

FITNESS AND DEVELOPMENT: 18 TO 24 MONTHS

By this stage of development, most basic gross motor milestones have been achieved and the focus shifts to repetition and mastery of higher level skills. It may seem as if motor development has come to an end, but don't be fooled. To continue to support fitness, previously obtained skills must be reinforced through practice.

GROSS MOTOR MILESTONES

Walking is now a child's primary mode of transportation. From 18 to 24 months, balance improves dramatically to enable your child to handle uneven surfaces, and eventually advance to immature running. Coordination skills, including kicking, forceful throwing, and walking up and down the stairs with the support of a rail or wall, can also be observed at this age.

FITNESS AT THE PLAYGROUND

The playground offers wonderful strength, balance, and coordination activities for toddlers. Although some parks may feel intimidating with a young child in tow, you should choose the park that feels right for your child to gain a range of skills while safely exploring. Look for a park that offers smaller equipment fitting for a toddler, and rubber or mulch cushioning to pad your child's tumble. Check for peeling paint or overly hot surfaces that may injure your child.

After finding a safe and appropriate playground, join in the fun. Watching you slide and climb encourages fitness for your child and offers an opportunity for the two of you to bond. Be prepared for your child to repeat an activity several times, as children stay with one developmental skill until they feel that they have mastered it.

FITNESS OFF THE PLAYGROUND

With life pulling families in so many directions, it can feel overwhelming to try to work fitness into your already hectic day. Simply walking around the grocery store or using the curb as a balance beam are opportunities to challenge your child's skills, and both can be easily integrated into your daily activities. Short distances require a lot of energy for your toddler, so even putting together a puzzle can be a great way to allow your child to move around.

In your home, keep several areas baby-proofed and fill them with play activities that don't require a parent's direct involvement. These can include blocks, blankets for forts, or pots and pans. If your child isn't interested in those types of objects, an easy chore around the house, such as setting the table, is also great fitness for a two year old. Anything that pulls your child away from the television and gets them moving is perfect.

IT TAKES ALL TYPES

Between the ages of 18 and 24 months, individual strengths among toddlers become obvious. Some children will experience explosions in their language skills, while others will exhibit rapid advances in their motor skills. Some children become very social, while others enjoy quiet activities. Children who prefer quiet activities may be at high risk of falling behind in gross motor development, as they may not repeat skills enough to master them. These delays can easily go unnoticed by parents if their child most often plays inside or with books.

In these situations, it is best to jumpstart your child's fitness by working gross motor play into his/her daily routine. It may help to break down an activity into simple steps so that your child does not become overwhelmed. On the other hand, children who are very active and rarely sit still may be missing some more refined gross motor skills, such as standing on one foot. Walking on a curb like a balance beam or standing on their tiptoes to reach for objects can be excellent activities to improve these skills.