

# The Exercise Experiment

Pediatric cardiologist and *Parents* advisor **Dr. Darshak Sanghavi** figured his high-energy preschooler was plenty active—until he measured for himself.

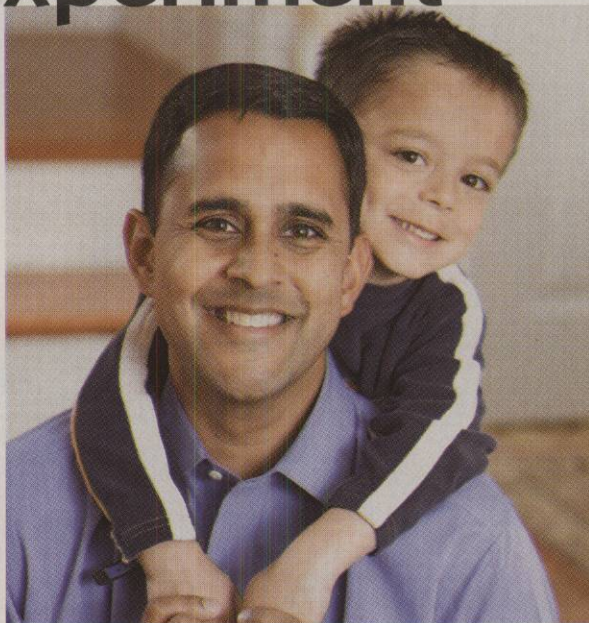
**A**s a pediatric heart doctor, I know how essential it is for children to get enough exercise. But like many parents, I wasn't sure how much activity my kids were really getting. So I decided to count the number of steps my 4-year-old son, Jake, takes every day. He's on the thin side for his height (and he certainly keeps my wife and me on our toes), so I assumed my informal study would confirm he's a healthy, active preschooler.

I began the experiment when Jake and I were on vacation at Disney World. After he woke up, I clipped a pedometer to his waistband. At first, I was worried that he wouldn't want to wear it, but the LCD display fascinated him. We'd barely walked from our motel room to the lobby when he exclaimed, "Daddy, I walked two-zero-zero steps!" (After several similar updates over the next few minutes, I decided to switch the display to "clock" mode.)

At the end of a long day spent meeting Mickey and running from ride to ride, Jake climbed into bed and fell asleep without even changing his clothes. I unclipped the pedometer from his shorts and downloaded the results to my computer. I could monitor the peaks and valleys of his activity throughout the day. The results were impressive: Jake walked 30,137 steps—more than three times the popularly recommended goal of 10,000 steps per day. The next day, we visited Disney's Animal Kingdom park, and Jake was almost as active, logging 24,423 steps.

When we got home to Boston, I monitored Jake's activity on a typical Saturday. He played inside during the morning, went to an hour-long soccer class at noon, and visited a kid-friendly museum in the afternoon. When I downloaded the day's pedometer results, I was disappointed. He had taken only 13,245 steps (despite not having watched any TV that day).

But I was truly shocked by the results when Jake went to preschool. On three separate days, he took only 4,873; 7,016; and 5,222 steps, respectively. By comparison, I walked 7,611 steps during a typical day at the hospital, and my wife took 10,032 steps during a day spent at her law firm (she boosted



her total by walking 3,194 steps during her lunch break). So in a typical preschool day—even with a 30-minute recess period—Jake moved less than an adult in an office job.

Jake's exercise shortfall turned out to be even more severe than I'd thought. As I soon learned, the 10,000-step daily goal has no basis in scientific research. It comes from a marketing slogan that was used in Japan years ago to sell pedometers, and the number 10,000 was chosen mainly because it was easy to remember.

Newer research suggests that 10,000 steps aren't enough to keep kids healthy. A study of nearly 2,000 6- to 12-year-olds at Arizona State University found that boys need more than 15,000 steps per day and girls need at least 12,000. That translates to two to two-and-a-half hours of walking per day—and some of those daily steps should come from vigorous activity like playing sports or running around the yard.

My little trial has been a big wake-up call for my wife and me. In the past, we figured Jake needed to rest after a long day at school. Now I get him moving, either by going to the playground or kicking around a ball in our basement. We'll continue to limit his TV time to 30 minutes a day, and I'm going to encourage his preschool teachers to add more activity to the daily routine. After all, I'm sure Jake wouldn't mind if every school day were more like a day at Disney.

## In Jake's Shoes

### DISNEY

30,137 steps; 9 miles

### WEEKEND

13,245 steps; 4 miles

### PRESCHOOL

5,222 steps; 1.6 miles



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