



**CHAPTER 9**

**9**

**PHYSICAL  
ACTIVITY FOR  
CHILDREN**

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# Physical Activity for Children<sup>1</sup>

## *Fun Activities and Sports*

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*We become overweight when we consume more calories than we burn. That defines (and clarifies) a problem that we must approach from two angles: nutrition and exercise. Today's obesity epidemic is the predictable result of the technological progress we've seen over the last 100 years, where every invention created to save time or make our lives easier has reduced the number of calories we're required to burn in an average day. To be fit and healthy, we have to consciously add physical activities back into our lives.*

### **Three and 30**

Your exercise activities should last a minimum of 30 minutes, and take place three times a week. This is a minimum commitment, though longer or more frequent exercise sessions are allowed. Everyone should begin slowly and work up a level optimal for that person, which will be discussed in the next paragraph. Cut back at the first sign of pain or injury. Remember that there is no hurry, even though it's easy to feel impatient for results. Starting slowly and gradually adding to your exercise program until it becomes a comfortable part of your weekly habit is better than trying to do too much too fast, hurting yourself, and becoming turned off to the process.

### **Optimal Level**

What is your "optimal level?" Bearing in mind that any level of exertion is better than none, you can roughly judge that you're approaching your optimal level when you're out of breath or sweating. What you want to do is increase your cardio-respiratory endurance, meaning the ability to deliver oxygen and nutrients to tissues, and to remove wastes, over sustained periods of time.

For a more accurate idea of your optimal level, measure your heart rate. Immediately following moderately intense exertion, stop and find a pulse point, either on your neck or wrist. Place two fingers over it (don't use your thumb because it has its own pulse) and, using a digital

watch or a clock with a second hand, count the number of beats occurring in 10 seconds. If possible, have a partner keep an eye on the clock while you count pulses. Multiply that number by six to get the number of beats per minute. Children ages six through 10 will want to maintain a heart rate of 150 beats per minute. Children ages 10 through 17 will want to maintain a rate of 148 beats per minute.

Again, while you do want to challenge yourself each time, you needn't push yourself to extremes. Most experts call for "moderately intense" exercise, which can serve as a guideline—go hard, but if things feel too intense, back off. If you're trying to do 50 sit-ups and you can't, don't worry. You'll get there tomorrow, or the next day, or sooner or later. It's not a race, and it's not a competition.

### **Stretching and Water**

You should begin and finish each 3/30 session by stretching. The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports recommends 10 to 12 minutes of slow stretching daily. You should drink water during exercise, and you should drink at least one eight-ounce glass of water when you're done. Water accounts for 60% of your body weight and 70% of your muscle tissue—you need adequate

water to perform at your peak. Water keeps your body cool, evaporating from your skin as sweat when you exercise, which is important to cool you off from exercise. You should drink water even if you don't feel thirsty, especially if you're outside during the colder months, when you may not be aware of how dehydrated you can get (where winter air is much dryer than summer air). The signs of dehydration include chills, clammy skin, stopping sweating, throbbing heartbeat, and nausea. Signs of more severe dehydration are headaches, cramps, shortness of breath, dizziness, or dry mouth. If such signs occur, stop exercising immediately and drink water, slowly. If the situation doesn't improve, you may wish to seek medical attention.

### **Y Activities to Choose From**

Any activity that gets your heart pumping is a good activity, but be sure to choose activities in which everyone can participate. From the following varied activities, select as many as you want. The important thing is that you get your metabolism up and that you keep your heart pumping at an optimal level for at least 30 minutes.

*Chase the fox:* Two people twirl a jump rope. Everyone else plays "follow the fox." The "fox" runs into the rope and

does a trick. The trick might be hopping on one foot or touching the ground. Then the fox runs out. Everyone else must repeat the trick. When someone misses, that person becomes a twirler. Continue playing as long as you can.

*Dance:* Put the music on and dance. Most communities have organized square dancing, line dancing, contra dancing, and so on. If you're at home, simply clear away the chairs in the dining room and dance there. Kids can pick music their parents are forced to dance to, and vice versa. You could check out a book or video from the library that teaches a specific dance.

*Family obstacle course:* Assemble a family obstacle course in the backyard, fixing seven different stations. At station #1, jump rope as fast as you can for 60 seconds. At station #2 (always running between stations), step up and down on a cement cinder block or step for 60 seconds. At station #3, dribble a basketball for 60 seconds. At station #4, do 20 jumping jacks. At station #5, hop on one foot for 30 seconds and then on the other for 30 seconds. At station #6, hula hoop for as long as you can or 60 seconds. At the last station, complete a 10-yard shuttle run, moving between lines to pick up and retrieve three items, one at a time. You can time each family

member if you want. After the first player has moved to the third station, the second player may begin. Depending on how many are playing, fit as many runs in as you can in 30 minutes.

*Fast-break basketball:* The game can be played with from one to six children. Use a basketball court or driveway with a basketball hoop at one end, with a marker set up at the other end of the driveway. Players run to the goal, shoot from one to three baskets, then fast break out to the marker and back to the hoop. Keep shooting until someone steals the ball. Players can use a whiffle ball for variation. Play for 30 minutes.

*Frisbee:* Competitive Frisbee can be played with two to four players to a side. Teams should use a long field with room to run. Two goal lines should be set, one at each end of the field. The object is to try to advance the Frisbee across your opponent's goal line by throwing it to a teammate, who is allowed two steps before throwing to another teammate. If the Frisbee touches the ground, the other team gets possession. If the Frisbee is intercepted or the opponent holding the Frisbee is tagged, the other team gets possession. A team that scores must "kick off" by throwing the Frisbee to the opposing team. The game should be played in two 15-minute halves.

*Simon Says:* This game is best played in a field or park, preferably on a path or trail, but can also be played in the backyard. Players line up in single file and only move when the leader precedes the instructions with the words “Simon Says.” If she says, “Simon says jump up and down,” players jump up and down. If she says only, “Jump up and down,” anyone who complies must go to the back of the line. The family follows behind the leader in single file along a preset course. Everyone gets a turn to be the leader. Leaders can tell followers to do jumping jacks, hop on one leg, walk backward, quack like a duck while flapping their arms, or anything they think of, as long as it’s a physical activity, and as long as “Simon Says.”

*Tag with a twist:* Try one of these different forms of tag. Play until you are exhausted.

*Hang tag:* You are “safe” as long as you hang by your arms from something, with your feet off the ground. You could hang from a jungle gym or a tree. “It” can tag you only if you are not hanging by your arms.

*Hop tag:* This version is like regular tag, except that all players must hop on one foot.

*Poison tag:* As in regular tag, when

“It” tags you, you become the new “It.” However, you must hold the part of the body where you were tagged with one hand. Keep holding that part of your body until you tag someone else.

*Shadow tag:* In this variation on regular tag, when the person who is “It” touches your shadow, you become the new “It.”

### **Exercises to Choose From**

There are also lots of exercises you can do when you’re by yourself or when there are too few of you to play tag or other group activities.

*Modified pull-up:* Place a pole or pipe strong enough to support your body weight on the seat of 2 chairs about 4 feet apart. Lie on your back underneath the bar and grasp it with both hands about shoulder-width apart. Pull your chest up to the bar, keeping your body straight from head to heel. Lower your body back to the floor, then repeat. Do as many as you can.

*Push-away:* Start developing your upper body with the push-away until you can comfortably do 3 sets of 10 in one workout. Face the wall, standing about 3 feet away from it or just beyond arm’s length. Lean toward the wall, using your arms to stop yourself when your nose is nearly touching the wall. Push yourself back until your arms are fully extended. (Be sure your hands are clean first.)

*Bent knee push-up:* Once you meet your goal for push-aways, try the bent-knee push-up, starting with 2 sets of 5 and increasing until you can do 2 sets of 10 in a single workout. Assume the position you would for a regular push up, but let your knees touch the floor, bending your legs at a right angle.

*Group pull-ups:* You need 4 people. Sit on the floor in a circle. Everyone holds hands. Together pull yourselves up to a standing position. Once 4 of you can do it, add 2 more to the circle. Experiment on the best way to get up. Do this at least 5 times.

*Half sit-ups:* Lie on the floor on your back. Your feet are flat. Bend your knees. Fold your arms across your chest. Raise your shoulders so you sit up about halfway. Hold for a couple of seconds. Lie down. Repeat this several times.

*Kickboard swim:* At a pool, a lake, or the beach, hold onto a kickboard with your arms out in front of you. Move yourself by just kicking your legs. Do this for 30 minutes, or at least 10 minutes if you want to combine it with other exercises.

### **What Different Exercises Can Do**

Some exercises are good for building endurance, while others improve your flexibility. In addition, different exercises work different muscle groups. That's

why varying your routine is a good idea, and it also helps prevent exercise from becoming boring. There are a wide variety of sports and activities to choose from.

*To improve aerobic capacity:* Bicycling, swimming, ice skating, roller skating, inline skating, running, jogging, walking, hiking, cross-country skiing, hurdler's jumps, lateral jumps, running zig-zags, soccer, full-court basketball, singles racquetball, tennis, badminton.

*To improve abdominal strength:* Bicycling, twirling a hula hoop, hanging leg raises, half sit-ups, swimming without your arms (kickboard swimming), leg wrestling.

*To improve upper arm strength:* Tennis; volleyball; swinging a baseball bat; throwing a baseball, basketball, or football; tug-of-war; paddling a canoe; group pull-ups; twirling a baton; arm wrestling; swinging from rings.

*To improve flexibility:* Gymnastics, tumbling, ballet, dancing, cheerleading, yoga, Tae Kwon Do, karate, other martial arts.

*To improve endurance:* Bicycling, jogging, running, walking, swimming, soccer, jumping rope. Try walking to music, running a relay race with friends, or playing tag.