

[IMAGE]

All in the Family

Lead by Example and Your Children Will Follow

By Kathryn Feather

Once you have children, finding time and energy for exercise is a luxury few can afford. The best way to ensure the health of your entire family is to find time to exercise together. Work these activities into your schedule for quality time the whole family can enjoy.

IN A FAST-FOOD SOCIETY OF VALUE MEALS AND SUPER-SIZE OPTIONS, CONVENIENCE OFTEN TAKES PRECEDENCE OVER NUTRITION, AND ADULTS ARE THE FIRST OFFENDERS. This couch-potato example has created a generation of children who sit in front of their television playing video games about sports, rather than engaging in the sports themselves. This poor example has proven detrimental to us and our children, as obesity rates are on the rise in both categories, along with diabetes, high blood pressure, cholesterol and heart disease.

You've probably seen the alarming news reports and the shock-value commercials with the adorable children asking for diabetes, preservatives and high-fructose corn syrup, as if they were ordering dinner at their favorite fast-food location. It might seem extreme, but it's hard to deny that obesity is becoming a major problem in this country. It's time for us, as parents, to set a good example. We can't expect our children to suddenly become active if they see us slumped on the couch, TV remote in one hand and potato chips in the other. But how do we even begin to convince our kids to move from the television to the front yard for some much-needed exercise?

A family of four running toward the camera. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Health and fitness experts advise parents to help their children establish a lifelong appreciation for fitness and good health. The Mayo Clinic (www.mayoclinic.com/health/fitness) offers tips for getting kids off the couch - it all starts with parents setting the right example. If we grumble and complain about exercising, how can we expect our kids to view fitness as anything other than a chore?

Some easy options for increasing your family's fitness participation can be found in everyday life. For example, instead of circling the parking lot, searching for the closest space to the entrance of the store, park farther away and make the walk. Instead of using the elevator or escalator at the mall, take the stairs. Both of these options provide an easy and inexpensive opportunity to burn some calories.

The Mayo Clinic also emphasizes limiting your child's screen time - that includes television, video games, the computer and text messaging. Figure out how many hours a day your child spends engaged in these activities, and cut that time in half. If your child can't live without their video games, encourage games that use a player's physical movements to control what happens on screen. This will boost the amount of calories your child burns by increasing the amount of energy they expend.

It's also recommended that you establish a routine of physical activity for you and your children. Involve the entire family in walking the dog, washing the car, doing yard work or just taking a stroll after dinner. As everyone becomes more active and fit, gradually introduce new activities into the routine.

According to the Mayo Clinic, it's important to let your children set the pace of the activities. Organized sports are a great outlet for many kids, but what do you do if your child is more artistically than athletically inclined? If your child likes to paint or draw, take them on a walk or hike in search of things for them to re-create on paper. If you are blessed with a child who is a climber, explore the local jungle gym or find a local climbing wall they can master. If your child is a reader, walk or ride your bikes to the local library.

It's also important to promote activity, rather than just exercise. If parents don't see activities as fun, kids won't, either. With younger children, it's OK to be silly. Your 5-year-old will enjoy seeing you hop like a bunny or walk like a spider, and they are much more likely to try it themselves once they see you do it. If your children are active in sports, play catch with them. Enjoy a family game of tag, basketball or soccer. Kids will make it their life's mission to defeat their parents. You accomplish several important goals with these types of activities. Not only are you spending quality time with your children, but you also are exercising, burning calories and instilling a competitive spirit within them.

Make chores a competition. See who can finish cleaning their room, mowing the lawn or shoveling snow off the driveway first. When it's time to plan your child's birthday party, don't have it at the local pizza parlor, where kids will load up on pizza, cake and video games. Instead, schedule it for a local bowling alley or climbing wall, where kids can work off some of that birthday sugar. Celebrate at the park and schedule games such as tag, hide-and-seek or relay races. Rent a bounce house for your child's party, and the kids

won't ever come out for cake! Physical activities such as these allow all the children to be involved, active and interacting with each other.

The American Heart Association recommends children and adolescents participate in at least one hour of moderate to vigorous physical activity daily. Regular exercise helps children (and their parents) feel less stressed; feel better about themselves; feel more ready to learn in school; maintain a healthy weight; build and maintain healthy bones, muscles and joints; and sleep better at night.

Family of four laying on the grass together. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has a Web site designed to help kids get active. Called BAM! Body and Mind Physical Activity (www.bam.gov), this site provides a wealth of information and includes an interactive activity calendar that allows parents and kids to schedule regular activities to look forward to throughout the week. The site advises parents to plan which activities will occur each week, remembering not to overdo it. They also advise setting a goal in terms of the number of activities you schedule, and how often you want your child to participate. You can track your child's progress using the calendar - and it offers more than 100 activity options, so you and your child don't burn out.

Another great resource for activity ideas for your family is PACES, or Parents and Children Exercise Simultaneously (www.lensaunders.com/paces). Organizers are encouraging every weekend to become a PACES weekend where children and their parents can spend time being active together.

1. **A family walk.** This is a fun and inexpensive activity the whole family can enjoy. Be sure to spend at least 20-30 minutes moving at a fairly brisk pace. Not only are you being active as a family, but you're also interacting with your kids. A walk can be a great opportunity to talk to your kids and hear about what's going on in their lives.
2. **Commercial-cize.** It is estimated that kids watch more than 20 hours of television each week. If you watch television as a family, make those boring commercials a time of fun. Make it a competition and see how many jumping jacks, push-ups or sit-ups you can do in the same time it takes a typical commercial to run.
3. **Exercise videos.** Purchase an exercise video the whole family can enjoy. If your kids are older, get a hip-hop or dance video and let your kids teach you how to groove.
4. **Household chores.** Working around the house can be a form of exercise. Yard work, cleaning the garage, painting a fence or sweeping the driveway are great ways to accomplish chores and get

everyone moving.

5. **Family hikes.** Make it an all-day activity by packing a lunch and taking all the necessary gear. Enjoy spending time together as a family, appreciate the great outdoors and increase your heart rate as well.
6. **Bike rides.** Make sure you have a safe environment in which to ride - then go!
7. **Theme parks.** Everyone always is tired after a day at the amusement park. All that walking around is great exercise, just don't indulge in all of the fatty foods around every corner. Instead, pack your own lunch and allow just one treat for the day.
8. **Join a local gym.** Check the gyms in your area to see which ones offer a family discount.
9. **Walk to and from school.** This is a great way to not only accomplish a daily task, but also talk with your children about their day and hear about what's going on in their world.
10. **Basic calisthenics.** Teach your children the proper way to perform basic exercises. Show them how to do a proper push-up, jumping jack or sit-up.
11. **Eat healthy meals.** Plan your meals for the week and be sure to include lots of fruits and vegetables, along with a balanced amount of protein and carbohydrates.
12. **Play sports as a family.** Challenge your kids to a pickup game of basketball, baseball, football, hockey, soccer or tennis.

Establishing a pattern of healthy eating and regular physical activity with your children can help them develop a lifelong habit of making smart diet and fitness choices. If you haven't been setting a great example up to this point, don't worry. It's never too late to start changing your family's attitude about health and fitness. Just remember, it starts with you! So get off the couch, and take your kids with you. Unplug the video games, throw out the unhealthy snacks and get moving. Your kids, and someday, their kids, will thank you for it.

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