

[IMAGE]

Parents Need Exercise, Too!

By Julie Engebretson

I will exercise regularly. It's quite possibly the most common New Year's resolution next to *I will start eating better*. Unfortunately, it's also the most frequently abandoned resolution of them all. Those who have resolve enough to change start strong, but eventually, fitness falls off the list of priorities.

Parents usually feel they have the least amount of time to exercise, considering their myriad responsibilities: childcare, household errands and upkeep, (limited) sleep, a spouse, pets, bills, meals, along with a full- or part-time job. Few know the busy parent's struggle to find time for fitness better than Jason Keigher, a certified personal trainer in New York City whose client base comprises mostly pre- and postnatal mothers and parents with young children.

"Many of my clients work 40-plus hours a week and have little time to exercise," says Keigher. "But the truth is, it doesn't take a lot of time to exercise, if you're doing it correctly." In nearly 10 years of training busy parents, Keigher has heard an assortment of excuses for avoiding a workout. "The three most common excuses I hear are, 'There is not enough time in my day,' 'The baby was up all night and I'm so tired,' and 'My kids come first,'" Keigher explains.

A father using his feet to suspend his young son in the air. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark The key to combating these routine excuses is changing the routine. Rearranging the day's events to include exercise may be easier than you think. A little effort and creativity yield countless health and wellness benefits, including increased longevity, better sleep and overall health, and improved confidence. And of course, as Keigher emphasizes, "You lose fat, gain muscle and energy, and improve mental health."

It seems many Americans have a somewhat skewed understanding of exercise. To many men and women, exercise requires expensive gear, fitness equipment, a weight room and floor-to-ceiling mirrors. No one exploits this misconception better than private gyms and fitness clubs. When the spring season rolls around, their print ads and loud commercials chide us about our broken resolutions, and threaten us with the impending bathing suit season. What the ads fail to mention is the truth: Fitness doesn't require a monthly payment. "Anyone can work fitness into their life," says Keigher. "You don't need a personal trainer or a

gym membership to get good exercise. With a single 5- to 10-pound dumbbell, maybe a fun exercise tape, and a pair of comfortable, inexpensive sneakers, you're on your way to a healthier life without ever leaving the house." Each parent's situation is unique and depends largely on the ages of the children. But whether your young ones are in high chairs or high school, there are plenty of effective, inventive ways to make a change for the fitter in your life.

Keigher knows well the dilemma of a brand-new mother who wants to bond with baby, but still work up a good sweat a few days per week. "One of the greatest aspects of motherhood is bonding time," Keigher admits. "But you can exercise and spend time with your newborn simultaneously." For example, parents living in San Francisco can join the Noe Valley Stroller Group, a citywide parent support group that organizes parent-child events for every day of the week, including fitness strolls, swim days at the YMCA, and even parent-child yoga sessions. "These stroller groups are so popular, moms and dads can find one and join in no matter where they live, nationwide," says Keigher. Many groups, like the Noe Valley Stroller Group, are designed especially for parents of newborn to kindergarten-age children. They're a great way to meet other new parents and explore the city with your child, and in most cases, membership is free!

As children grow older, their own activities, appointments and social engagements have a tendency to start stacking up. More work for your little ones inevitably means more work for you, and it's common to become overwhelmed. But, as Keigher suggests, "when the kids are working out on the soccer field, don't just sit on the sidelines." While your children are preoccupied with ballet, softball or gymnastics for an hour or two, that allows plenty of time for you to go on a run, a long walk or get to a kickboxing class at your local recreation center. "Parents who aren't already making fitness a priority should remember that they too need exercise," says Keigher. "Finding time in the day to work out - particularly while the kids are already busy with an extracurricular activity - will increase your energy and stamina, and help you keep up with your kids."

For some parents, working full-time means working overtime - *every day*. Some occupations require long hours behind a desk. Many moms and dads arrive to work in the early morning and don't pick up the kids from the babysitter's or day care until sometime in the evening. When time for a proper meal at lunchtime is rare, fitting in a workout may sound like a joke. But these overworked parents may be surprised by the exercise they can get with a little imagination and a spare pair of sneakers.

A young woman holding dumbbell weights. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark The hard-working parent should make it a necessity to get out of the office for 20 to 30 minutes each day and get moving.

"Walking at lunchtime with a coworker or a small group is a great way to get in some low-intensity aerobic exercise," says Keigher. "And it's good for business: Over time, you can build stronger professional relationships with your walking buddies." Keep a pair of sneakers in the trunk of your car or under your desk for comfortable walking. And along with your shoes, it's not a bad idea to keep a light dumbbell by your side. "Doing some quick two-minute exercises, such as bicep curls, a couple of times a day offers some easy strength training and can help boost your metabolism," suggests Keigher.

Also, if it's not disruptive in the office setting, you can try these simple toning exercises at your convenience:

Abdominal squeezes: While seated at your desk, keep your spine straight and gently contract the stomach muscles, exhaling slowly. When you're out of air, hold this "squeeze" for a few seconds, and then release. A dozen of these each day, and you're on your way to washboard abs!

Chair squats: Standing behind your desk chair, with feet shoulder-width apart, place one hand on the chair's back for balance. Slowly lower your body into the squat by bending your knees and keeping your spine perfectly straight. If you're doing the exercise correctly, it doesn't take much to feel the burn in those quads and glutes!

Curls: Keep a pair of lightweight dumbbells or wrist weights under your desk. Do a few sets of biceps or triceps curls periodically during the day to keep your arms toned and blood circulating.

When it comes down to it, fitting in fitness is a decision. Only you can put it, and *keep it*, at the top of your list of priorities. In doing so, you only stand to gain improved health and longevity, self-confidence, better rest, and the energy to keep up with your children. "But, you might lose a few pounds," says Keigher, adding: "There is always time to work out. You have to take charge and *decide* to make it an important part of your life, and you will naturally find the time. Parents often say it, but they could stand to be reminded - anything and everything is possible if you put your mind to it!"

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