

Physical activities come with their fair share of benefits – for both body and mind.

■ WORDS ANNA FERNANDEZ

IT'S NOT ALL FUN AND GAMES

While there's no real necessity for very young children to be enrolled in formal sports, it is recommended for them to be exposed to a combination of structured physical activities and free play. According to Edgar Tham, sport and performance psychologist at SportPsych Consulting, sports sampling at an early stage helps to build a strong foundation of physical and psychological skills that would benefit children in their future sporting pursuits, eventually reaping long-term health and physical benefits.

You don't even have to get your kid on the team; it can be as simple as coming together as a family once a week to throw ball or play catch so that your children can pick up the rules of a game without any pressure to perform. Here are some ways getting physical can benefit your children.

1 A Little Self-confidence can Go a Long Way

Taking part in a sport can help in the development of your child's confidence, especially in their own abilities and skills. Simple gestures between teammates, or even words of encouragement from the coach, nevertheless help to nurture their self-esteem.

Dr Chan Poh Chong, head and senior consultant, Division of General Ambulatory Paediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, National University Hospital says, "Being a team player, sharing the joys and sorrows of winning and losing, and understanding their own strengths and weaknesses all help to establish self-confidence in who they are. Early exposure to the social issues of human interactions has shown to help children succeed in adult life."

2 It Aids in Social Development

Sports allow children to learn the importance of teamwork.

By working together, they'll realise each other's strengths and weaknesses, and will be better equipped to communicate strategies that are best for the team as a whole.

Being exposed to social interactions of various forms helps to develop their interpersonal skills, which will carry into adulthood.

3 Balance, Coordination, and Body Control

Balance and hand-eye coordination are least developed among preschoolers. Many parents assume that they'll develop naturally as their child progresses with age. However, getting a hang of these motor skills usually requires some instruction, either through structured or non-structured activities. The perfect sport for your child to cultivate stamina, balance,



and hand-eye coordination is soccer, as they learn how to dribble while running, pass the ball to a fellow teammate, and shoot it at the goalpost.

4 The Active Lifestyle is Learned

Getting your kid off the couch, and away from a sedentary life may prevent many weight-related problems including obesity, and cardiovascular diseases. So, if your child shows no initial interest, start out with simple activities instead. **Tham says, "Parents can encourage their children to take part in multi-sport programmes to try out different sports. Alternatively, simple activities like chasing after bubbles or any kind of outdoor play could be a good way to ease kids into getting active."**

5 Routines and a Sense of Security

Whether it's waking up at a certain time in the morning to get ready for school, settling down for a meal with the family, or heading to the field to join the rest of the team for practice, routines establish good habits and a sense of certainty and security. Because very young children may not have much control over their lives just yet, having a regularly scheduled activity to look forward to gives them some form of stability, and comfort.

6 The Transfer of Learning

By being involved in sports, your child would need to follow a set of rules. Learning the techniques of a new sport can instil in a child the discipline they'll need both on and off the field. Furthermore, through the transfer of learning, children who see the role of discipline in achieving their athletic goals are more likely to apply discipline to their later pursuits throughout adulthood.

7 Navigating the Ups and Downs of Life

Through sports, especially competitive ones, your child can learn how to handle disappointment rather than dwell in defeat. The important part is to get back up and try again. It'll also help them to take responsibility for any mistakes they made, instead of blaming others when things go south.

As parents, you too play a role in preparing your children for the future. Remember to communicate with them, and instead of focusing on whether they won or lost, for example, ask if they enjoyed themselves. There's always a right way to kick-start the process of getting your kids involved in sports – the ball's in your court now.

8 Competition isn't Always Bad

To some, competition places too much pressure on kids, causing unnecessary stress for them to measure up to the expectations of their performance. However, it can actually help kids learn that it's not always the best or the brightest who succeed, but rather those who are consistent and hardworking in their efforts to reach a goal.

9 Strength of Body and Mind

Apart from aiding in the development of fine motor skills (like holding a pencil) and gross motor skills (like walking or climbing), being involved in sports improves endurance. This simply means that their stamina will increase, and they'll be able to play for longer periods of time, leading to the development of healthy organs, muscle tissue, and strong bones and joints.

Exercise is also known to improve the circulation of blood to the brain, building a stronger mind that is less prone to stress and anxiety. According to Dr Chan, "Running, cycling, and swimming improve stamina by working the heart and lungs. They also reduce obesity, enhance immunity, and accelerate brain functioning." ■

