The Medical Minute: Making fitness fun for everyone

April 21 2010, By Danielle Sunday

(PhysOrg.com) -- Heading outdoors with family and friends is a great opportunity for children to have fun, be active, expand their imaginations and experience all the joys of nature. With longer, warmer days, it's important for families to consider adding outdoor activity to the daily schedule.

Numerous studies have found that active play is an important part of healthy child development. Through play, children learn to interact with others, develop language skills, recognize and solve problems, and discover their potential.

With the loss of school recess and safe green spaces, reduced physical education minutes, increased time in front of television and computer screens, and an overabundance of adult-organized activities, today's children spend less time playing outdoors than ever before.

Experts recommend 60 minutes of daily physical activity. Getting started can be as simple as setting a goal to move more as a family. Once physical activity becomes part of the daily routine, continue to add minutes until the whole family is reaching 60 minutes of physical activity on most days of the week.

Fun Ways to Reach 60

• Try the following activities together or come up with some of your own

ideas to make fitness fun for everyone:
• Walk or bike to the store, school, park, library or community event.
• Explore close-to-home parks and trails for a fun and free activity.
• Celebrate special occasions -- birthdays, holidays and anniversaries -- with something active, such as a hike, bike ride, or Frisbee game.
• Walk or play with your pet; explore new walking routes and parks with your dog.
• Keep a family activity log. Post it on the refrigerator and encourage family members to log their active time. Recognize those who achieve their daily activity time.
• Make a change to your home or yard that makes doing physical activity easier.
• In addition to active family fun, it's important for children to also try other forms of activity. Children don't need expensive lessons and equipment to participate in regular physical activity.

Moving is what kids do naturally when given the opportunity to spend time outdoors. Help children with active play by having a selection of games, toys, and low-cost equipment on hand to engage them, including balls, Frisbees, jumping ropes, hula hoops and sidewalk chalk.

Community activities are another great way for children to learn different recreation skills. Contact the local community recreation center to find free or low-cost classes that help youth learn basic skills while having fun.

Try Organized Sports

Many school-age children also enjoy organized activities. For example, playing on a sports team can teach children about sportsmanship and teamwork while building self-esteem.

For younger school-age children (5 to 8 years old), noncompetitive

sports leagues where children can learn basic skills and have fun in a supportive environment are best.

For older school-age children (9 to 12 years old), competitive team sports are appropriate, but should still emphasize fun and learning. Helping a child choose the right type of activity is as important as doing the activity. Take into account the child's interests, physical and mental abilities, body type and temperament when selecting an activity. Help guide their choices by offering appropriate options, but leave the decision-making to them.

Make daily activity a family priority. Encouraging your children to be active for 60 minutes a day, whether they are playing with friends or participating in organized physical activities, will help them to maintain a healthy weight as they grow, build their skills and confidence and develop lifelong healthy habits.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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