Exercise Tips for Overweight Kids
Four simple ways to help your overweight kids exercise more.

WebMD Feature
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It's not surprising that overweight kids often don't like to exercise. Exercising in public can be humiliating if your weight makes it more difficult to move around. In fact, just wearing shorts and a T-shirt in front of other kids can be too embarrassing.

A 2006 University of Florida study of 100 children found that bullying is a major reason why overweight kids don't exercise. Overweight children are bullied more than other kids, and they tend to avoid situations where they have been picked on before, such as gym classes or sports.

But avoiding exercise isn't the answer. Hardening of the arteries can start during childhood in obese and inactive children. Regular exercise can help children reduce – and even reverse -- the risk of developing heart disease and diabetes.

As a parent, there are ways you can help. WebMD asked fitness experts for tips to help overweight kids find activities they'll enjoy and can do at their own pace. With your encouragement and support, you and your child can start moving more together. Here's how.

1. Build Confidence

Studies show that kids who feel more confident about their ability to be physically active are more likely to exercise. Try boosting your child's confidence with these tips.

Make kids' exercise easy to master. "All kids want to feel competent and self-efficient in any activity they do," says Jackie Epping, MEd, a physical education expert at the Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity at the CDC. For a start, "choose exercises that don't take a lot of extra coordination and skill. Brisk walking, bicycling, and swimming are all good options."

Take it slow. While health experts recommend that kids get 60 minutes of exercise a day, that can be a lot for a kid who hasn't been active. "Start with just five to 10 minutes of play," says Laura Alderman, MEd, an exercise physiologist and wellness coach at Sanford Health in Fargo, N.D. "For example, throw a Frisbee or play volleyball for just a few minutes and then stop when the time is up. The idea is to show kids that moving can be fun and to leave them craving more."

Avoid elimination games. Some games, such as dodgeball, make it too easy to be eliminated from play. "These kinds of games can make an overweight child feel self-conscious," says Epping. "And then the child sits out for the rest of the game and doesn't get any exercise."

2. Make Family Time Active Time

"One of the best ways to help your child get more exercise is to be active with your child," Alderman tells WebMD. "For example, play with your child at the playground or go swimming together rather than just watching."

Getting the whole family involved will also make it less likely that your overweight child will feel singled out. Parents need to be role models and stress the value of healthy living to their children on a daily basis. A family activity that may be especially helpful for overweight kids is walking the family dog.
"Walking a dog doesn’t seem like exercise to kids, so it’s especially good for overweight children who may otherwise shy away from being active," says Epping. "And walking with a dog can help increase social contact and provide a level of social support."