

### Physical Fitness

Physical fitness **allows children and adolescents to participate in daily activities** without stress or fatigue. Physical fitness is as important for children with developmental disabilities as it is for all children.

A child who is physically fit:

- Can perform daily household activities, attend school, and participate in sports and recreation at a level appropriate for their developmental skills without getting overly tired.
- Should have energy left over after a normal active day.

Physical fitness also **reduces health risks** that may occur in adulthood as a result of physical inactivity, including heart disease

- high blood pressure
- obesity
- low stamina
- diabetes (sugar)
- osteoporosis (brittle bones)
- low back pain
- depression.

### Four Major Components of Health Related Fitness

1. **Cardiovascular/respiratory endurance** (fitness of the heart, lungs and circulatory system): This type of fitness may be most important for long term health. Without good cardiovascular/respiratory fitness sustained activity for longer than a few minutes is difficult.
2. **Muscle strength and endurance** Activities such as walking long distances with or without crutches, performing transfers, wheeling a wheelchair up a ramp all require lots of muscle strength and endurance.
3. **Flexibility** (of muscles and soft tissue around joints) Flexibility is a problem for children who are relatively immobile, who use wheelchairs for sustained periods or who have spasticity, muscle weakness or muscle strength imbalance. For example long periods of sitting in a wheel chair can cause tightening of the hip flexors, hamstrings, and lower back.

- 4. Body composition** (weight and % body fat compared to muscle)  
Weight problems can limit health and function and increase inactivity. A child who is over weight needs more muscle strength and cardiovascular effort to maintain basic activity levels.

A fitness program for a child with cerebral palsy or other developmental disability should include activities to build all four major components of fitness and should be individually designed by a physician or therapist familiar with the child's special health needs.

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### Reference

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