All Together Now: The Benefits of Family Exercise

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There’s strength in numbers—literally—when it comes to getting fit. Beyond all of the usual benefits of regular exercise (looking great, staying healthier, getting stronger and relieving stress), there are extra perks for folks who get fit with their spouse and/or kids. “Studies have shown that couples who work out together tend to be happier, have better love lives and have better communication—better ‘active intimacy,’” says Selene Yeager, certified personal trainer, contributing editor to Bicycling and Prevention magazines and author of Perfectly Fit. “Exercise burns off the stress hormones that build up all day, so you’ll be less cranky to each other.” As a bonus, regular exercise makes you less likely to get stressed in the first place—and more likely to find time to talk to each other.

These less-stress, more-talk benefits extend to the next generation too. “What you tell your kids to do is like a whisper, but what you actually do is like a scream,” says Yeager. “When you make fitness a fun part of kids’ everyday lives, they’ll be more likely to exercise when they’re grown. That’s your greatest gift to them.” And with a recent study finding that as many as one-third of American kids are not physically fit, it’s a gift truly worth giving.

Here are a few great ways to have fun and get fit with the most important people in your life:

Get kids to think out of the X-Box. After school or work, say “game over” to the video games and TV, and take a family walk or bike ride. Shoot hoops in the driveway. Or check out the local YMCA or health club for a parent/child exercise class (such as yoga or circuit training).

Are you ready to rhumba? Couples can take a dance class—ballroom, salsa, waltz or rhumba. Families with young kids can turn on some tunes and have an impromptu dance party in the living room.

Scout for active activities. Look through the weekend paper for local events that involve moving. Instead of dining out, pack a picnic, and hike to a scenic spot. Trade an evening at the movies for an outing at the bowling alley. Walk around the zoo…or the mall. Weekends are also a great time to tackle vigorous chores such as washing the car or working in the yard.

Don’t just be a team player. “Team sports are great, but very few people carry them into adulthood,” says Yeager. In addition to organized sports, introduce your child to activities that she can do all her life, such as hiking, bicycling, swimming, skiing, running and ice skating.

Add an element of charity. “Every year, we do the Dream Come True ride or another charity run or ride with our daughter,” says Yeager. It feels good to raise money for a worthy cause, and it gives you the
opportunity to teach your children about the importance of giving to others—even as you’re doing something good for your own health.

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