



by Karen Stephens

Active Play is Key to Kids' Lifelong Health and Fitness

According to a survey conducted by the American Pediatrics Association, 88.9 % of pediatricians believe adult lifestyle-related diseases such as heart disease, hypertension, obesity, and diabetes may be prevented by emphasizing physical fitness in childhood and adolescence.

And yet we have headlines that show we're falling short of that achievement: "Kids' obesity growing trend," "Report: 1 in 3 kids may get diabetes," and "Study: Many children don't exercise at all."

That doesn't spell good news for kids— or those who love them.

Today's children deserve a chance at a long and healthful life. But if we don't parent differently, for the first time in history, we're likely to raise a generation with a shorter lifespan than our own. That's counter to every parent's hopes and dreams; no matter where they live or how much they earn.

Thankfully there are parenting practices that can toss alarming headlines right off the page. All we need is the will to apply them.

Parents (and communities!) will go a long way toward ensuring children's health when we consistently set the stage for fitness during early childhood. We must seed and nurture habits that support health, rather than undermine it. There are simple fitness strategies that are preventative, effective, family affordable, and often, downright fun.

In the parenting book *Your Active Child*, author Rae Pica, identifies five fitness factors to play into anyone's health — child or adult's. They are: cardiovascular endurance, muscular strength, muscular endurance, flexibility, and body composition (percentage of lean body tissue to fat).

Children will develop positive fitness factors to add zest and health to life if parents nourish them *daily* with: (1) wholesome, nutrient-filled meals and snacks; (2) reasonable amounts of developmentally-appropriate physical activity; and (3) adequate hours of sleep.

While providing those fundamental nourishments, we must combat the unsavory side-effects of sedentary or *couch potato* lifestyles. Kids (and parents!) spending two or more hours each day watching television or videos, or playing games on the computer has to stop. Technology isn't a good babysitter. It isn't a good substitute for an engaged parent. And it's absolutely not a good role model for a lifetime of physical fitness. Families need to take action to get off the couch — literally.

Children need daily playful activity that engages both large and small muscles. It will build their body, mind, and self-esteem as they discover all marvelous things their body can do.

Children need safe space where they can develop the ability to: creep, crawl, roll over, walk, run, slide, hop, jump, tiptoe, skip, gallop, leap, climb, and eventually swim. They need chances to develop the coordination and balance needed to: move around, over, and through things; pivot to change direction; and explore their body's grace as they twist, bend, balance, stretch, curl, swing, sway, and dodge.

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On top of all that, children need active play that requires them to simultaneously use visual perception and their large and small muscles. That allows kids to master the abilities needed for many social games, such as being able to: throw, catch, kick, toss, bounce, volley, rebound, swing and hit a moving object, or aim for a target.

There are two reliable ways to put kids into action: Daily play time and daily responsibility for some household chores.

Provide opportunities for leisurely FUN play with: balls and beanbags of different weight, shapes, and sizes; low-to-ground balance beam or chalk-drawn *tigbtropes* on concrete; Wiffle® ball, badminton, and croquet sets; plastic or foam bowling pins; obstacle courses; scarves and marching band toys (such as oatmeal box drum and stick); roller skates, roller blades, ice skates; big wheels and bikes; hula hoops and jump ropes; mats for rough and tumble play, target games, hiking gear with items to help with bird-watching or animal tracking; sand, water, and dirt-digging play; kite flying; tossing Frisbies™ and tree climbing. And of course, take walks together, visit parks and swimming pools, or facilities that offer rock climbing for different skill levels.

There are simple fitness strategies that are preventative, effective, and family affordable, and often, downright fun.

Active household chores foster fitness, too. Encourage competence, accountability, and family teamwork by including kids in duties, such as: dusting; vacuuming; broom porch, walkway, or garage; loading and unloading the dishwasher; raking leaves; garden planting, weeding, and harvesting; sorting and packaging recycling; washing car and bikes; feeding and watering pets as well as wildlife; washing windows; shaking out throw rugs; making beds; carrying and shelving groceries; and loading, folding, and carting laundry.

And it doesn't stop there. In good weather, school children who live in a safe area can walk or bike to school or run neighborhood errands. Adolescents can help paint the house, tend the lawn with a push-style mower, or stack and haul wood for the fireplace.

Books for Parents

- *Your Active Child: How to boost physical, emotional, and cognitive development through age-appropriate activity* by Rae Pica (New York: Contemporary Books, 2003)
- *Your Child's Fitness: Practical advice for parents* by Susan Kalish (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1995)

On the Net

- American Public Health Association: www.apha.org/ppp/child_ob/parents.htm
- KidsHealth: www.kidshealth.org/parent/nutrition_fit/

Teachers' Books and Web Sites

- *Experiences in Movement: Birth to Age Eight* by Rae Pica (Albany, NY: Delmar 2004)
- *Active for Life: Developmentally appropriate movement programs for young children* by Stephen Sanders (Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2002)
- *Round the Circle: Key Experiences in Movement for Young Children* by Phyllis Weikart (Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press, 2000)

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.