

CASA Conversations



California **CASA**
Court-Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN

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Exercise: Movement Matters

Introduction

The benefits of physical activity are many and varied. In the age of video games, processed food, and sedentary lifestyles, children need our encouragement more than ever to add physical exercise to their daily regimen. Even though CASA children have limited direct control over the environment in which they live – and CASAs have limited time with children – you can adopt simple steps with your child to help create new, healthy lifestyle habits.

Exercise does not have to be in a gym, it does not have to be extremely difficult, and it can and should be fun! Exercising with your CASA child can be as simple as taking a five minute walk. As a CASA, you have the opportunity to encourage physical activity and drastically improve the life of the child.

The Facts

Exercise has many benefits. Among them, it:

- controls weight
- combats health conditions and diseases
- improves mood
- boosts energy
- promotes better sleep
- is fun!

Leading a sedentary lifestyle and making poor food choices can lead to devastating health risks and conditions.

- Diseases that used to be more commonly associated with adults are now affecting our children in large numbers. Childhood obesity is on the rise, and both metabolic syndrome and Type II diabetes are showing up more frequently in children in the last decade.
- Far too often children are bullied because of their weight and this social pressure can result in eating disorders, low self-esteem, and other negative outcomes.

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Starting a CASA Conversation

If you want to be successful in getting your CASA child active, make sure your tone is encouraging and supportive, and that the child doesn't feel "forced" to exercise. It is equally important to make sure that the child is screened for any health issues that limit his ability to exercise. In this case, any exercise plan and modifications should be discussed with the child's health care provider.

It is best to contact the child's doctor directly to ask if the child can engage in physical activity, like running in the park or walking in the mall. The doctor will also be able to determine if any medications the child may be taking could affect her physical abilities.

Once you've established that it is safe for your child to exercise, it's time to get active! No matter what activity you choose, remember these five important tips:

1. **Dress comfortably**

It is important that children wear proper exercise attire while active. Tennis shoes should fit properly and clothing should be non-restrictive and comfortable.

2. **Drink water!**

Water intake is crucial during exercise - please make sure your child has water available!

3. **Start Slowly**

Activity should start at a very basic level, and ramp up according to the child's abilities.

4. **Consistency is key**

Emphasize to the child that they should engage in some sort of activity each day, even if it is only for five minutes.

5. **Stretch & breathe afterwards**

Share with your child that post-workout, they can just "be" for a few minutes, free of any demands. Guide her in gentle stretches and breathing in and out slowly, allowing increased oxygen to do its work in the brain and muscle cells.

How you engage your child will depend on how active they currently are and how they feel about exercising. Exercise for some children is much harder than it is for others. For example, an active child may think nothing of running after a ball, walking a flight of stairs, or doing a set of jumping jacks. But asking an inactive child to perform these tasks would not benefit her, as her body would not be ready for the stress placed on the muscles and cardiovascular system.

Inactive children

Some children may dislike exercise altogether, or for one reason or another they are very uncomfortable with it due to what they perceive as past failures with the performance or competitive component often associated with it. These tips can help you get an inactive child on his feet:

- Choose activities that require little energy expenditure, and keep workouts to just a few minutes at a slow pace, until they are ready to do more. Even these short spurts of activity will get blood flowing and move and stretch muscles.
 - With time, as the child becomes more fit and comfortable with exercise, you can increase the time and frequency of the workouts.

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- If you are having trouble sparking interest, connect the activity to something the child already loves. If he likes to paint, suggest going for a short walk in the neighborhood or park to find subjects for his next masterpiece.
- No matter their level of fitness, you should encourage them to do some sort of exercise daily, if only for a few minutes.
- In general, start simply, build slowly, and enjoy yourself as you both reap the rewards!

Activities

Most of these activities are exercises that can be accomplished in only a few minutes and with little to no props or equipment needed. Enjoy!!!

Low-Intensity Exercises for Beginners/Inactive Kids

Walking is an incredibly versatile exercise. Mix it up by walking in a variety of different settings:

- Neighborhood
- Local Park
- Or simply park in the furthest spot from your destination and create a ready-made workout!
- Local River Trail
- School track or football field

Other low-intensity exercises:

- Leg circles
- Scavenger hunts in the back yard or in a park
- Alphabet shapes ("draw" A-Z with one leg while balancing on the other, then switch sides.)
- Bean bag toss
- Arm circles

Moderate Intensity

- Knee Lifts
- Catch
- Four square
- Drums Alive - using drum sticks to make noise on various items as you "pound" away and advance to the next item to "pound."
- Frisbee
- Kick ball
- Blowing bubbles and then chasing them

- Walking for 20- 30 minutes
- Balloon bouncing

High Intensity

- Jumping Jacks
- Jump Rope
- Running
- Stadium Stairs

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Pitfalls to Avoid

- When you're talking about exercise, never let judgment creep into your voice. It is important to be positive about exercise and set a good example.
- Don't push your child beyond her limits!
- Avoid setting expectations too high - if the child is moving, she is successful!
- Listen to your child about her comfort zone. If she says it's unsafe to talk a walk in her neighborhood, take her word for it.
 - If you are constrained by the environment, be creative and find out what facilities might be available to you, such as a church facility room.
- Instead of asking your youth if he wants to "exercise," avoid this word, and instead say, "hey, do you want to throw a ball around?" or "I bet you can't run to that trash can and back before I count to ten!" Get him excited about the activity at hand, and the benefits will follow!

Additional Resources

Kaiser Permanente, "Young Adults/Eating and Exercise: What Works for You?"

http://mydoctor.kaiserpermanente.org/ncal/mdo/presentation/articles/articlepage.jsp?article=regions/ncal/article_181851.xml

Action for Healthy Kids

Valuable tools and resources for getting involved in children's fitness on state and local levels

www.actionforhealthykids.org

Mayo Clinic, "Exercise: 7 Benefits of Regular Physical Activity"

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/exercise/HQ01676>

Alexandria Williams, MA, ACE Fitness, "Childhood Obesity Doomsday Countdown"

<http://www.idealife.com/fitness-library/childhood-obesity>

Kids Enjoy Exercise Now (K.E.E.N.) Foundation.

A nonprofit volunteer organization, K.E.E.N. provides free one-on-one recreational opportunities for children and young adults with mental and physical disabilities; visit:

www.keenusa.org

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