

10 Ways to Exercise as a Family

How to get the whole family moving -- together.

by Aviva Patz for Parents.com

How to Make Family Time Workout Time

Get Moving

Babies and toddlers spend an awful lot of time strapped into car seats or plopped in front of the TV. Not only does this prevent them from practicing their emerging motor skills and strengthening their heart, lungs, and muscles, but it can also set them up for a sedentary lifestyle, and even obesity, as adults. A good habit of physical activity, on the other hand, will last a lifetime, says Adelphi University professor Stephen Virgilio, author of *Active Start for Healthy Kids* (Human Kinetics Publishers). "And it's never too early to start," he says.

How, you may wonder, can you help your child get the recommended one-plus hours of daily physical activity when you can't even make it to the gym? The answer, says Virgilio, is to rethink your idea of exercise. "A workout doesn't have to mean running laps or lifting weights, which requires you to set aside blocks of time," he says. "Think of exercise as leading an active lifestyle, which you can do with your kids, and you'll be able to fit in more than you think."

As a bonus, exercise with family does double duty as quality time -- no small consideration given our jam-packed schedules. Let these creative ideas help you turn every day into an opportunity to get fit - - and have fun -- together.

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1. Go for pre- or post-dinner walks

Whether you head into town or just cruise the neighborhood, building a walk into your daily schedule ensures that it won't get put off. Brookline, Massachusetts, master Pilates instructor Lisa Johnson and her husband take evening walks with 3-year-old Alex, who alternates time in and out of the stroller. To make walking more enticing, Johnson makes a sport of it. "At one house we look for a cat sitting in the window, at another we run up and down a short flight of stairs," she says.

2. Crank up the music and boogie down.

Betsy Murphy of Coral Gables, Florida, holds disco nights with her four kids and several neighbors. She moves the furniture aside, fills the CD player with dance tunes, and lets the kids take turns using a flashlight as a strobe light. "They dance for three hours straight," Murphy says. "The older ones

know all the words to the songs and really dance; it's hilarious to see the younger ones try to mimic them. Their favorite song is 'Brick House!'"

3. Make a game out of household chores.

Pretend that dust creatures are invading earth and it's up to Captain [insert child's name] to save the day by capturing them with his broom, suggests registered dietitian Juliet Zuercher of Wickenburg, Arizona. "Make believe he's one of the Rescue Heroes, and have him save his teddy bears from the slimy pit of the floor by putting them safely in his toy chest," she says. Jodi Arlen of Bethesda, Maryland, turns folding laundry into a guessing game. "It started when my daughter would ask, 'Is that mine?' and it grew into 'Guess who's this is!'" she says. After her daughters, 3 years old and 20 months old, correctly identify the clothing, they help fold them.

4. Sneak workouts into other activities.

Have your toddler walk instead of riding in the cart at the supermarket, and take the stairs or walk up the escalator whenever possible. Nancy Twigg of Knoxville, Tennessee, drives partway to her daughter Lydia's preschool, parks the car, and walks the rest of the way.

5. Turn TV commercials into fitness breaks.

Invent silly names for simple exercises like squats, push-ups, and sit-ups, and then do them together till the show comes back on. "Call them princess sit-ups or Bob the Builder muscle builders," says physical therapist Peter Kofitsas, of New York City, who does the moves with his 4-year-old and 20-month-old daughters. You can also play "coach," in which you take turns "ordering" each other to "drop and give me five," or "follow the leader," in which one person leads the others in fun, simple moves like clapping, wiggling, and marching.

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6. Have a weekly sports night.

Every Wednesday, for example, get everyone up and moving. One game to play is the fit-deck shuffle. Create a series of playing cards featuring family-friendly exercises, such as bear-crawling or ape-walking. Each family member picks a card and performs the exercise pictured until all the cards have been dealt. You can also buy a ready-made set of exercise cards from FitDeck (fitdeck.com).

7. Walk or run for charity.

Model the value of exercise -- and of giving back to society -- by teaming up with your children for a fund-raising race. When her husband and father-in-law participated in the Father's Day Race for Prostate Cancer, Jodi Zielinski, of Upper Montclair, New Jersey, took her 3-year-old daughter, Noa, to

watch them run. When the race was over, she entered Noa in the kids' race that followed. "She didn't win but she had a great time," says Zielinski, who hopes to make it an annual family tradition.

8. Put kids to work in the yard.

If autumn brings down leaves in your area, make a game out of catching them on a windy day -- see who can catch the most yellow, orange, or red ones, suggests Zuercher. Then rake them into piles -- give the kids child-sized rakes so they can help -- and have fun jumping in them, or take turns completely covering one another in leaves. After a snowfall, let kids help clear the porch or walkway, then see who can make the most snow angels. Older kids can help build a snowman -- and even toss a few snowballs.

9. Team up for gardening.

Kids are great at digging up dirt, so let them turn over the soil and help you plant new bulbs. Research shows that gardening is as good as weight training when it comes to preventing osteoporosis, and if you're planting vegetables, it can make them more appetizing to kids. Dawn Schwartz, of Livingston, New Jersey, has her 3-year-old daughter, Samantha, help water the plants. "She loves to mush her hands in the soil," she says. In the summer, set up a sprinkler to water the lawn and challenge kids to duck the droplets.

10. Walk the dog.

New research from North American Association on the Study of Obesity shows that dog-owners had more fun losing weight and were able to keep it off longer than non-pup-owners. Don't have a pooch? Go look for some. Somers, New York, mom Mary Rose Almasi gets her two kids, ages 5 and 3, to go for a walk after dinner by suggesting they go "looking for dogs." "Luckily, there are a few at the end of my long street. That's the carrot I dangle," she says. "It works like a charm."

Aviva Patz is a mother of two daughters in Montclair, New Jersey.