need time away from demanding training, especially during growth spurts or after illness.

Why it matters for your health

Regular movement supports the heart, lungs, muscles, and bones. Weight-bearing activities, such as running and jumping, place safe everyday forces through growing bones and help them become stronger.

Activity can also support sleep, mood, attention, and social connection. Games and sports give children opportunities to practise cooperation, problem-solving, and coping with mistakes. Individual activities can offer similar benefits without the pressure of a team.

Movement skills build gradually. A child who becomes comfortable balancing, throwing, catching, swimming, or riding may have more ways to stay active later in life.

The benefits are not limited to highly active children. Starting with small, manageable changes is worthwhile, especially for a child who has been inactive, unwell, or unsure about movement.

What can go wrong

The main concerns are not caused by "fitness" itself. They relate to unsafe environments, excessive training, injury, health conditions, or pressure around performance and body size.

Overuse injuries happen when repeated strain exceeds the body's recovery time. Examples include stress fractures, tendon pain, and irritation around growing bones. Persistent pain, swelling, limping, or pain that affects sleep deserves routine medical assessment. A child should not be encouraged to play through ongoing pain.

Acute injuries include sprains, broken bones, cuts, and concussion. A concussion is a brain injury that may follow a blow to the head or body. A child with a possible concussion should stop the activity and be medically assessed before returning to sport.

Heat illness and dehydration are more likely during hard activity in hot or humid conditions. Warning signs can include headache, nausea, unusual weakness, dizziness, or confusion. Move the child to a cooler place and stop activity. Confusion, collapse, or reduced responsiveness requires emergency help.

Under-fuelling means not eating enough to support growth and activity. It can contribute to tiredness, poor recovery, iron deficiency, menstrual changes, and bone stress injuries. Restrictive eating, intense worry about weight, or exercise used to compensate for eating should be discussed with a healthcare professional.

Some children have asthma, heart conditions, joint problems, or other medical needs that affect activity choices. Many can still be active with suitable support. Recurring wheeze, coughing with exercise, unusual shortness of breath, or repeated dizziness should be assessed routinely rather than simply accepted as poor fitness.

Seek urgent medical care for fainting during exercise or chest pain brought on by exercise. Call emergency services for severe breathing difficulty, blue or grey lips, collapse, confusion, an unresponsive child, or a suspected serious head or neck injury.

What you can do

Make movement easy to start and enjoyable enough to repeat. The best activity is usually one that suits your child's interests, abilities, surroundings, and stage of development.

Practical steps include:

Protective equipment should fit properly and match the activity. Helmets reduce the risk of some head injuries but cannot prevent every concussion. Children should learn and follow road, water, playground, and sport safety rules.

There is no single test that proves a child is fit. Weight and body mass index do not measure stamina, strength, skill, or enjoyment. You can keep a simple record of activities, pain, sleep, energy, and what your child likes. The record should support planning, not become a scorecard.

Ask a paediatrician or family clinician about activity if your child has a long-term condition, takes medicine that affects exercise, has repeated injuries, or is returning after significant illness. A physiotherapist can help when pain, weakness, balance, or movement difficulties limit participation.

- Offer several choices, including active play, walking, dancing, wheeling, swimming, or sport
- Build movement into ordinary routines, such as active travel or playground time
- Join in when possible without turning every activity into a lesson
- Praise effort, learning, teamwork, and enjoyment rather than appearance
- Provide water, suitable clothing, safe equipment, and time to recover
- Increase duration or intensity gradually after inactivity or illness
- Keep at least one regular rest day from demanding organised training
- Ask coaches how they manage injuries, heat, hydration, and child safeguarding

Common questions

Does activity have to happen all at once?

No. Activity can be built up through play, active travel, school breaks, chores, and organised sessions. For school-aged children, the weekly pattern matters more than making every day identical.

Does screen time cancel out exercise?

No, but long periods of sitting can replace movement, sleep, or social time. Break up sitting when practical and create predictable times for both activity and screens.

What if my child dislikes sport?

Sport is only one option. Try dancing, walking with a pet, martial arts, gardening, skating, playground games, swimming, or active video games. Ask what feels fun, comfortable, and socially safe.

Should children lift weights?

Age-appropriate resistance training can include body-weight movements, resistance bands, or weights. Good technique, suitable equipment, and qualified supervision are more important than lifting heavy loads. Training should not involve pressure to attempt maximum lifts.

Should I track steps, calories, or weight?

Usually, nothing needs to be tracked. Numbers can sometimes motivate, but they can also create pressure or comparisons. Focus first on enjoyment, energy, skills, sleep, and regular participation. Speak with a healthcare professional if tracking is linked to anxiety, restrictive eating, or compulsive exercise.

Sources

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