

Exercising with your kids creates long-lasting health

By Natalie McGill

As a parent, the bond between you and your kids is special. Whether you're looking for new ways to connect or to strengthen that bond, exercising with your kids is a fun way for your family to get closer. It also sets up your kids for a lifetime of healthy habits.

Parents can model healthy physical activity behaviors by exercising with their children, says Charlotte Pratt, PhD, RD, a nutritionist and health scientist at the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute. Additionally, parents who exercise with their kids can get a closer look at their motor skills, balance and how well they play, she says.

"It's also very enjoyable when you do things together as a family," Pratt says. "Some studies have shown that physically active children are more likely to engage in health-promoting behaviors, such as not smoking."

Some of the health benefits for you and your kids when you exercise together include

better cardiovascular fitness, improved blood pressure and a potential lower risk of obesity. Pratt says about 17 percent of U.S. kids and adolescents — nearly 12 million — are overweight or obese.

But parents may also see a boost in their kids' morale, she says.

"Children see their parents and caregivers as role models," Pratt says. "Playing with them and being active with them helps build their self-esteem and confidence."

If you're a parent looking for ways to engage your kids in physical activity, consider making a family activity calendar that includes all the ways you and your kids can fit exercise into everyone's daily routine, according to the institute. To get the most benefits, kids age 6 and older should exercise at least one hour a day, according to the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans.

"It doesn't have to be a whole 60 minutes in one stretch," Pratt says. "It can be a half hour in between. Parents can do that with their kids five days of the week."



>> For more exercise tips for you and your kids, visit www.nhlbi.nih.gov

For outdoor activity, take your kids for a walk or bike ride together around the neighborhood, play basketball or swim, Pratt says. Even gardening, shoveling snow and doing yard work together can be ways to get moving while getting fresh air.

You can also motivate your kids by making fitness into a safe and fun competition, according to the institute. Compete to see who pulls the most weeds or who makes the most baskets from the three-point line. And you and your kids can team up with others to exercise.

"Other outdoor activities include organizing neighborhood soccer and basketball games where parents and caregivers can participate with kids outdoors," Pratt says.

Make sure there are some types of activity to do indoors when going outside isn't a possibility. Options include climbing stairs, indoor cycling or walking inside a mall.

There are plenty of activities to get muscles moving together inside your home. Jump rope inside with your kids or play table tennis. Plan a dance party with your kids or clean with music playing. Get creative with indoor bowling, scavenger hunts or a furniture obstacle course.



Staying safe while staying physically active together

While being active with your kids is usually a plus, it can be a minus if you're not prepared to do it safely.

It's important to use the right equipment for the right activity. Make sure to wear the proper shoes with the right insoles, Pratt says. And when you bike with your children, make sure to not only wear helmets, but secure them properly for yourself and your kids.

"To really avoid injuries, when you're going on a hike, for example, in rugged places, you can use walking poles," Pratt says.

Before starting an activity, assess all the risks to both you and your children and take precautions. That can include using bug spray with outdoor activities or keeping chemicals and sharp tools away from kids while gardening.

It's also important for you and your kids to stay hydrated during exercise, Pratt says.

