

# Fit Kids: Why Children Need Exercise

Physical activity can improve your children's grades, self-esteem, and sleep.

By [Hansa D. Bhargava, MD](#)

Do you find yourself reaching for a tall cup of java each afternoon to power yourself out of that 3 p.m. energy slump? I feel your pain -- being a mom takes energy. As a pediatrician, though, I have a better fix: a 15-minute power walk. And what works for your midday slump works for your kids, too.

But with school and so much homework, can they afford to take time to [exercise](#)? In truth, they can't afford not to. A Georgia school that started a before-school [fitness program](#) found that children who walked for just 25 to 30 minutes participated more in class and showed improved grades.

Another bonus: Exercise can improve self-esteem in kids. When 207 formerly inactive kids exercised for just 40 minutes a day, they reported less sadness and said they felt better about themselves, according to research published online in the *Journal of Pediatric [Psychology](#)*.

So the next time your kids complain they're tired (or you feel the urge to get caffeinated), get up and move. While the official recommendation for children is 60 minutes of [physical activity](#) a day, breaking this down into shorter segments may be easier for a busy family. Make sure you include aerobic activity such as brisk walking at least three days a week. And don't forget muscle- and bone-strengthening exercises, such as gymnastics and push-ups. You and your family will be healthier, [sleep](#) better, and feel happier.

## Fit Kids Action Plan

Here's how you can get your family moving.

*Step out.* Take the stairs, park far away from the entrance to the grocery store, and walk short distances instead of driving. Soon your kids will remind you to do this, says Hansa Bhargava, MD.

*Make it simple.* Play oldie-but-goodie family games such as Frisbee, tag, and hopscotch. Who can hula-hoop the longest?

*Move on the weekend.* Take one hour to do an activity together: Shoot hoops, play tennis, or go for a nature walk. Too hot or cold outside? Dance to fast music, or see who can clean their room the fastest.

*Limit TV and other media.* The more time your family spends in front of screens -- TVs, computers, phones -- the less they exercise. Turn the electronics off and move.

*Celebrate!* If you and your child just finished a long walk, make a point of acknowledging your efforts. Remind your kids how moving makes them feel good.