



Fitness and Your 4- to 5-Year-Old

By the time they're 4 and 5 years old, kids have mastered basic movement skills like running and jumping, and have plenty of energy to put them to good use.

Now they'll continue to refine these skills and build on them to learn more complex ones.

Take advantage of your child's natural tendency to be active. Staying fit can help improve kids' self-esteem and decrease the risk of serious illnesses later in life.

Fitness for Preschoolers

The National Association of Sports and Physical Education recommends that every day preschoolers should:

- get at least 60 minutes of structured physical activity (adult-led activity)
- get at least 60 minutes of unstructured physical activity (free play)
- not be inactive for more than 1 hour at a time (unless sleeping)

It's important to understand what preschoolers can handle. They should participate in fun and challenging activities that help build skills and coordination but aren't beyond their abilities.

Kids this age are learning to hop, skip, and jump forward, and are eager to show off how they can balance on one foot (for 5 seconds or longer), catch a ball, or do a somersault. Preschoolers might also enjoy swimming, hiking, dancing, and riding a tricycle or bicycle with training wheels.

Many parents look to organized sports to get preschoolers active. But the average 4- or 5-year-old has not mastered even the basics, such as throwing, catching, and taking turns. Even simple rules may be hard for them to understand, as any parent who has watched their child run the wrong way during a game knows.

And starting too young can be frustrating for kids and may discourage future participation in sports. So if you decide to sign your preschooler up for soccer or another team sport, be sure to choose a peewee league that emphasizes the fundamentals.

No matter what the sport or activity, remember that fitness should be fun. If your child isn't having fun, ask why and try to address the issue or find another activity.

Family Fitness Tips

Walking, playing, running in the backyard, or using playground equipment at a local park can be fun for the entire family.

Other activities to try together, or for a group of preschoolers to enjoy, include:

- playing games such as "Duck, Duck, Goose" or "Follow the Leader," then mixing it up with

- jumping, hopping, and walking backward
- kicking a ball back and forth
- hitting a ball off a T-ball stand
- playing freeze dance or freeze tag
- pretending to be statues to practice balancing

Kids can be active even when they're stuck indoors. Designate a safe play area and try some active inside games:

- Treasure hunt: Hide "treasures" throughout the house and provide clues to their locations.
- Obstacle course: Set up an obstacle course with chairs, boxes, and toys for the kids to go over, under, through, and around.
- Soft-ball games: Use soft foam balls to play indoor basketball, bowling, soccer, or catch. You can even use balloons to play volleyball or catch.

When to Call the Doctor

If your child refuses to play or join other kids in sports or complains of pain after being active, talk with your doctor.

Kids who enjoy sports and exercise tend to stay active throughout their lives. And staying fit can improve self-esteem, help a person maintain a healthy weight, and decrease the risk of serious illnesses such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease later in life.

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