

How can I support and encourage my preschooler to keep physically active?



Congratulations for wanting to keep your preschooler physically active! Raising active children who continue to remain active throughout their school years and into adulthood should be everyone's goal. Presently, over one half of Canadian children are not active enough for healthy growth and development and over one-third are overweight. Similarly, over half of Canadian adults are physically inactive and overweight putting them at risk for heart disease, cancer, diabetes, osteoporosis and other health problems. Now is the ideal time for you as a parent or caregiver to develop healthy lifestyle habits in your child, such as being active and eating well, that can be carried through his or her childhood years and beyond.

Physical activity levels in children drop off significantly after the preschool years when children start school and have less time for active play. Therefore it is important to develop active children and an interest in a variety of physical activities before that time. As a parent or caregiver you can support and encourage your child to be active by being active yourself and providing adequate time for physical activity.

Research shows that children whose parents are active are more likely to be active and this is often a result of families with young children being active together. Parents who play actively or do age-appropriate sports with their children can increase their activity level and

help them develop positive attitudes towards activity. Caregivers or child care centers which provide regular physical activity programs also significantly increase the activity levels of young children.

Toddlers and preschoolers are naturally active and you should support, rather than discourage, this tendency. Children who spend more time playing actively and playing outside are better off health wise than children who spend a lot of time watching TV or playing video or computer games. Active children expend more energy, have healthier weights, have higher fitness levels, and sleep better than inactive children.

You can help grow active children by keeping them moving and helping them experience and learn new movement skills in a variety of activities and settings. For example, learning how to skip, climb or ride a bike. Instruction and positive reinforcement are important to help children develop their skills. Remember that young children develop at different ages and stages so **choose activities that are appropriate to their skill level.**

You can encourage your child to keep active by making sure activities are fun and in keeping with their interests. Try an activity in a relaxed and reassuring way. If he or she responds by laughing and smiling or is clearly having fun, continue on. If not, stop and try that activity again some

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other time. It takes time for a child to learn new skills. For example, activities such as skating or skiing can be challenging and frustrating for both you and your child. It's better to wait until your child is ready rather than forcing it.

Praise children for participating in an activity - building confidence is more important than skill at this stage (e.g. I'm glad you enjoyed playing that game vs. you played that game really well).

To support and encourage active children:

- Limit television watching and video or computer games
- Don't carry a child who can walk
- Walk with your child instead of driving, when you can
- Play outside
- Go to the park and help your child climb and swing
- Play hide and seek or go on a scavenger hunt
- Teach children how to kick a soccer ball, ride a bike, or skate

- Let your child help with the gardening, raking or shovelling
- Be active together as a family - hiking, cycling, skating, or skiing
- When the weather is bad outside, put on some music and dance or exercise together
- Don't just sit there - play along

To keep your child safe:

- Introduce new activities carefully and with patience - preschoolers need time to practice and master new skills.
- Make sure indoor and outdoor play spaces are safe.
- Keep constant watch of children around water, in parks and public places.
- Wear protective equipment such as helmets for cycling, scooters, skate boards, roller skating, hockey and skiing, and lifejackets for paddling and water activities.

To fit active living into your busy day:

- Use the [Healthy Start for Life - Keeping Active Together Planner](#) to plan and keep track of the activities you do with your children. Plan to keep your child active each and every day.