

Fitness and Children With Disabilities

TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES



Why Should Your Child Be Active?*

The obesity rate for children with disabilities in the United States is 38 percent higher than for children without disabilities. Nutrition is one component to a healthy lifestyle, but exercise also plays a key role. Engaging your child in an active lifestyle will:

- Burn calories to promote a healthy weight
- Decrease appetite
- Improve sleep patterns
- Improve self-esteem
- Decrease stress
- Promote a healthy metabolism
- Improve heart health

How much exercise is enough?

Though amount of exercise will vary depending on your child's abilities, it is recommended that most children get 60 minutes of activity a day.

What are good types of activity?

The type of physical activity your child engages in will depend on abilities and preferences. Some possible options include:

- Walking or jogging as a family
- Playing tag
- Gardening with mom and dad, digging holes, pushing a wheel barrow, or raking
- Dancing
- Video games that incorporate movement

- Water aerobics or swimming
- Walking the dog
- Playing soccer or kickball
- Community sports or organizations
- Biking
- Playing on a playground

How can you encourage your child to be active?

- Include friends or siblings
- Make it fun
- Try to eliminate the chance for injury
- Modify activities to meet your child's abilities
- Make it challenging, but not competitive
- Do not do the same activity all of the time
- Show interest and ask questions about the activity
- Try using rewards or reinforcements that do not involve food (stickers, clothes)
- Give your child daily chores
- Include your child in your own exercise routine

Why Might Group Activities Be a Good Option?

Participation in an organized group sport or activity encourages exercise and also opens doors to making friends. So often, children with disabilities do not have the same social opportunities typically developing children have that can add to an overall sense of health and well-being.

Choosing groups that include children with and without disabilities may be a good option. Inclusive groups have benefits for everyone involved, and celebrate different types of strengths and skills. Ask other parents who have children with disabilities about their success with local inclusive sports leagues and organizations. Often, only slight modifications need to be made to include a child with a disability in any group sport. Organizations like the National Center on Health, Physical Activity, and Disability provide resources for sports organizations seeking to be more inclusive.

Other good options may be groups like Special Olympics that offer individual and group sports specifically for

Please see reverse for resources.



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RESOURCES

people with disabilities. Though these types of programs are not inclusive, they offer the benefits of exercise, the promotion of a healthy lifestyle, and encourage social opportunities.

*Be sure to talk with your doctor before starting a new exercise program.

Who We Are and Who We Serve

The **Vanderbilt Kennedy Center (VKC)** works with and for people with disabilities and their family members, educators and service providers, researchers, students, and policy makers. Faculty and staff engage in interdisciplinary research, training, service, and information dissemination and work in collaboration with local, state and national networks and partners. The following are some of the ways the Center's programs and staff can assist families, educators, and other service providers.

Tennessee Disability Pathfinder

Tennessee Disability Pathfinder provides free information, referral sources, and help with navigating services via phone, email, and website. Assistance is available to individuals of all ages, all types of disabilities, and all languages spoken. Its website database has more than 3,000 agencies searchable by Tennessee county and service. Pathfinder is a project of the VKC and is partially funded by Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities and other state agencies. (615) 322-8529, toll-free (800) 640-4636, TNPathfinder.org

Other Resources

- **Able Recreation Association, Inc. (ABLES)** is located in Symrna and provides recreational activities for children and young adults with disabilities. www.ablesinc.org
- **Challenged Athletes Playing Equally (CAPE)** is a Murfreesboro-based nonprofit organization for people with disabilities who want to play in a sport or activity. www.facebook.com/CAPEtn
- **National Center on Health, Physical Activity, and Disability** aims to collaborate with the nation's leading health advocacy and disability organizations in linking

them to the hundreds of program initiatives ongoing across the nation, and using this framework to build inclusion and integration into these existing programs. www.ncpad.org

- **Special Olympics Tennessee** provides year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities. www.specialolympicstn.org
- **Sports 4 All** aims to improve the quality of life of people with disabilities by providing funding, equipment, programming, and education to enable full participation in sports and recreational activities. www.s4af.org
- Sumar, Sonia. (1998). *Yoga for the Special Child: A Therapeutic Approach for Infants and Children With Down Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, and Learning Disabilities*. Sarasota, FL: Special Yoga Publications
- **Tennessee Best Buddies** creates opportunities for one-to-one friendships. www.bestbuddiestennessee.org
- **Tennessee Greenways and Trails** There are 931 greenways and trails in Tennessee. connectwithtn.com
- **Tennessee State Parks** For a list of accessibility features and programs, visit tnstateparks.com/about/ada-plan
- **YMCA of Middle Tennessee—Full Circle Program** provides social and recreational opportunities to help children with special needs grow in spirit, mind, and body. Services include after-school arts, sports and fitness classes, swim lessons, summer recess, and much more. Offerings vary by center, so check with your local site for specific class and program availability. ymcamidtn.org

Content for this tip sheet was developed by Jenna R. Brinkman as a component of her participation in the Dietetic Internship Program at Vanderbilt University.

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