

# Time to get moving: Researcher recommends physical activity be part of school day, after-school programs

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(Medical Xpress) -- Along with reading, writing and arithmetic, do you know if physical activity will be a big part of your child's school day? What about after school and on weekends -- is your child getting enough physical activity?

According to guidelines from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, children ages 6 to 17 need 60 minutes or more of [physical activity](#) a day. That means, says a Kansas State University child physical activity expert, that schools should be providing a minimum of 30 minutes during the school day for [physical education](#) and/or recess. The same holds true for after-school programs.

"Emerging evidence shows that children do better in school if they have opportunities to be physically active," said David Dzewaltowski, professor and head of the university's department of kinesiology. "Many children do not have opportunities to be active before or after school, so the school day is vitally important. Our work has shown that schools can reverse the trend for increased [childhood obesity](#) if they focus on providing activity, especially to those who are most in need."

Dzewaltowski is director of the Youth Health Behavior Research Laboratory at Kansas State University, which provides the Healthy Opportunities for Physical activity and Nutrition -- or HOP'N -- research and programs. HOP'N looks at strategies to promote [healthy eating](#) and

physical activity in children.

Health and Human Services says most of the 60 minutes of daily physical activity recommended for children and adolescents should be in moderate or vigorous intensity aerobic activities, which should be done at least three days a week. Muscle strengthening and bone strengthening activities should each be part of physical activity requirements at least three days a week as well.

Physical activity shouldn't stop when the school day ends. If your child is in an after-school program, Dzewaltowski said it is important that it provides at least 30 minutes of physical activity a day.

"Look for programs that provide activity in the form of free play. If they provide structured activity, examine how much time is spent in actual activity," Dzewaltowski said, adding that it's important the personnel providing the activity know what they are doing.

"Our research has shown that physical activity leaders have to be well trained to provide structured activity or these programs are better off just letting kids play," he said. "Poorly led activity often results in children just standing in line or playing elimination games where the fitter kids play more and leave the unfit kids standing on the sidelines."

Many parents get their kids involved in a youth sport after school. Dzewaltowski says that while youth sports can provide a great physical activity experience, there is a wide variability in the quality of these programs. Leading a youth sport program is a difficult task and requires a lot of skill.

"Many youth sport coaches are parent volunteers or part-time, paid coaches who have little education in the sport. If they do have some certification, it often is little more than a few workshops," Dzewaltowski

said.

It's important for parents to recognize when their child has a coach without the necessary skills to appropriately create a program that positively develops their child or promotes activity.

"Across youth sport there are great coaches at promoting physical activity at every level, and there are less effective coaches at every level," he said. "Parents need to watch practice and be very critical of what is going on. Ideally, every team sport practice should typically include an active warm-up, individual activity, small group activities and then large group activities, regardless of the team sport. This allows for more involvement of all kids rather than just some kids."

Some things to look for in your child's after-school program or sports practice include:

- \* The amount of time spent actually being physically active at a moderate to vigorous level. Dzewaltowski said this should be more than 50 percent of the total practice time.

- \* The amount of time children stand in line or on the sideline. Watch to see if the coaches waste a lot of time getting practice started, transitioning between sessions and providing instruction while kids are standing.

- \* Does the coach break up the group into smaller groups so the ratio of children to the ball is closer to one ball to four kids, rather than 10 kids to one ball?

- \* Does the coach use physical activity as a punishment?

- \* If you spend more time driving your child to his or her competition,

such as a soccer or baseball game, than the child is actually participating, evaluate if your child is in the correct program -- especially if the child is in elementary school.

Another way Dzewaltowski suggests to get more physical activity in your child's day is to look for opportunities for active transportation to and from school and programs. Consider walking or biking to school in groups and with an adult coming along for safety of younger children.

When it comes to weekends or for children who are home-schooled, getting outside can be a strong influence on physical activity. Dzewaltowski said to consider active recreation opportunities that promote lifelong endeavors, such as fishing and camping, as well as sports such as biking, swimming and golf that families can do together.

"It is important to encourage young people to participate in physical activities that are appropriate for their age, that are enjoyable and that offer variety," Dzewaltowski said.

More information about physical activity guidelines for children is available at [www.health.gov/paguidelines/default.aspx](http://www.health.gov/paguidelines/default.aspx)

Provided by Kansas State University

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