

Health should be group goal for all families

by Jane Clifford

Everyone aspires to be fit, but how does a busy family with school, jobs and activities factor fitness into their busy lives?

Expert advice comes from the American Council on Exercise and the San Diego County YMCA.

"Families are under increasing stress and struggle to balance work, family and health," the Y's Pattie Griffin says. "Getting fit doesn't require that much time, it's just setting aside the time. It can be done during the time you're usually together as a family."

CABIN FEVER - Parents who have a healthy lifestyle are living role models for their children. CNS Illustration by Eri Hashimoto. ACE stresses that parents who have adopted a lifestyle that includes healthful foods and regular exercise are living role models for their children. Parents who aren't quite there yet can follow these tips ACE suggests for children and improve the whole family's eating habits.

- The first step is to stop battling with your kids about food. Offer reasonable alternatives as you gradually reduce those high-fat, high-sugar foods. Be sure to include some of their favorite foods in daily meals.

- Stock the kitchen with a majority of healthy items, keeping in mind that kids want some of their favorite foods, which may be sweet and/or salty.

- A good way to get kids involved and committed to healthy eating is to involve them with the food shopping and preparation. Children who feel competent to select and prepare food will make more intelligent food choices.

- The key to keeping kids happy and healthy is to strike a balance between foods that are good for you and those that just taste good, between leisure or TV time and physical activity.

- Make physical activity a family affair. Go for walks, fly kites, Rollerblade around the neighborhood, play miniature golf or other sports. Anything that gets you moving together will no doubt be good for you, too.

Griffin seconds all that and urges families to just get started.

She points to statistics that show 60 million adults and 9 million children are obese or overweight and 15 percent of children have type II diabetes.

"The health statistics clearly illustrate why it's so important for kids and adults alike to lead healthier lifestyles. At the YMCA, we believe strong families play a critical role in how to make it happen," Griffin says.

- First, schedule a time for the whole family to talk about family fitness resolutions.

- Consider the realities of your family's daily life that cannot be changed, or at least not changed overnight.

- Put goals in writing and display them on the refrigerator where every family member will see them regularly. Celebrate each small success and prepare for setbacks. A bout with the flu might get the whole family off track for a week or two, so schedule a family meeting to get restarted.

- Focus on adding healthy activities rather than restricting unhealthy ones - adding a fresh fruit snack every afternoon will naturally help replace the afternoon candy bar.

- If a family member is having trouble meeting a goal, brainstorm together to develop a new strategy. For example, if mom is having trouble finding time for exercise, the kids can do the dishes a few nights a week so she can take a 30-minute walk.

To find more tips, tools (including work sheets) and resources to help families succeed, go to www.ymca.net and click on "Resources for Families."

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