



PLAYTIME IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF CHILDHOOD, but most children spend 4 to 5 hours a day doing sedentary activities. Although being overweight or obese is unhealthy for people of all ages, it is especially harmful to children because the habits developed as early as pre-K are often precursors to lifelong patterns. Childhood obesity is both a physical and mental health issue; it affects a child’s ability to socialize, learn, play, and develop a positive self-image.

Making small changes can have a dramatic effect on your entire family’s health. The following suggestions are from occupational therapy practitioners working with children and their families to become more healthy—while having fun.

If you want to:

Consider these activity tips:

An occupational therapy practitioner offers expertise to:

Create a healthier lifestyle.

Make conscious decisions about your activities: Could you walk or bike instead of drive? Take the stairs instead of the elevator? Can your children safely walk or bike to school? (Refer to the national Safe Routes to School Program.)

Dieting is a short-term action. For a lasting effect, focus on lifestyle activity changes that are feasible and achievable.

Keep a healthy living journal and monitor your activities and associated mood and weight. This journal can help to identify trends and lifestyle choices that work for you and your family.

Do *not* make drastic changes, which often lead to failure. Make a few small incremental changes that become habits before adding something new.

Make activity part of your family’s daily routine.

Encourage the activities your child enjoys (e.g., sports, dance) while reducing time in front of the TV or computer. Find fun things to do as a family, such as going to the park or playground, playing in the backyard, walking the dog, or hiking.

Analyze your family’s routines and suggest strategies to increase leisure and play activities, and tools that can promote physical and mental health.

Promote health literacy by teaching families how to read food labels; ensure that they know the signs of heart attack, stroke, and other conditions; and help empower them to take charge of their own health.

Develop specific recommendations that are based on the interests and abilities of all family members. Occupational therapy practitioners can adapt activities so everyone can participate. Finding the “just right fit” for activities that match your family’s needs, wants, abilities, and goals is a core occupational therapy skill.

Evaluate the family dynamics and needs to help create guidelines that address physical health, emotional and social needs, and schedules. For example, the occupational therapy practitioner can help determine how healthy living can be incorporated into existing family routines and dynamics.

Consider health factors or risks that could make certain types of exercise or movement dangerous and offer alternatives if necessary. For example, the occupational therapy practitioner could monitor low-impact activities like swimming, ping pong, foosball, and billiards for family members with arthritis and other conditions.

If you want to:

Consider these activity tips:

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Make mealtime a priority and opportunity for family participation.

Make dinner time a valued time for talking, socializing, and sharing.

Get the whole family invested: grow a simple garden (if you don't have a yard, try growing herbs on a windowsill), and have your kids take turns selecting a healthy menu and making or helping to make it. Add some fun by using unfamiliar vegetables, new recipes, etc.

Explore your family tree and make a food from your family's country of origin.

Evaluate your home to help enhance comfort and safety in the kitchen: ensure that countertops and chair heights are appropriate, evaluate tools to be sure they are safe and comfortable for all users (and offer alternatives if they are not), evaluate efficiency and ergonomics, etc. By increasing safety and access, meal preparation, dinner time, and clean-up become easier and more enjoyable for all.

Provide ways to engage all family members or increase socialization during meals. For example, the occupational therapy practitioner may suggest a "round-table" turn-taking discussion during dinner when each family member shares his or her favorite and least favorite part of each day, and be able to address barriers preventing this type of socialization.

Help ensure children are healthier in all aspects of their lives.

Help kids select and pack a nutritious lunch, and model this behavior by bringing your own lunch to work.

Encourage children to do yoga, take a walk, join clubs, use recreation centers, develop a hobby, or participate in other social events to help reduce stress and keep active.

Teach children not to bully or make derogatory comments about others who don't look like them.

Become involved in your PTA or afterschool committees to help keep or reinstate recess in your children's school. Encourage policies that don't allow recess to be withheld as a form of punishment.

Contribute to bullying prevention and recess promotion school programs so all kids not only get the chance to exercise but feel comfortable doing so.

Promote the value of recess to school administrators and suggest adapted or alternative activities so all children can participate. For example some students may enjoy walking, gardening, yoga, or dance rather than competitive or team sports.

Need More Information?

Helping people achieve the things they want and need to do through therapeutic, meaningful, and enjoyable activity is the art and science of occupational therapy. Occupational therapy practitioners work with children in their homes, at school, in private practice, at children's hospitals, and in other community locations, providing interventions that are individualized, appropriate, and effective. Ask your pediatrician or school administrator for a recommendation, or look online to find an occupational therapist in your area.

You can find additional information through the American Occupational Therapy Association at www.aota.org.

Occupational therapy is a skilled health, rehabilitation, and educational service that helps people across the lifespan participate in the things they want and need to do through the therapeutic use of everyday activities (occupations).

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