

## Sport and children

Only six out of 10 children aged between five and 14 years participate in sport outside of school, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The rate of obesity among children and teenagers (21 per cent for boys, 23 per cent for girls) indicates that we need to foster a more sports-minded culture that encourages children to be physically active.

People who are active dramatically reduce their risk of many diseases including heart disease and osteoporosis. Regular exercise is also known to reduce the risk of emotional problems such as anxiety and depression. Habits are established early in life, and evidence suggests that physically active children are more likely to mature into physically active adults.

### Benefits for children

Some of the many benefits of sport participation for children include:

- Reduced risk of obesity
- Increased cardiovascular fitness
- Healthy growth of bones, muscles, ligaments and tendons
- Improved coordination and balance
- A greater ability to physically relax and, therefore, avoid the complications of chronic muscular tension (such as headache or back ache)
- Improved sleep
- Mental health benefits, such as greater confidence
- Improved social skills
- Improved personal skills, including cooperation and leadership.

### Physical inactivity may be as detrimental to health as physical activity is beneficial

An emphasis on reducing inactivity may be more effective in achieving overall increases in energy levels in young children than an emphasis on increasing involvement in sporting activities. Taking steps to reduce children's sedentary time is important.

### Sedentary pursuits

Around 30 per cent of Australian children don't participate in sport at all. Common sedentary activities that compete with physical activity include:

- Homework
- Computer games
- Internet use
- Television.

The Australian Government recommends:

- 'Children and young people should participate in at least 60 minutes (and up to several hours) of moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity every day'.
- 'Children and young people should not spend more than 2 hours a day using electronic media for entertainment (eg computer games, Internet, TV), particularly during daylight hours'.

These recommendations are a guide to the minimum level of physical activity required for good health.

According to the Bureau of Statistics, over the 12 months prior to 2009-10 in Australia, 1.7 million or 63% of children aged 5 to 14 years participated in at least one sport outside of school hours that had been organised by a school, club or association. The participation rate for boys (70%) exceeded that for girls (56%), both overall and within each age group category. Children aged 9 to 11 years were most likely to participate in sport.

The three most popular organised sports for boys in 2008-2009 were soccer, swimming and Australian Rules football. For girls, two sports were predominant - swimming and netball. The level of participation by girls in both of these sports was more than double the level of participation in gymnastics, which was the next placed sport.

Encourage your child to be physically active

Parents can help their children to be physically active in a number of ways, including:

- Lead by example - be physically active yourself.
- Make sure that some family outings offer opportunities for physical activity, such as playing sport together.
- Encourage your child to walk or ride their bicycle for short trips, rather than rely on you to drive them.
- Support your child's efforts in sport. Make sure you're there at each match, cheering them on from the sidelines.
- Set time limits on sedentary activities like computer games and television.
- Consult with your child's school on ways to encourage greater participation in sports and physical activity.

## Sport safety issues

Many sporting injuries sustained by children can be avoided. Suggestions include:

- Always wear appropriate protective gear.
- Mouth guards should be worn for all contact sports. See your dentist for professional fitting.
- Wear knee, elbow and wrist guards for all sports that include a risk of falling, such as inline skating or skateboarding.
- Wear shin pads for sports like hockey, softball and cricket where injuries to the front of the lower leg are relatively common.
- Helmets can reduce the risk of eye and face injuries.
- Make sure to thoroughly warm up and cool down.
- Cross-train with other sports to ensure overall fitness and strength.
- Use good form and technique.
- Allow adequate recovery time between sessions.

## Where to get help

- Your child's school
- Sporting clubs and associations
- Your doctor, physiotherapists (with a special interest in paediatrics) or other exercise qualified professional.

## Things to remember

- Only six out of 10 children aged between five and 14 years participate in sport outside of school.
- More boys (66%) than girls (52%) participate in sports.
- Evidence suggests that physically active children are more likely to mature into physically active adults.
- Reducing physical inactivity is just as important as increasing physical activity.
- Aim for at least 60 minutes of physical activity each day and a maximum of 2 hours per day using electronic media including TV.
- Parents can encourage their children to play sport in many ways, including through role modelling.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

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