Ask the Expert

Move More with Kids

Move Kids with Physical Activity

George Graham, PhD

Dr. Graham was inducted into the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) Hall of Fame in 2007. He has served as fellow with the American Academy of Kinesiology and Physical Education and as senior advisor for the PE Central website for physical education teachers. A popular speaker and author on physical education for children, Dr. Graham has presented at over 100 conferences worldwide, served as a consultant to over 70 school districts, the United States Tennis Association and the Professional Golf Association, and appeared on National Public Radio and CBS in the Morning.

When we say physical activity, what are we talking about?

When children walk, jog, run, climb, chase, dodge — anything walking or above — it's physical activity. They're moving their total body and moving from point A to point B. Physical activity sets the stage for lifelong activity. People often confuse physical education and physical activity. They're different! Physical education introduces children to different sports or movement forms that hopefully lead to enjoying and doing them for a lifetime. It's easier for people who played tennis, golf or inline skated as a kid to do it as an adult because those skills are there. The body remembers the skills, as opposed to having never done them.

The recommendation is that kids get at least one hour of physical activity a day. What's magic about one hour?

It's a general guideline. And it's a minimum. Experts are saying that one hour is an amount that seems to be appropriate for children to gain the health benefits from being physically active. I'm leery of being too prescriptive, though. Ideally what happens is that parents enjoy being physically active. They have things they like to do, and kids pick up their enjoyment. It doesn't work for parents who do virtually nothing to tell their kids to go out and play and be physically active.

Do they need to get all their activity at once for it to be beneficial?

It's not one hour non-stop as we might think if it — for example, riding a bike or swimming for an hour. It's important to understand the nature of physical activity for children. Children are "spurters."

They spurt; they rest and recover incredibly fast, and they're ready to go again. Playing tag, kids run around hard for five or 10 minutes, stop, rest and the game is on again. We're not talking about an hour all at once.

And children need to move. We're coming out with the recommendation that kids don't go longer than two hours without physical activity. It's because of the emphasis on high-stakes testing and pressure for teachers to keep kids at their desks for several hours at a time. Developmentally, it's not in their best interest.

How can parents tell how active their kids are in general?

Kids like gadgets, and pedometers are handy devices parents can have kids wear to tell how active they are. And they're not intrusive. Parents don't need to mention 10,000 steps, which is a benchmark we're hearing more and more. The point is to see how many steps a child gets in a typical day. I worry about parents who force their children to get an hour of physical activity, or, if they get a pedometer, to get 10,000 steps. The best approach is to celebrate what a child does and aim for a little bit more each day.

If kids play organized sports, can parents assume their kids get all the physical activity they need?

It depends. You have to look at the individual child. In a Little League baseball game, a child in the outfield may not run two minutes. If they strike out, they don't run at all. The same is true for soccer. You see kids who get remarkably little activity because they don't move much and others who are all over the field. An interesting experiment that parents can do is to bring a stop watch and observe their youngster doing a sport. They should start the watch every time their child jogs, runs, skates, or does anything that's walking or above. This will answer the question of how physically active they actually are.

Is it true that physical activity helps develop healthy bones and joints?

The body is designed to be physically active. That's how it develops optimally, including strengthening bones and joints. In one study where adolescent girls simply did jumping, their bones strengthened compared with girls who did not. We also know that people who are physically active are less likely to get certain kinds of cancers, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease or suffer from stress or drug or alcohol addiction.

(Editor's Note: Physical activity and adequate calcium are important for healthy bone development. Children ages 4-8 need 1,000 mg of calcium a day, or the amount in approximately three servings of Dairy Group foods. Between ages 9 and 18 the amount increases to 1,300 mg a day, or the amount in about four servings of Dairy Groups foods.[i] [ii])

We often read that good nutrition and physical activity go hand in hand for good health. What's the connection?

Sometimes the connection is framed in terms of being overweight, but there are some people who can eat quite a bit of unhealthy food and not be overweight or obese. The same is true for inactivity. It may not be obesity or overweight, but in terms of health over a lifetime, poor food choices and inactivity increase the odds for health problems that may not have occurred had someone eaten better or been more active.

How important is physical activity in helping children maintain a healthy weight?

It's helpful, and it plays in important role. However, controlling weight with physical activity alone requires a lot of activity. Activity is important, but it's also making healthful food choices and watching portion size. Increasingly, experts are saying that both are important for preventing obesity.

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[i] U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2015*. (See Appendix 7), Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, December 2015. Accessed at: http://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015/guidelines/ February 19, 2018.

[ii] National Institutes of Health: Office of Dietary Supplements. *Calcium: Dietary Supplement Fact Sheet*. Updated November 2016. Accessed at: https://ods.od.nih.gov/factsheets/Calcium-HealthProfessional/#h3 February 19, 2018.