

GROWING UP

Little Athletes Just Need Water

By Dan Florell, Ph.D. & Praveena Salins, M.D.

A little five year old boy comes running into the house after playing outside. Face all flush with his exertions and panting, the boy says, "I am so thirsty!" His father reaches into the refrigerator and gets a big blue sports drink and hands it to the boy. This situation is becoming more common in many households as children rehydrate after playing sports and being outdoors.

However, sports drinks are not needed by most children even when they are participating in sports like soccer and baseball. Sports drinks were created to replace carbohydrates and electrolytes that were lost by athletes during prolonged vigorous physical activity. Most children do not require sports drinks as they don't engage in high-intensity physical activity lasting more than three hours in normal conditions.

Using sports drinks initially for exercise can make it easier for children to start using them whenever they are thirsty. Children can even get into the mindset that sport drinks are the only appropriate drink any time they exercise. Many parents may believe this too as sports drinks have been touted as a healthy alternative to soda. The problem is that sports drinks average around 80 calories per eight ounces and have added sugar and sodium. While this is less than soda, it still can represent a significant addition to a child's caloric intake and it can contribute to a child's obesity. In addition, the added sugar in sports drinks has been linked to an increased risk for cavities.

The first reaction parents should have when their child comes in thirsty is to turn on the tap and give the child a glass of water. Water has a range of benefits with the main one being that it keeps the body working properly by rehydrating it. When children begin drinking water, they are no longer thirsty which cuts down on consumption of soda and sports drinks. Water also flushes out toxins from the body and it helps transport nutrients that children consume to the rest of their body. Finally, many communities add fluoride to their water to prevent cavities. This means that drinking water is good for dental health.

Ensuring that children are properly hydrated is important. Parents should encourage their children to drink water before, during, and after vigorous exercise. If children are exercising for a long period of time or in a very hot and humid environment, small portions of sports drinks may be appropriate. The next time your child is thirsty, reach for the faucet rather than the fridge.

Biography:

Dan Florell, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at Eastern Kentucky University and has a private practice, MindPsi (www.mindpsi.net). Praveena Salins, M.D., is a pediatrician at Madison Pediatric Associates (www.madisonpeds.com).