What fitness actually is: the ten skills, explained for parents

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Fitness is not one thing. It is ten, and four of them come from the body changing, four from the brain learning, and two from both. What that means for a child.

Being fit is not the same as being able to run a long way. A useful definition is that fitness is how much work you can do, across lots of different kinds of work and lots of lengths of time, and it breaks into ten skills: endurance, stamina, strength, flexibility, power, speed, coordination, agility, balance and accuracy. Four of them improve because the body changes, four because the brain learns, and two need both. That last idea is the one worth explaining to a child, and it is the backbone of Peabody's Gym.

Peabody (peabody.kids) is a free learning site, free through the end of 2026, with stories in the library, games and a Gym of real exercises a child can do at home. This post is the thinking behind the Gym, for the grown-up who wants to know why it is shaped the way it is.

Where the ten come from

The list was published by CrossFit in a 2002 article called What Is Fitness?, and it is still on their site. Peabody is not affiliated with them, our Gym does not use their name or their workouts, and we disagree with them in several places (no barbells for children, for one). But the definition is clear and teachable, and we have not seen a better one for a child.

The ten, in a child's words

- Skill: Endurance · What it means: How long you can keep going without stopping · How it gets better: Training: the body changes
- Skill: Stamina · What it means: How long your energy lasts before you run out · How it gets better: Training
- Skill: Strength · What it means: How hard your muscles can push or pull · How it gets better: Training
- Skill: Flexibility · What it means: How far you can bend and reach · How it gets better: Training
- Skill: Power · What it means: How fast you can be strong: a jump, a throw · How it gets better: Both
- Skill: Speed · What it means: How quickly you can do the same thing over and over · How it gets better: Both
- Skill: Coordination · What it means: Making two or three moves into one smooth one · How it gets better: Practice: the brain learns

- Skill: Agility · What it means: How fast you can swap from one move to another · How it gets better: Practice
- Skill: Balance · What it means: Staying over your own feet without wobbling · How it gets better: Practice
- Skill: Accuracy · What it means: Putting your body, or a ball, exactly where you meant to · How it gets better: Practice

The split in the last column is CrossFit's own: endurance, stamina, strength and flexibility come about through training, coordination, agility, balance and accuracy through practice, and power and speed from both.

Why the split matters for a child

Because it changes what "getting better" feels like.

The four trained skills improve slowly and invisibly. A child doing push-ups three times a week will be able to do more in a month, but they will not feel it happening. The four practised skills can improve in an afternoon. A child who wobbles on one leg at the start of a game of Simon Says can be steady by the end of it, because their brain has worked out what to do.

Children are usually told fitness is about effort. Half of it is about learning, which is a much friendlier idea to a seven-year-old who is not the fastest in the class. You cannot out-try someone at balance; you can practise.

One fat spoke

The other reason to teach the ten is that most children, and most adults, train one or two of them and call it fitness. A child who runs a lot is building endurance and stamina. Their balance, accuracy and agility can be no better than a child who never runs.

The Gym draws this as a Skills Wheel: ten spokes, each filling as a child does workouts that train it. A child who only ever runs sees one fat spoke and nine thin ones, and the picture makes the argument without anyone having to. There is a wheel to colour in if you would rather keep it on the fridge than on a screen, and the ten skills page shows which movements build each one.

Why it is worth doing at all

The CDC lists what regular physical activity does for children: it strengthens bones, builds strong muscles and endurance, improves blood pressure and aerobic fitness, improves attention and memory, and reduces the risk of depression.

We would add one thing that is not in that list but is in every playground: a child who is fit for lots of kinds of work can join in with more things. They can climb the frame, keep up in the game, carry their own bag home, and try the new sport without being embarrassed in the first

ten minutes. That is the version of the argument a child actually cares about.

What you will not find in the Gym is any of this explained in terms of weight, shape or size. That is a deliberate decision, and we wrote about why.

How to use the ten at home

- Ask which spoke a game is. Tag is agility and speed. Catch is accuracy and coordination. Hanging from the climbing frame is strength. Children enjoy sorting things, and it turns ordinary play into something they understand.
- Pick for the thin spoke. If your child loves running, the next thing to try is a balance or aim game, not more running.
- Praise the practised ones as learning. "You've got much steadier" lands differently from "you tried hard".
- Keep it varied. The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans ask for activities that are appropriate for a child's age, that are enjoyable and that offer variety. The ten skills are a good way to see what variety means.

Fitness School has fourteen short lessons that say all of this for a child, starting with "What is fitness?" and ending with three ways to move.

Sources

- CrossFit, What Is Fitness? Lecture: 10 General Physical Skills (from the 2002 article What Is Fitness?) — the ten skills, and which come through training, practice or both. Read at crossfit.com, 31 October 2026.
- CDC, Health Benefits of Physical Activity for Children — bones, muscles and endurance, blood pressure and aerobic fitness, attention and memory, depression. Read at cdc.gov, 31 October 2026 (page updated 10 March 2026).
- Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, 2nd edition (2018), US Department of Health and Human Services — activities that are age-appropriate, enjoyable and varied.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/what-fitness-actually-is-the-ten-skills