



Holiday Gift Guide! 36 New Toys Worth Your Money

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*A fun first
baking project
—our apple
blossom tart
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NOVEMBER 2008

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In Breakaway Tag (page 62), one player tries to tag the other before the other can pull the belts apart

Make Your Own Gym

Turn your backyard into a fitness center with homemade gear and games **By Leslie Garisto Pfaff**

FOR MANY ADULTS, staying fit means clocking time at a decked-out health club. But it doesn't take a room full of expensive equipment to get kids moving; all you need is a few simple supplies and a playful spirit.

In fact, say fitness pros, kids beginning a fitness regimen should generally start by pushing, pulling, lifting, and moving their own bodies — a technique known as body-weight exercising. You probably already know a lot of these moves from back in the day: pull-ups, push-ups, sit-ups, jumping jacks. Don't worry: you don't have to channel your inner drill sergeant. As you'll see here, you can offer kid-friendly variations that feel more like play than PE. Andrea Metcalf, a fitness expert on NBC5 TV in Chicago, offers an alternative to jumping jacks, for example. "Try jumping contests instead," she suggests. "See how high and how far kids can jump, then have them try to beat their own records."

To ramp up a kid's interest, introduce some basic fitness gear, either purchased or homemade. Using a large rubber exercise ball (under \$20 in many places) builds balance and works core muscles and is just plain fun. Add a new twist to familiar exercises by helping kids do push-ups or sit-ups on the ball. (Check the manufacturer's height recommendations before buying to find the right size for your child.) Another great

Belt Out the Fun

Joined with Velcro, these homemade reaction belts let kids build quickness through one-on-one challenges (see page 62 for games). Here's how to make a set.

You Will Need: 3-inch length of $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch Velcro • fabric glue (such as Fabri-Tac) • two 6-foot lengths of 1-inch polypropylene webbing • four 1-inch metal D-rings • Optional: clothespins and needle and thread

Directions: Round the corners of the Velcro with scissors, coat the underside of each half with a layer of glue, and press one half onto each belt, as shown. Coat the ends of the belts with glue to prevent fraying. Let dry. At the other end of each belt, slip on 2 D-rings, fold 2½ inches of webbing over them, generously coat the first 2 inches with glue, and press into place. If necessary clamp with a clothespin. Let dry completely. (For added strength, you can stitch the webbing together after gluing.)



option is a medicine ball; lightweight ones are available for under \$15. Start with 2 pounds and work up to 4 or 6 pounds, if your child can handle it. Your child can not only use a medicine ball for weight-lifting exercises, she can toss it too. Try a game of Fitness Catch, in which each player lifts the ball over her head three times, then throws it to a partner.

You've probably already got the makings of other great gear just lying around the house. For example, cans of food (contents included) make no-fuss weights, as does a milk jug filled with dried beans (see our Homemade Hand Weight, at right). To strengthen legs, kids can do simple step-up and step-down exercises on a low stool.

How Exercise Builds Strength

Working out with your kids is an ideal time to tell them about the benefits of what are called weight-bearing exercises. When you push your body to work — by running laps, say, or lifting heavy objects repeatedly — you create tiny tears in the muscle fibers. To repair these tears, your body makes the muscles slightly larger so they can handle the new stress. If we give our bodies small, persistent pushes regularly, they'll continue to build muscle and bone.

Of course, you don't want to push muscles too hard. That can cause real injury and turn kids off to the whole idea of working out. Kids over age 6 are perfectly capable of lifting free weights as long as they stay on the light side, says Robert S. Gotlin, D.O., author of *Dr. Rob's Guide to Raising Fit Kids*. He recommends starting at 1 to 3 pounds to see what your child can handle and warns that "kids shouldn't be straining, and they shouldn't have to grimace."

If enthusiasm for exercise starts to flag, Fredrick Hahn, author of *Strong Kids, Healthy Kids*, offers the following for pumping up the fun.

Keep it brief. Hahn started his daughter, Georgia, on a strength-training regimen when she was 6 years old. He kept her interested, he says, by "keeping it brief — no more than 20 minutes or so twice a week."

Keep it playful. Hahn counts repetitions in another language or uses kids' top-five cartoons or music stars instead of numbers. Other fitness teachers suggest letting kids pick their own workout music and inviting friends to join in.

Keep track. Record your child's progress in a notebook or on a chart. Says Hahn: "Kids relish the challenge of doing a little bit better each time."

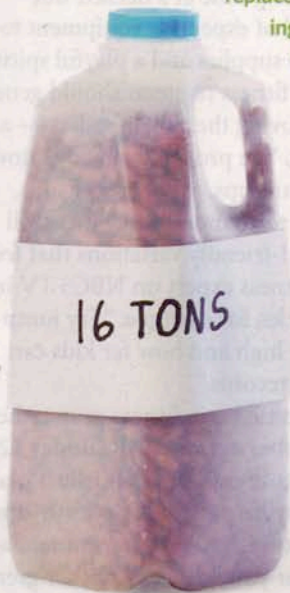
The bottom line: it really doesn't take a lot to show kids that fitness — and fun — both begin at home.

This bean-filled jug lets you introduce kids to weight training



HOMEMADE Hand Weight

"Strong muscles are the best protection for growing bones," says author Robert S. Gotlin, who recommends that kids begin exercising with only very light weights, such as this 3-pound jug. (The 16 Tons label is merely to bring out your child's inner superhero.) To make it, fill a clean half-gallon plastic milk jug with 3 pounds of dried beans (we used red kidney beans), replace the cap, sealing it with duct tape, if you like. Then give these exercises a try.



TWIST AND SHOUT

This works the oblique muscles of the abdomen. Have your child stand with feet shoulder-width apart, holding the jug against her chest horizontally, with one hand at either end. Have her twist her torso left 45 degrees, hold 1 second, then return to her original position (shouting is optional at any point). Repeat, turning to the right. Repeat both moves 4 or 5 times.

OFFER THE JUG

This works the deltoid muscles over the shoulder joints. Have your child stand with her feet slightly apart, holding the jug with both hands at thigh level. Keeping her arms straight, she should slowly extend the jug to shoulder level. Repeat 4 or 5 times.



Tied to Be Fit

You can't get much simpler than a fitness band — stretchy material, like a giant rubber band, that provides resistance for muscles to work against. For these games, we used the 41-inch Super-mini Bands from IronWoodyFitness.com (\$27 for two), but you can also tie your own loops from flat bands purchased at sporting goods stores. Try these games for a workout that stretches the possibilities for fitness and fun.

RUBBER BAND RUN: Jim Massaro, a coach in Nyack, New York, uses this strength-building exercise with his athletes. He first sets up a station by wrapping a fitness band around a tree or another anchor, then looping a second band to the first. A kid steps into the second band and tries to grab a cone or other object placed about 5 yards away. (For safety's sake, remind your child to back up slowly when returning to the tree.)

TIED-UP TWO-STEP. This variation uses another player for the anchor. Loop together two fitness bands to create a chain. Have the players stand back-to-back, each with a loop around his hips, then have one player try to reach a target, such as a line on the ground several yards away, while the other tries to stand firm. (Adjust the target's distance so both players are challenged.) Reach the mark and you get a point; move (if you're the anchor), and you lose one.

Reaction Belt Games

SEE INSTRUCTIONS FOR MAKING THE BELTS ON PAGE 59.

In addition to honing balance and agility, reaction belts offer a great two-person cardiovascular workout while building core muscles of the abdomen and back. Try these fast-moving games, in which the object is to outmaneuver your opponent and snap the Velcro. To put on the belt, wrap it around your waist, slip the Velcro end through both D-rings, then back through the first ring, and pull to tighten.

BREAKAWAY TAG: Have the two players (the Leader and the Chaser) face each other at a 4-foot distance with their Velcro "tails" in front. Join the two tails. The Leader wins if he can break the Velcro connection (no grabbing the belt!). The Chaser wins if she can tag the Leader.

BUNNY CHASE: The Leader turns his belt so that the tail is behind him. Join the two tails, and again the Chaser tries to tag the Leader, while the Leader tries to break the bond. The catch: both must hop like bunnies instead of running. 🐰

