



Fitness for Kids with Special Needs

Finding fitness activities for kids with special needs can be difficult. Every child has a unique diagnosis and their own challenges and preferences, but many of them struggle with participating in sports. Still, physical activity offers them important benefits (just as it does for kids without special needs). So start here to zero in on some options that might work for your child.

Kids with Autism

We often think of autism as mostly affecting social skills and the ability to communicate, but it can have implications for physical health and activity as well. Food aversions can lead to weight gain, and sensitivity to environmental stimuli (like light and noise) sometimes makes participating in sports and fitness difficult. But matching a child on the autism spectrum with the exercise they enjoy can offer important benefits. Some kids can participate in sports leagues for neurotypical kids, while others might enjoy a program designed for kids with special needs.

Kids with Intellectual and Learning Disabilities

If you've heard of the Special Olympics, you've heard of a very successful sports program for kids with special needs, particularly intellectual disabilities. Nearly 4 million athletes in 170 countries participate in Special Olympics events. And it's not the only option for kids with Down syndrome or other cognitive challenges. For children with learning disabilities, athletics can provide feelings of success that they might not be getting at school. Plus, physical activity is an excellent stress reliever.

Kids with Asthma

This chronic condition can be exacerbated by exercise, sometimes depending on the weather or other environmental conditions (indoors and out). But it can also be managed with medication and other strategies, so kids with asthma don't have to miss out on sporting events and other active play.

Kids with Attention Issues

Kids and teens with ADD, ADHD, and other attention issues need help redirecting their excess energy. So physical activity is a big win for them. Help your child find a sport they enjoy and can succeed at, and you'll likely see improved behavior and mood both at home and at school.

Kids with Anxiety

Just as it does for adults (both with and without anxiety disorders), exercise and physical activity can help kids with anxiety manage stress and improve their mood, energy levels, and ability to sleep. Children and teens who are experiencing anxiety may prefer non-competitive sports.

Kids with Depression

For kids with depression, exercise provides benefits similar to those it offers to kids with anxiety. Working hard on a physical skill can distract your child from negative thoughts. Also, the discipline that sports teaches can help improve coping skills which can then be applied in other contexts.

Kids with Diabetes

Kids with diabetes (type 1 or 2) can continue to enjoy sports and play actively with their friends. Their blood sugar will need to be monitored before, during, and after they play, so that any necessary adjustments can be made. But having diabetes doesn't preclude participation in sports at all.

Kids with Physical Disabilities

There's no question that for children with physical disabilities, sports participation can be a challenge. Kids may have limited mobility and/or tire more easily than their non-disabled peers. They may need special equipment or other assistance (such as trained coaches or guides) to participate.

Given the right help, children with physical disabilities can participate in almost any sport or exercise. Dedicated parents, physical therapists, and teachers (not to mention kids and adults with disabilities) have created many sports programs for kids with special needs or worked to make sure they can be included in programs designed for children without physical challenges. It's a matter of creativity, understanding, and advocacy.

Find Sports for Children with Disabilities

The first step: Ask around! Talk with other parents and check with your child's doctors, teachers, and therapists. They're often aware of available programs. See the list of resources below, too. Then do a little investigating to determine if the program is right for your child.

"Check out who's teaching the program (not just the director, but instructors or coaches too) and find out their qualifications specific to working with a child with a disability," says Joann Ferrara, a pediatric physical therapist. "If your child has seizures or a trach, for example, make sure the teacher has some kind of medical training." Before investing in any program for your child with disabilities, check the credentials of each instructor who will interact with your child. Also, make sure that the program provides the specific adaptations (including equipment or services) that will make the activity meaningful and comfortable.

Once you've found a program, try it out. It may or may not work for your child (the same goes for every child!). Your child may need to watch from the sidelines for a while before they're comfortable joining in, and that's fine.

Resources for Children with Disabilities

These adaptive sports programs and leagues are designed especially for children with special needs.

- **Baseball:** Miracle League, Little League Challenger Division, Upward Sports
- **Basketball:** Upward (not just for kids with special needs, but very welcoming)
- **Cheerleading:** The Sparkle Effect, Upward
- **Flag football:** Pop Warner Challenger Division, Upward Sports
- **Hockey:** American Special Hockey
- **Horseback riding:** American Hippotherapy Association, Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International
- **Multiple sports:** Special Olympics, BlazeSports, KEEN (Kids Enjoy Exercise Now)
- **Soccer:** AYSO VIP Program, Upward, US Youth Soccer TOPSoccer

Two more really helpful resources: The National Center for Physical Activity and Disability, which has a searchable listing of hundreds of adaptive sports programs and camps; and PE Central, a resource for physical education teachers, which has a handy collection of suggested adaptations for sports and activities.



810 Dominican Drive
Nashville, TN 37228

877.293.9355
concierge@wellviewhealth.com
my.wellviewhealth.com

