How much exercise does a child actually need?

Peabody blog · Fitness · updated 2026-10-31

An hour a day, strength work three days a week, and about one child in five gets there. What the guidelines say, what counts, and what to do with twenty minutes.

Children aged 6 to 17 need 60 minutes or more of moderate-to-vigorous activity a day, and on at least three of those days some of it should make their muscles work and some should put weight through their bones. It does not have to be in one go. That last sentence is the useful part, and it is the one most people have never heard. Peabody (peabody.kids) built a free Gym of workouts and exercises for kids around it, and Peabody is free through the end of 2026.

Every figure below is from a named public source, read on 29 October 2026 and dated here, because numbers about children's activity get repeated for years after they stop being true.

What the guidelines actually say

The current advice in the United States is the second edition of the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, published in 2018 by the Department of Health and Human Services. It splits children into two groups.

- Age: 3 to 5 · How much: Active throughout the day · What kind: Anything, at any intensity, including light play. There is no minute target, and a reasonable aim is around three hours of it
- Age: 6 to 17 · How much: 60 minutes or more a day · What kind: Mostly aerobic — running, cycling, swimming, games. Plus muscle-strengthening on at least 3 days a week and bone-strengthening on at least 3 days a week, both counted inside the 60 minutes

Two things in that table surprise people.

The first is that the three-days-a-week strength and bone work is not extra. It happens inside the hour. A child who spends twenty minutes of their hour climbing a frame and jumping off things has done all three kinds at once.

The second is how little the under-fives are asked to do. There is no target, because at that age movement is play and counting it is beside the point.

What counts

More than people think.

- Moderate means you can talk but not sing: brisk walking, cycling on the flat, scooting, a playground.
- Vigorous means you can only get a few words out: running, chasing games, football, swimming lengths, skipping.

- Muscle-strengthening does not mean a gym. Climbing, swinging across a frame, push-ups, crawling, tug of war, carrying the shopping, and gymnastics all count.
- Bone-strengthening means impact: running, jumping, hopscotch, skipping, basketball. Swimming and cycling, for all their virtues, do not — the bones never get loaded.

And it adds up across the day. Ten minutes walking to school, fifteen at break, twenty of chasing someone round the garden and fifteen of a workout is an hour, and no single piece of it felt like exercise.

Almost nobody gets there

The 2024 United States Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth, from the Physical Activity Alliance, put 20 to 28% of 6-to-17-year-olds at the 60-minute mark and gave the country an overall grade of D?. A separate federal survey, the National Survey of Children's Health for 2023–24, put it at 19.7%.

The two figures differ because they ask differently, so treat them as a range rather than a number: somewhere around one child in five.

It also falls off a cliff with age. The report card found 26 to 42% of 6-to-11-year-olds meeting the target, against 15% of 12-to-17-year-olds. Whatever is happening, it happens around the end of primary school.

And it has not moved. The report card's own summary notes the proportion has not improved in the past decade.

School is not going to cover it

SHAPE America recommends 150 minutes a week of instructional physical education for elementary children and 225 minutes for middle and high school, plus 20 minutes of daily recess — and it is explicit that recess is not PE and must not be used to meet a PE requirement.

What actually happens is some way off. One study of US elementary schools found PE offered about twice a week, averaging 78 minutes, against the 150 recommended. Recess did better, at around 137 minutes a week with most schools offering it daily.

So on a typical school day a child might get thirty to forty minutes of the hour from school, on the days they have PE. The rest is at home, which is an awkward thing to be true but is worth knowing rather than not.

What to do when there isn't an hour

The honest answer is that the hour is a target, not a threshold, and that the difference between zero and twenty minutes is much larger than the difference between forty and sixty.

A few things that help more than they should:

- Make it short and daily rather than long and occasional. Three minutes most days beats an hour once a month, because the habit is the thing being built.
- Count what is already happening. Walking, the playground, dancing in the kitchen, the trampoline. Parents routinely report their child does "no exercise" and then describe forty minutes of it.
- Put the strength and the impact in deliberately. This is the bit that goes missing, because it is not what anyone pictures. Jumping, hanging, climbing and carrying, three days a week.
- Let them pick. The single best predictor of a child still being active at fifteen is whether they enjoyed it at eight.
- Use it before the sitting-down part of the day, not instead of it. Plenty of children settle to a book more easily after they have run about, which is why the Gym sits beside the library rather than in place of it.

Where Peabody's Gym fits

The Gym is our answer to the specific problem of the twenty minutes at home. You tap where you are, what you have and how long you have got, and it shows only what fits — 44 workouts from three minutes to twenty, 70 exercises each drawn so a child can see the movement, and 28 games for one child, two, or a whole class.

Three things about it are deliberate, and worth saying because they are not what a fitness section usually does.

There is no barbell, dumbbell or bench in it, anywhere. The evidence on youth strength training is clear that it is safe with qualified supervision, safe equipment and technique before load — and that without supervision it is not. A screen cannot supervise. So the shapes are taught properly, with an empty hand, a ball, or a backpack with a book or two from 3rd grade, and a child who later walks into a real gym arrives with the movements already right.

The youngest level has no clock, and the next has one a child can ignore. Intensity is the last thing to add, not the first.

It never mentions weight, shape, size or calories. Not once, anywhere a child reads — the words are refused in our code, not merely avoided by whoever is writing. A children's fitness section is the likeliest place on a kids' site to plant a lasting worry about food and bodies, and everything worth saying can be said as strong, fast, springy, steady and bendy instead.

If you want the longer version of all that, including where the ideas come from and the five places we deliberately disagree with the program they came from, it is on the Gym's page for grown-ups.

Sources

• Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, 2nd edition (2018), US Department of Health and Human Services — the 60-minute target, the three-days-a-week strength and bone work, and the advice for 3-to-5-year-olds.
• CDC, Physical Activity Basics: children and adolescents — what counts as moderate, vigorous, muscle-strengthening and bone-strengthening.
• 2024 United States Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth, Physical Activity Alliance — the 20–28% figure, the D?, the age breakdown, and the decade of no change.
• National Survey of Children's Health, 2023–24, via America's Health Rankings — the 19.7% figure.
• SHAPE America, Guidelines and Strategies for Recess in Schools (2017) — 150 and 225 minutes of PE, 20 minutes of daily recess, and that recess is not PE.
• Whole-of-School Physical Activity Promotion: Findings From Elementary Schools in the United States — the 78 minutes of PE and 137 minutes of recess a week actually offered.
• National Strength and Conditioning Association, Youth Resistance Training: Updated Position Statement Paper — supervision, equipment and progression, and that without them children should not do resistance exercise.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/how-much-exercise-do-kids-need