

- Children—physical fitness

## Three ways to make fitness fun for you and your children

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TO today's generation of kids, the word "play" has taken on a whole different meaning from their parents' and grandparents' definitions. Their version of "play" is usually done indoors in a dark room, and involves an electronic gadget like a cellphone, tablet, computer, or console. If there's anyone getting any action in this kind of play, it's the avatars or characters on the screen, as kids control their every move from the comforts of their seats or beds.



"It's this type of 'play' that may lead youngsters to develop noncommunicable diseases (NCDS) years before they become adults," says Bernadette C. Benitez, MD, Head of the Department of Pediatrics of top hospital in the Philippines, Makati Medical Center (Makatimed, [www.makatimed.net.ph](http://www.makatimed.net.ph)). The World Health Organization (WHO) recognized that physical inactivity is a contributor to the rise in overweight and obesity and a leading risk factor for global mortality.

"Obesity, in turn, can lead to noncommunicable diseases [NCDS] like diabetes, hypertension, cancer and heart disease which are thought to be a middleaged person's diseases, conditions that happen over time owing to poor lifestyle and eating habits. Children are likely to develop such diseases early if they live sedentarily and maintain a diet of processed food."

The figures to back up this claim are certainly alarming. According to a 2021 report from the WHO, the incidence of overweight among Filipino adolescents has tripled in the last 15 years. Percentages of stroke and heart attack among the young are slowly creeping up too. Those in the 18 to 49 age bracket make up 10 percent of stroke victims in the country. Cardiologists are also seeing Filipinos in their 30s or younger suffering a heart attack. Exercise, even at a moderate pace for 30 minutes 3 to 5 times a week, offers a slew of benefits. It keeps your weight down, boosts your energy, reduces elevated cholesterol, blood pressure and blood sugar, improves your mood and concentration, and makes you sleep better.

But how do you get your gadget-wielding kids to play the way you and other children used to—out of the house and participating in activities that make them run, sweat, jump and

have a good time?

“By serving as a role model and being active yourself,” says Benitez. “There are enough studies to show that parents who are fit—meaning, they exercise or engage in physical activities regularly and eat a balanced diet—raise fit or physically active kids. No problem if you haven’t exercised in years or are off your ideal weight. Use this opportunity to get into shape and invite your children to join you in this journey. Make it a shared goal to reach a target weight, run a certain distance at a specific time, or swim as many laps. Above all, make it fun for everyone involved.”

Here are three ways to redefine your kids’ meaning of “play”:

- **Teach them how you played .** “Remember how you and your friends looked forward to agawan base, patintero, piko and other games back in the day? Introduce these street games from simpler times to your kids and organize ‘mini tournaments’ with other parents and kids,” Benitez advises. “End the sessions with servings of healthy snacks like nuts, fresh fruits, and fresh juices.”
- **Learn something new together .** Can’t swim to save your life? Never climbed a vertical wall? Now’s the time to do it! “If kids are scared or shy to begin a new activity with strangers, the comforting presence of Mom or Dad will put them at ease and likely make them want to stay, especially if a parent is participating in it,” Benitez points out.
- **Commit to a common goal .** “An example for this is signing up for a manageable distance for you and your youngster to run—a 1K, 3K, or 5K is doable— then spend the next weeks or months training for it together,” says Benitez. “This makes you motivate each other to show up, stick to the program, and push yourselves to do better. Sharing a goal to get fit is a great way to solidify relationships, too. After the race, you’ll definitely have something to talk about for years to come.”