

# Child's Play: The Foundation of Good Health

## 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans



Encouraging regular physical activity among elementary school children is a goal worthy of every educator. Regular physical activity in children promotes health and fitness. Physically active youth have higher levels of cardiovascular fitness and stronger muscles than their inactive peers. They usually have less body fat, their bones are stronger and they may have reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression. Helping children achieve success in whatever physical activities they choose can boost self-esteem and competency which in turn can encourage them to further expand their activity choices.

Active youth also have a better chance of a healthy adulthood. Although young children typically don't have chronic diseases, such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, or osteoporosis, risk factors for these diseases can begin to develop early in life. With regular physical activity, it is less likely that these risk factors will develop and more likely that children will remain healthy as adults.

The Federal Government has issued its first-ever Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans. These guidelines describe the types and amounts of physical activity that promote health. **Children and adolescents should do 60 minutes (1 hour) or more of physical activity each day.** Activities should be developmentally appropriate, based on the age of the child. The 60 minutes should be comprised of three essential activities: aerobic, muscle building and bone strengthening.

- **Aerobic activities**—those activities in which children rhythmically move their large muscles—should make up most of your child's 60 or more minutes of physical activity each day. The activity does not need to come in a 60-minute block; it can be in 10- to 15-minute activity bursts throughout the day. Daily activities can include either **moderate-intensity aerobic activity**, such as brisk walking, dancing or bicycling or **vigorous-intensity activity**, such as running or swimming. Vigorous-intensity aerobic activity should be included at least 3 days per week.
- **Muscle-strengthening activities**, such as tug-of-war, playing on a jungle gym or push-ups, should be included at least 3 days per week as part of the 60 or more minutes. As children get older, they may start structured weight training programs, for instance with an organized sports team.
- **Bone-strengthening activities**, such as jumping rope or running, should be included at least 3 days per week as part of the 60 or more minutes. Bone-strengthening activities remain especially important for children and young adolescents because the greatest gains in bone mass occur during the years just before and during puberty. The majority of peak bone mass is obtained by the end of adolescence.

## What is moderate- or vigorous-intensity activity?

On a scale of 0 to 10, where sitting is a 0 and the highest level of activity is a 10, moderate-intensity activity is a 5 or 6. When doing moderate - intensity activity, the heart will beat faster than normal and breathing is somewhat harder than normal. Vigorous-intensity activity is a level 7 or 8. When doing vigorous-intensity activity, the heart beats much faster than normal and breathing is much harder than normal.

## What schools can do to promote physical activity

As educators, you can help shape attitudes and behaviors toward physical activity. Encourage young people to be physically active for one hour or more each day, with activities ranging from informal, active play to organized sports. Here are some ways you can do this:



- Set a positive example by leading an active lifestyle yourself.
- Make physical activity part of your daily classroom routine by including short stretch and activity breaks.
- Encourage students to be active during recess.
- Don't take away recess as a form of punishment.
- Include Physical Education in your curriculum as many days a week as possible.
- Offer a variety of activities that appeal to different interests and abilities. Most students are not natural athletes. Look beyond traditional sports and expose children to activities they can enjoy throughout life.
- Give students the opportunity to choose what types of activities they wish to participate in. They are more likely to enjoy and continue activities they have selected for themselves.
- Children benefit from equipment that encourages physical activity—lobby that school and/or PTA dollars are spent purchasing play equipment (could even include inexpensive items such as balls and jump ropes).
- Support school-wide events that promote physical activity, such as a faculty-versus-student kickball game, American Heart Association Jump Rope for Heart or a school-wide picnic organized by the student council.
- Recruit teachers, other school personnel and parents to organize a walk- or bike-to-school day once a month.
- Be positive about the physical activities in which your students participate and encourage them to be interested in new activities.
- Help your students set goals for meeting physical activity targets. Consider developing an activity tracking spreadsheet and offer rewards for teams that successfully meet activity targets.
- Include health education in your curriculum. Consider using Dairy Council of California nutrition education resources, all of which include a physical activity component.

More information is available in this handout, **Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, At-A-Glance: Fact Sheet for Health Professionals**. US Department of Health and Human Services, 2008 <http://www.health.gov/PAGuidelines/factsheetprof.aspx>