

# How Fit Should A Child Be?

Do you over compensate for the obesity epidemic and give your child too much activity? As a parent are you over protecting them? Or are we all just expecting too much from them? Can we actually be doing more harm than good and will too much sport actually turn a child off exercise? These are some of the questions that surround the issue of just how fit should your child be.

So just how fit should a child be? Think about:

- The age of the child. In this article I am referring to kids from the ages of 7 years to 16 years old
- Should they be pushed to perform? If they are showing extremely high levels of interest, then guide them but don't push
- Are there weight issue associated?
- What is the goal by exercising them?

Lets cover some of the facts of today's children. There really is an obesity issue amongst children, with a more sedentary lifestyle, poor nutrition and a changing role that is seeing parents struggling to commit time to their child/children's health and well being. There is also the other end of the child health scale with children being pushed to become super athletes at a very young age.

So where should your child/children be on this scale?

Unfortunately the answer is not so definite. Take the inspiration and desire to become a sporting 'great' out of the equation and we are left with a more tangible scenario. Firstly, the desire to be a sporting great is not a bad thing. A drive and self-discipline that is coming from within a child shouldn't be quashed just guided with the wisdom from both parents and professionals.

For all of those that are left (the majority of children) a child's fitness should be measured and determined by the following:

- Are they happy, really happy?
- Can the move like they did when they were 2 years old? Squat, bend and twist
- Is there a body fat issue?
- Do they sleep well?
- Do they concentrate well?
- Can they hold their own body weight?



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Apart from these questions there is a developmental stage that has a major influence on your long-term health, well beyond adolescent years. By the age of 14 a child has 90% of their neuromuscular development (co-ordination between the brain and muscular control in association with spatial awareness). From here you tune or hone these skills into adulthood. In my opinion this is the single most important factor in determining a child's fitness. If a child can; throw, catch, hop, skip, balance, jump, roll, kick a ball, ride, climb, swing, swim three different strokes, dive, flip, cartwheel etc then you have a fit child. Cardiovascular endurance for a child is important but I would weight it less important than a child with great neuromuscular coordination. Being a child is where we can develop a base from which all life experiences stem from. Even self-confidence and self-belief can be established in these formative years through activity.

## How strong should a child be?

In my opinion children should be able to hold their own body weight. Exercises or movements such as hanging from monkey bars and swinging from arm to arm, doing a hand stand and maybe a walk on the hands, single leg squats, push ups, a chin up or two and you have a perfectly strong child. The key here is the child's body weight; this places all children on an equal 'playing field'! When determining these strengths it is important that we keep the exercises standard. These movements listed above are all functional movements that the majority of people should be capable of performing.

Speed, power and endurance are all factors in determining fitness levels but in the case of children these are more related to genetic factors that are unique to any given child. Once a child has found their natural ability these elements will flourish accordingly.

So keep your child/children moving, take away the toys that limit a child's creative nature and allow them to live a little. By allowing children to experience new limitations they develop a sense of what is safe and what's not. Encourage your child/children to hang from a bar, jump from a platform, hit a ball, lift objects and play games or with toys that encourage gross motor skills. As a trainer I see the differences in adults who exercised as children compared to those who did not – the differences in health, coordination and fitness are enormous! So you see that your child/children do not need to partake in triathlons or represent Australia in the under 7's A-League to be considered 'fit'...just the ability to move freely and hold their own in the park!

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