

Readin', writin', rithmetic, and recess

The recess bell signals more than a brief break from academic work: It also sounds the beginning of good habits essential to a child's health and development. It's true that recess is all about play, and that's precisely the point.

With childhood obesity at epidemic levels, play – and the physical exercise that comes from it -- is becoming as important a school subject as reading, writing or math.

Building strong bodies and minds with play

Efforts to teach the benefits of exercise are focused sharply on elementary school-aged children, and for good reason: Nearly 20 percent of children ages 6 to 11 are considered obese, according to the National Centers for Disease Control.

For this reason alone, it's no wonder that school-based physical education programs are trying to instill good exercise habits in young children. What's more, research shows that, in addition to doing better in school, physically active children are stronger, have more endurance, maintain healthier weights, build cardiovascular strength and more effectively manage stress.

Put them all together, and those benefits create engaged students who are more likely to perform better academically. Numerous studies performed around the world point to a positive correlation between physical fitness and academic performance. For example, physically active children build the strength they need to sit up straight for extended periods of time in class, hold writing utensils properly, make proper eye contact with teachers and peers, and focus for longer periods of time overall.

But children are most likely not interested in the treadmills, weights and exercise bikes that form our typical perceptions of exercise. Instead, you can help inspire healthy exercise habits by providing opportunities for one of the best things about being a child: play.

Encouraging beneficial play at home

The National Centers for Disease Control recommend children do at least 60 minutes of moderately intense physical exercise each day. Though every minute counts, the exercise children receive during recess and gym time at school only provides a portion of what they need. In addition, busy schedules, limited open space and safety concerns may make this recommendation difficult to fulfill at home. But there are easy ways for your children, and you, to squeeze in beneficial playtime each day. Try these tips:

Turn off the gadgets. Limit children's combined use of the television, home computer, video games, and cell phone. In addition, try specifying that each device can be used only to supplement academic work during the school week. While these devices have their benefits, they can easily distract children with plenty of non-academic, sedentary activities, leaving less time for actual physical activity and sports. If your children enjoy video games, opt for games that require movement, such as the games available for Nintendo Wii, Kinect for Xbox 360 or Playstation Move. As an added bonus, you can join in the fun.

Make exercise a priority. Establish regular times for physical activity each day. From walking the dog together when you arrive home to playing a game of catch after dinner, making exercise time a regular part of the daily routine will teach your children that being physically active is important to you, and thus should be important to them.

Let your child choose. Once a set exercise time is established, letting your children choose the activity will not only clue you into their interests, but it will also teach them how to incorporate exercise into their daily routines. For example, walk or ride bicycles to the library if your child is a bookworm. Take a camera on a winter walk so your aspiring young scientist can take pictures of nature, whether in the park or on a local walking trail. Encourage your budding performers to sing along with their favorite songs or act out their favorite story.

Introduce your child to a variety of activities. Establishing a daily routine for physical activity is great, but it's important to make sure the routine doesn't get boring. Organized sports are great for teaching sportsmanship and cooperation, but may not be for every child. Simple activities, such as walking, running, bike-riding or visiting the playground with friends, are also great ways for children to build physical fitness. Younger children, who may have limited attention spans and stamina, may benefit from short, 10-minute bursts of physical activity throughout the day instead of a one-hour block of time.

Play together while setting an example. Why not make physical fitness a family affair? Teaching your children about what you liked to do as a child will encourage activity while teaching your child some family history. In addition, children tend to develop good attitudes toward physical activity when they see their parents being active. As a bonus, you get quality time with your children and can supervise their safety while they play.

Bring on spring!

As the weather warms up, so will opportunities for your family to have fun while getting a workout. The onset of spring brings with it many opportunities to develop muscle strength and get aerobic exercise. Get some "spring cleaning" done by making a game out of such tasks as putting winter clothes away or cleaning out the garage. Taking a trip to a local park, playing a game of tag in the backyard, even jumping in puddles after a spring rain are great ways to get children moving in warmer weather.

Take a hike!

A long walk in warm, sunny weather may be just the ticket to help the whole family recharge their batteries. Just be sure all members of the family wear comfortable shoes with closed toes (no flip-flops) to protect their feet. For extended hikes, think about packing a lunch or bringing plenty of snacks, such as fruit, granola bars or trail mix, to keep everyone's energy up.

Resources

Need inspiration for springtime fun? These websites and books can help:

Web

- Activities for Kids
(http://www.activitiesforkids.com/holiday/holiday_spring.htm)
- Spring Crafts from Nick Jr.
(http://www.nickjr.com/crafts/all-shows/seasonal_spring/all-ages/index.jhtml)

Books

- A Kid's Spring EcoJournal: With Nature Activities for Exploring the Season
by Toni Albert
- The Twelve Days of Springtime: A School Counting Book
[Hardcover ages 4-8]by Deborah Lee Rose