

Children and Sports: Choices for all ages

By Mayo Clinic

Children's sports promote fitness and prevent obesity, but not all children thrive in formal leagues. Help your child find the right sport and venue - school, recreation center or backyard.

Want to give your child a head start on lifelong fitness? Consider children's sports and other kid-friendly physical activities. With your encouragement and support, chances are a few sports will spark your child's interest. Fan the flame by taking your child to local sporting events and sharing your own sports interests with your child. Then, when the time is right, provide opportunities for your child to try out equipment and experiment with various sports.

What are age-appropriate activities?

Your child is likely to show natural preferences for certain sports or activities. Start there, being careful to keep your child's maturity and skill level in mind.

Ages 2 to 5

Toddlers and preschoolers are beginning to master many basic movements, but they're too young for most types of organized sports. At this age, unstructured free play is usually best. Try:

- Running
- Climbing
- Kicking
- Tumbling
- Dancing
- Playing catch with a lightweight ball
- Pedaling a tricycle or a bike with training wheels
- Supervised water play

Ages 6 to 7

As children get older, their coordination and attention spans improve. They're also better able to follow directions and understand the concept of teamwork. Consider organized activities such as:

- T-ball, softball or baseball
- Soccer
- Gymnastics
- Swimming
- Tennis
- Golf
- Track and field
- Martial arts

Ages 8 and older

By age 8, nearly any sport - including contact sports - may be acceptable. Carefully supervised strength training is OK at this age, too.

Of course, organized athletics aren't the only option for fitness. If your child doesn't seem interested in sports, find other physical activities. Take family bike rides, check out local hiking trails or visit indoor climbing walls. Encourage active time with friends, such as jumping rope, shooting baskets or playing tag. You can even encourage fitness through video games that prompt dancing, virtual sports or other types of movement.

If several sports are available in your community, allow your child to sample a range of activities before settling on one or two - perhaps both team sports and individual sports. When you're comparing sports, consider the:

- Amount and cost of equipment
- Amount of physical contact
- Emphasis on individual skill vs. team performance
- Opportunity for each child to participate

Also consider your child's schedule. Children who are already signed up for music lessons or other activities may feel overwhelmed if athletics are added to the mix.

Above all, make sure your child really wants to play. Organized athletics have many benefits, but a healthy lifestyle doesn't have to include sports. What's most important is helping your child realize that physical activity is fun.

