

Children, Physical Activity & Organized Sports! – Summer 2004

Benefits of Physical Activity

Physical activity helps provide children with more energy to do daily tasks and builds a positive self-image. Children should be involved in active play at least one hour per day. Whether it is playing catch, riding a bike or playing tag, physical activity helps children stay healthier. Physical activity can help:

- Prevent high blood pressure.
- Strengthen bones.
- Ward off heart disease and other medical problems.
- Relieve stress.
- Maintain a healthy weight.

Organized Sports

More American children than ever are competing in organized sports. Organized sports can promote a sense of personal satisfaction, team camaraderie and increased social acceptance for children who are emotionally and physically mature enough to play. The American Academy of Pediatrics offers the following guidelines for children considering participating in organized sports:

- Most children should wait until 6 years of age before beginning team sports.
- A child's physical and emotional development should be evaluated when considering the choice of team sports.
- Late-developing teens should delay contact sports until their bodies have caught up with their more mature peers.
- Children should be taught good sportsmanship and a love of the game. Too much focus on winning puts undue pressure on children.

Preventing Common Injuries & Illnesses

Overuse Injuries

Exercise too intense for your child's age and development may result in overuse injuries including sprains, stress fractures, shin splints and tendonitis. Children are especially vulnerable to overuse injuries because their bone length grows at a faster rate than their muscle mass, which places uneven stress on muscles and bones during strenuous exercise. To avoid overuse injuries:

- Begin and end sports activities with warm up exercises and stretching.
- Gradually build up the intensity of participation in sports activities.
- Don't let children play through pain.
- Check children's shoe size every three months.

Heat Related Illnesses

Children competing in sports are at especially high risk for heat injuries including dehydration, heat cramps, heat exhaustion and heat stroke. Fortunately, heat injuries are generally preventable with careful attention to the following:

- Provide pre-exercise hydration and frequent fluids (water) during activity.
- Limit activities between 11 a.m. and 6 p.m. (times of highest heat).
- Take frequent breaks to cool down and drink water.
- Wear loose, light-weight clothing.
- Avoid participation in sports during acute illnesses.

