

ParentBrief



Potato kids – getting them off the couch

A major concern used to be that our kids were spending too much time slumped on a couch watching television. TV still rates a mention, but these days so do other screens: smart phones, tablets, laptops and video consoles. What hasn't changed is the fact that many kids are still couch potatoes, regardless of which screen their umbilical cord is attached to. Our kids may not agree, but getting them off the couch or computer chair is in their best interests, especially when it comes to their physical and mental health...

Encouragement to get off the couch

As parents, our involvement is key to our kids' success. We want them to achieve to their potential and to do this they need to be fit, both mentally and physically. Slumped on the couch or computer chair for hours on end may be doing great things for the mind, but the body will be stagnating. Not all kids will be interested (or equipped) for running a marathon or even swimming a few laps, but if encouraged, most kids are into a walk, back yard game of cricket, or kicking a ball in the park. Creating an inside space for an exercise bike, a few balls or hoops can also encourage our kids to stretch and move more.

The benefits of exercising

Regular exercise helps develop muscles and strengthen bones. Kids who exercise, generally sleep better and suffer less from tension and stress. Kicking a ball for half an hour is a great way to release pent up emotions and help rid the body of toxins. Aerobic exercise such as walking or running helps increase

stamina, endurance, strength, flexibility and the body's ability to provide oxygen to the cells. Physical fitness also aids concentration and overall feelings of wellbeing. Most kids are naturally active, but screen time can be addictive and it's easy for them to lose track of how much time has been spent sitting in the one position.

Play is exercise

Play is great exercise for kids of all ages. For little kids in particular, play is work and a natural part of their development. Creative play in particular helps them to develop dexterity, gross and fine motor skills and muscle strength. As play becomes more involved, kids develop agility, coordination, flexibility and spatial awareness. Screen time can be mostly solitary and consume a child's undivided attention, whereas play encourages kids to be social, cooperate and work as a team.

Ideas for getting kids moving

- **Sign up for sport** – not every kid's ideal, but for those who don't mind rules and like being part of a team, competitive sport can be the go. Being part of a team also encourages feelings of belonging as well as encouraging friendships and commitment.
- **Move with them** – do things as a family, like walking, biking, swimming, playing outdoor games.
- **Picnic more often** – map out a favourite place, take the Frisbee, bats and balls.
- **Get to know the neighbourhood** – walk, catch public transport, check out shops, visit friends.
- **Social Saturdays** – book up friends with kids of the same age, visit museums, libraries, adventure parks with climbing frames and other equipment.

Getting them off the couch can be done anytime. The aim is to keep it enjoyable, regular and social. While our kids keep moving they're helping to keep their weight in check and lessen the potential for type 2 diabetes. They're also going to look good and feel great and the same can't really be said for potatoes.