

AGES & STAGES

By Emily Puro

Physical Fitness for Life

Helping Our Kids Develop Active Lifestyles

The bad news: According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the obesity rate for toddlers and preschoolers has more than doubled during the past three decades; for school aged kids and tweens, it's almost tripled. In fact, the CDC reports that roughly a third of all children ages 2 to 19 are either already overweight or at risk of becoming overweight.

The good news: Parents can make a huge difference in the health and physical fitness of their kids. The benefits of an active lifestyle span the spectrum from physical to social to emotional. This month we're exploring how we as parents can help our children reap those benefits for life.

The Early Years (2 and Under)

Developing Motor Skills

Before they can swing a bat, kick a ball or run a lap, children need to develop gross and fine motor skills. Gross motor skills, says Dr. Peter Blasco, director of the Neurodevelopmental Program at Oregon Health and Science University, refer to movements that "revolve around the center, or long axis, of your body." In infants and toddlers, gross motor development manifests as rolling, sitting, standing and walking.

"Fine motor centers around the appendages," Blasco continues, "the arms and legs. We traditionally look at kids' hands but you could look at feet, too." The major fine motor skills infants and toddlers are developing typically involve grasping and transferring items from hand to hand, such as using utensils to feed themselves or crayons and markers to draw.

As parents, we wait expectantly for our little ones to reach major motor milestones, from rolling over to sitting to pulling themselves up and finally walking. For details about what milestones to watch for and when, Blasco recommends two sources: your child's pediatrician, who can access any number of publications through the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP); and Pathways Awareness (www.pathwaysawareness.org), a nonprofit that promotes early detection of motor delays.

The best way to ensure your child is on track with motor development, adds Dr. Alice Eaton, a pediatrician at Portland's Westside Pediatric Clinic, is simply to attend all the recommended pediatric checkups. The pediatrician will assess your baby's development as part of each visit, and if you have any concerns about your baby's progress, the doctor can determine whether or not further evaluation is warranted.

Most of us are eager to encourage our children's healthy motor development, but according to Blasco, "the most important thing you can do is give them a safe floor to crawl around on. That's it. They'll move."

Blasco offers similar advice for fine motor skills. "We talk about milestones like using a spoon to feed yourself," he says. "Really, the greatest



influence on that milestone is how much of a mess Mom is willing to tolerate. It has almost nothing to do with the child. It just goes back to allowing kids to explore." Patience is also a factor, adds Eaton, noting that sometimes we have to slow down and give our children time to master new skills rather than doing everything for them.

In addition to allowing unhindered exploration, Eaton offers a few simple suggestions for nurturing our little ones' motor development. While we're told not to place our babies on their tummies to sleep, for example, "tummy time" is important for gross motor development. Give your infant something to reach for, too – a favorite toy that's just beyond his grasp, for example – to encourage him to move toward the object. If your older baby seems interested in standing up or walking, encourage him to build those muscles and develop balance by gently supporting him as he bears his weight on his legs and takes his first wobbly steps. Also, adds Eaton, "you want to give them the opportunity to work on (new skills) when they're rested and fed and they have energy."

You can pair language development with fine motor skills by encouraging babies and toddlers to play with books, too. "It all goes together," says Blasco, "using their hands to turn the pages and pointing at the pictures as they start to reach that level of recognition."

What About Crawling?

According to Peter Blasco, director of the Neurodevelopmental Program at Oregon Health and Science University, "crawling is the least predictable and the least predictive motor milestone." Some children never crawl, he says, or crawl for only a brief period before standing up and walking. "People get overly concerned about that," he notes. "As clinicians, we pay attention to it but we don't get too worried about kids who don't crawl unless there are other things going on."

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