



A Parent's Guide to Fitness for Kids Who Hate Sports

Eight-year-old Bradley is a terror on the ice - he lives for hockey practice and spends much of his free time at home slapping a puck around in the driveway. But Bradley's 10-year-old brother, Michael, has no interest in hockey or in any organized sports. He would rather be in his room with a book or riding his bike around the park than playing hockey or basketball with his friends.

The boys' parents worry about Michael's lack of interest in team sports, but do they really have anything to be concerned about? Read this article to find out how you can help to promote fitness in a child who dislikes team sports.

Why Does My Child Hate Sports?

If your child isn't interested in team sports, you should attempt to get to the root of the issue rather than force her to join a team. Kids may not want to participate in sports for many reasons - some of them physical, others emotional.

Children who are physically self-conscious or who feel different from their peers may feel uncomfortable about participating in team activities. Whether this difference is real or imagined, it may lead to self-esteem and body image problems.

Fear of failure or public embarrassment - as well as fear of letting their parents down - can also make some children reluctant to play team sports.

Other children may lack, or believe they lack, the grace or coordination needed to succeed at a particular sport. They may also be afraid of injury or may simply be cautious by nature.

Some children, like many adults, may just not be interested in team sports, but they can still maintain an excellent level of fitness by engaging in other activities that don't emphasize competition. As long as your child does not become sedentary, there's no reason to worry if she resists joining organized sports activities.

Encourage your child to take up lifelong activities like cycling, running, martial arts, or hiking - activities that can promote fitness on an individual, noncompetitive level, suggests Michael Stanwood, PT, ATC, a sports medicine coordinator in Delaware. He also suggests sports such as wrestling or tennis. "Wrestling takes place one on one, but the participants still earn team points."

Ruling out Any Problems

Before beginning any sports or fitness program, your child should have a physical examination by her doctor. Children with undiagnosed medical conditions, vision or hearing problems, or other disorders may have difficulty participating in certain activities. If your child shows uncharacteristic

resistance to a particular activity or sudden reluctance to participate in a sport that she previously enjoyed, a visit to her doctor may be in order to rule out any health problems that may be hindering her enjoyment and performance.

Can I Help My Child Learn to Like Sports?



Although you should share your interests with your child, it's never a good idea to force your child into an activity just because you once excelled in it.

In fact, many children may worry that they won't be able to measure up to the success their parents once enjoyed playing a particular sport. Your child needs to know that although you would love to share your love of softball or basketball with her, it would be equally acceptable if she would rather play golf or tennis, or take up gymnastics or karate.

You should also keep your expectations realistic - most children never make it to the city finals or become Olympic medalists no matter how hard they try. The ultimate goal is to help and encourage your child to become fit, healthy, and happy.

Parents should try to remain openminded about their child's chosen sport. For example, it's possible that your child may enjoy a sports activity that is not offered at her school or that is not offered for girls. If your child wants to try football or ice hockey, help her find a local league or talk to school officials about starting up a new team. Boys may prefer figure skating or ballet. Let your kids know that no matter which sport they choose, they have your support.

You'll also need to be patient with your child if she has difficulty choosing and sticking to an activity. It often takes several tries before a child finds an activity with which she feels comfortable.

Even if your child never belongs to a sports team, there are many other areas of her life where she can learn important skills like teamwork, competition, and cooperation. Clubs, school and volunteer activities, band or music lessons, acting or debating groups, and many other activities teach children to work and get along with others.

Fortunately, there are also many alternative ways to keep fit and active other than organized sports.

What Activities Can My Child Do to Stay Fit?

Many children choose not to join teams, and prefer activities that can be done alone or with friends. Suggested fitness alternatives include:

- cycling
- swimming
- horseback riding
- dancing
- in-line skating
- running

- skateboarding
- hiking
- martial arts

These activities help children build self-esteem, strength, coordination, and general fitness.

How Can I Be a Good Fitness Role Model?

Parents who live sedentary lifestyles may have a hard time motivating their children to stay fit. Try to make exercise a part of your family life by finding fun fitness activities that the whole family can do together, such as swimming, cycling, canoeing, tennis, nature hikes, or walks with the family dog.



Maintain a positive attitude toward exercise and physical activity - be careful not to treat it as a punishment or a chore.

Encourage your child to come up with creative suggestions for family fitness activities; she will be more likely to enjoy an activity if she has a role in planning it.

Parents who attend regular fitness classes or work out at a gym may find it fairly easy to be good fitness role models. Although Stanwood recommends that children under the age of 12 or 13 not get involved in weight training, many gyms offer activities that may interest older children. Some gyms and community centers also offer "Mommy and Me" classes, which introduce fitness to toddlers and preschoolers.

Finally, emphasize the importance of having both a healthy mind and a healthy body, and make it clear to your child that physical activity is an integral part of daily life. By creating a supportive environment, acting as a positive role model, and providing your child with a wide range of fitness choices, you can help your child develop good habits that will last a lifetime.

Updated and reviewed by: Kim Rutherford, MD

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Originally reviewed by: Steven Dowshen, MD, and Michael Stanwood, ATC, CSCS

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