

PARENTING

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TIPS

Getting Your Kids Off the Couch

By
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Big Macs and Big Gulps. PlayStation 2 and TV. Fast food nutrition and couch potato fitness are super-sizing our kids.

As a parent, you should encourage healthy habits in your youngsters – starting now! This means decreasing fat, cholesterol, salt and sugar in your family's food and making exercise a routine part of your family's day. You think your children get enough exercise in school PE? Well, they don't. Kids and teens need at least 30-40 minutes of continuous cardiovascular activity 3-4 days a week.

Your family should work out together: a stroll after dinner, bike riding, camping, hiking – even walking the dog! Also, limit TV, video game and computer time to less than 2 hours a day. By stressing fitness with your children, you help ensure that they will stay active throughout their life. Exercise improves self-esteem, reduces stress and decreases the risk of serious illnesses such as heart disease and stroke later. Here are some age-specific exercise tips for your kids.

2-3 year olds:

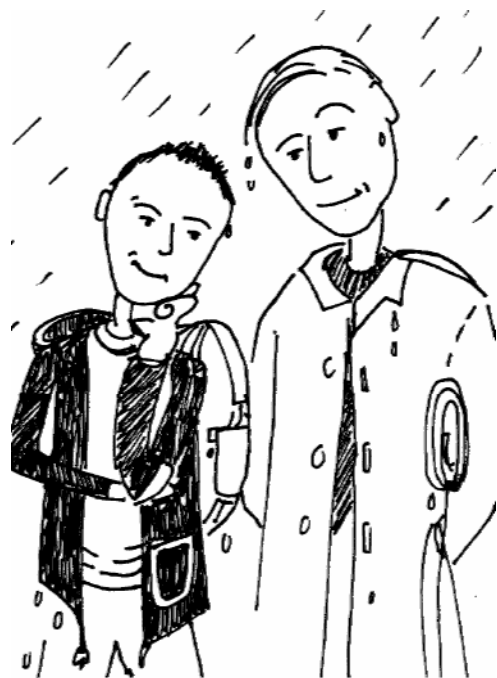
Toddlers thrive on unstructured play! Swinging, climbing, playing in a sandbox and carefully supervised water play are fun and healthy activities. Join in – they'll love it and you'll get some exercise too. However, most toddlers are not developmentally ready for competitive activities or swimming. Keep in mind – if your child isn't interested in a specific activity, don't force it.

4-5 year olds:

With increasing coordination, four and five years olds can roll balls, play catch and take part in other organized games. Biking and swimming are also an option. But be careful. Use training wheels for your kids' bike, because they still lack judgment, safety awareness and coordination. And always watch your children when they are near a pool.

6-12 year olds:

This is the most important age to develop exercise skills that will prevent obesity later in life – and elementary school kids are primed to learn. Find out what your child likes: team sports or noncompetitive activities such as swimming, ice-skating, gymnastics, dance and nonviolent martial arts. Demonstrate your commitment by practicing at home, coaching teams, or showing up at your child's games.



Tired, wet, train delay
... staying cheerful...
a simple exercise in fortitude
for Stan and son

13-18 year olds:

Unfortunately, teens spend more time exercising your credit card than their muscles. So encourage whatever activity they enjoy: competitive sports, skateboarding, in-line skating, rock climbing or snowboarding. Take a ski trip, go to the beach or travel to the mountains with the entire family. Make sure teens stretch their growing muscles to prevent tears and sprains, and any weight training should be conducted under supervision.

You are your child's best role model, so be safe. Always use helmets and protective gear on bicycles (tricycles and big wheels too!), roller blades and skateboards. Never leave a child unsupervised around a pool; it takes very little for a toddler to slip beneath the water. Apply sunscreen to your entire family (even on overcast days) to prevent sunburn and decrease the risk for skin cancer.

Exercise should become as routine a part of your family's life as eating and sleeping. No matter what, the activity should always be fun—never force kids to compete. By decreasing junk food and increasing fitness, you and your children will be off the couch and in shape in no time!

Teach fortitude... challenge your child physically.

We cannot discover new oceans unless we have the courage to lose sight of the shore.

Andre Gide

Fortitude empowers us to make hard decisions and to stick to what is right in the face of difficulties. It is an inner toughness. We stay focused on a worthwhile goal rather than succumbing to setbacks, inconvenience, pain, and even our own earlier failures. Courage, resilience, determination, endurance, and a healthy self-confidence are all aspects of fortitude. Refusal to feel sorry for oneself in the face of setbacks, sufferings, and hard work builds character.

Without toughness kids grow up dodging work and commitments. And unfortunately too many kids these days are soft in this way. Soft kids can't be found when there is work to be done. They don't like to work before play, in fact they don't like work much at all. They complain, or they nag until they get what they want. They are fussy eaters and compulsive softdrink buyers and they don't like walking anywhere. But remember when you look at your kids you look in a mirror: soft kids can have soft parents.

Lean towards physically demanding experiences ... walk to the shop with your children, take them on camping holidays, work together in the garden each weekend, create a family culture of leaving the armchair or the largest slice of the cake for the last person.

And possibly the best way to teach fortitude is by passing on positive attitudes towards work. Perhaps we give lip service to hard work, but we don't believe glowingly in its importance. Does work have prestige in the family? How do you talk about work? What is your body language? Or do you get far more enthusiastic about holidays, weekends and sport, than you do about work?

Visit Dr. Tanya Remer Altmann's website at www.drtanya.com.

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