

Fitness for Kids Who Don't Like Sports

Team sports can boost kids' self-esteem, coordination, and general fitness, and help them learn how to work with other kids and adults.

But some kids aren't natural athletes and they may tell you — directly or indirectly — that they just don't like sports. What then?

Why Some Kids Don't Like Teams

Not every child has to join a team, and with enough other activities, kids can be fit without them. But try to find out why your child isn't interested. You might be able to help address deeper concerns or steer your child toward something else.

Tell your child that you'd like to work on a solution together. This might mean making changes and sticking with the team sport or finding a new activity to try.

Here are some reasons why sports might be a turnoff for kids:

Still Developing Basic Skills

Though many sports programs are available for preschoolers, it's not until about age 6 or 7 that most kids have the physical skills, the attention span, and the ability to grasp the rules needed to play organized sports.

Kids who haven't had much practice in a specific sport might need time to reliably perform necessary skills such as kicking a soccer ball on the run or hitting a baseball thrown from the pitcher's mound. Trying and failing, especially in a game situation, might frustrate them or make them nervous.

What you can do: Practice with your child at home. Whether it's shooting baskets, playing catch, or going for a jog together, you'll give your child an opportunity to build skills and fitness in a safe environment. Your child can try — and, possibly, fail — new things without the self-consciousness of being around peers. And you're also getting a good dose of quality together time.

Coach or League Is Too Competitive

A kid who's already a reluctant athlete might feel extra-nervous when the coach barks out orders or the league focuses heavily on winning.

What you can do: Investigate sports programs before signing your child up for one. Talk with coaches and other parents about the philosophy. Some athletic associations, like the YMCA, have noncompetitive leagues. In some programs, they don't even keep score.

As kids get older, they can handle more competitive aspects such as keeping score and keeping track of wins and losses for the season. Some kids may be motivated by competitive play, but most aren't ready for the increased pressure until they're 11 or 12 years old. Remember that even in more competitive leagues, the atmosphere should remain positive and supportive for all the participants.

Stage Fright

Kids who aren't natural athletes or are a little shy might be uncomfortable with the pressure of being on a team. More self-conscious kids also might worry about letting their parents, coaches, or teammates down. This is especially true if a child is still working on basic skills and if the league is very competitive.

What you can do: Keep your expectations realistic — most kids don't become Olympic medalists or get sports scholarships. Let your child know the goal is to be fit and have fun. If the coach or league doesn't agree, it's probably time to look for something new.

Still Shopping for a Sport

Some kids haven't found the right sport. Maybe a child who doesn't have the hand-eye coordination for baseball has the drive and the build to be a swimmer, a runner, or a cyclist. The idea of an individual sport also can be more appealing to some kids who like to go it alone.

What you can do: Be open to your child's interests in other sports or activities. That can be tough if, for instance, you just loved basketball and wanted to continue the legacy. But by exploring other options, you give your child a chance to get invested in something he or she truly enjoys.

Other Barriers

Different kids mature at different rates, so expect a wide range of heights, weights, and athletic abilities among kids of the same age group. A child who's much bigger or smaller than other kids of the same age — or less coordinated or not as strong — may feel self-conscious and uncomfortable competing with them.

Kids also might be afraid of getting injured or worried that they can't keep up. Kids who are overweight might be reluctant to participate in a sport, for example, while a child with asthma might feel more comfortable with sports that require short outputs of energy, like baseball, football, gymnastics, golf,

and shorter track and field events.

What you can do: Give some honest thought to your child's strengths, abilities, and temperament, and find an activity that might be a good match. Some kids are afraid of the ball, so they don't like softball or volleyball but may enjoy an activity like running. If your child is overweight, he or she might lack the endurance to run, but might enjoy a sport like swimming. A child who's too small for the basketball team may enjoy gymnastics or wrestling.

Remember that some kids will prefer sports that focus on individual performance rather than teamwork. The goal is to prevent your child from feeling frustrated, wanting to quit, and being turned off from sports and physical activity altogether.

Try to address your child's concerns. By being understanding and providing a supportive environment, you'll help foster success in whatever activity your child chooses.

Fitness Outside of Team Sports

Even kids who once said they hated sports might learn to like team sports as their skills improve or they find the right sport or a league. But even if team sports never thrill your child, there's plenty a kid can do to get the recommended 60 minutes or more of physical activity each day.

Free play can be very important for kids who don't play a team sport. What's free play? It's the activity kids get when they're left to their own devices, like shooting hoops, riding bikes, playing whiffleball, playing tag, jumping rope, or dancing.

Kids might also enjoy individual sports or other organized activities that can boost fitness, such as:

- swimming
- horseback riding
- dance classes
- inline skating
- cycling
- cheerleading
- skateboarding
- hiking
- golf
- tennis
- fencing

gymnastics
martial arts
yoga and other fitness classes
Ultimate Frisbee
running

Supporting Your Kid's Choices

Even if the going's tough, work with your child to find something active that he or she likes. Try to remain open-minded. Maybe your child is interested in an activity that is not offered at school. If your daughter wants to try flag football or ice hockey, for example, help her find a local league or talk to school officials about starting up a new team.

You'll need to be patient if your child has difficulty choosing and sticking to an activity. It often takes several tries before kids find one that feels like the right fit. But when something clicks, you'll be glad you invested the time and effort. For your child, it's one big step toward developing active habits that can last a lifetime.

Reviewed by: Steven Dowshen, MD

Date reviewed: May 2009
