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Encouraging Family Fitness & Healthy Habits

By Len Saunders, MA



By setting the basic foundations of life, parents are the number one source affecting the way children feel about living a healthy lifestyle. Children innately realize that Mom and Dad are their educators, mentors, heroes, supporters, and role models throughout their lives. This is a colossal responsibility for the adult, as children believe that most behaviors by parents are acceptable actions, whether good or bad. The bottom line: children are watching their parents' every move, mirroring their every action; if a parent is sedentary, there is a good chance their children will be too. However, parents who eat healthily and exercise with their children on a regular basis are teaching them many valuable lessons.

Certified health coach and mother of two Pam Howard agrees. "Parents who exercise with their children are not only teaching them how to live a healthy lifestyle, they are also reinforcing the family bonds and creating wonderful family traditions. It's fantastic for super-busy parents who wouldn't get as much exercise as they need without incorporating their kids in the process."

A daily exercise program is essential for every child's normal growth and development. The benefits of exercise are endless, and go deeper than just fighting heart disease and other adolescent risk factors for poor health. Author and fitness expert Debbie Mandel states, "Children who exercise do better academically and learn how to reduce stress. In essence, adults in the household are showing children a healthy way to relieve stress and improve their thinking while they (the adults) practice what they preach. Children are always observing their parents and picking up on their body language, not just their words."

It is imperative that families make time to exercise together so that it eventually becomes part of their routine. Dr. Marc Tinsley describes his experience with this issue. "When I speak and consult with people about health and fitness, many people look at their family obligations as an obstacle to exercise instead of an opportunity. One of the main problems is that people associate exercise with a gym or equipment. I tell people to think 'outside the barbell.' Fitness isn't about sweat, six-packs, and sex appeal; it's about having enough energy to do your activities of daily living safely and effectively."

Getting fit as a family does not have to be very time-consuming or complex; it can be fun and creative. Here are seven simple suggestions to help your family get fit together.

1. **Commercial-cize.** Many children (as well as their parents) watch a few hours of television each night. It is important for families to reduce sedentary time. Whenever a commercial break comes on the TV, exercise as a family. Try running in place, push-ups, or jumping jacks during each commercial to keep everyone up and moving.
2. **Make an Exercise Video.** Most portable cameras now have a video function. Have your family create their own exercise video where your kids are the stars. Everyone will get fitter creating the videos, and at a future time, have fun exercising along with the video over and over again.
3. **Dancing Can Be Fun.** Nutritionist Lisa Suriano suggests, "Just dance! Turn on the radio or pump up some fun songs on your mp3 player to rock out together as a family. Jump around, do a shimmy, shake your limbs and let the giggles ensue. With minimal effort, you can burn some calories and have a super-fun, spirit-lifting family time."
4. **Going the Extra Step.** Dr. Kathryn Cahill, a pediatrician, states, "Parking farther away when running errands with the kids, encouraging them to take the stairs with you when shopping, and having them walk along the cart can increase their activity."
5. **Allocate Time for Family Exercise Every Day.** Certified health and wellness coach Carrie Karkoska says, "It doesn't have to be much. Take a family walk after dinner and use that time to talk about your days. Play a family game of football during halftime of the game Dad is watching. Invite your kids to join you during your cross-training or yoga DVD. They will not be able to do all the exercises, but they will be moving and trying! Teach them that exercise and sweat are really important, and that it can be fun!"
6. **Blend Technology With Play.** Fitness professional Jamie Atlas says, "Many games offer the chance to move with a partner and be scored according to