

4 Simple Steps to Make Your Family a Fit Family

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If your kids are starting to look like a bunch of couch potatoes, they aren't alone. Nearly one in five American children is overweight. It's a growing epidemic that has many health professionals concerned about the long-term health implications.

So what's the secret to getting your kids in shape? Make sure nutrition and fitness are a family affair. Studies show that family-based programs, where parents are the sole agents of change, produce greater weight loss and behavioral change among obese children than conventional programs where parents are not involved.

Incorporate these four cost-effective solutions into your daily routine to make your family a fit family.

1. Create a family plan

The first step to becoming a fit family centers around coming together as a family. It's incredibly important to have one central health message. If one child is overweight, it's crucial that you don't isolate that individual child. Instead, make this a project that benefits the entire family.

Sit down together and discuss everyone's favorite foods and activities. Then come up with a family plan that incorporates everyone's ideas. If one kid likes pizzas, plan a whole-wheat pizza night with all their favorite veggie toppings. If another kid likes bike rides, organize a Saturday adventure with the entire family. A centralized goal of being healthy is good, but it doesn't need to be weight-loss specific.

2. Make health education a daily game

Kids are unlikely to be interested in weight-loss specifically, however, once they're engaged in planning meals or fun family activities, educating them about nutrition and fitness becomes easy. There are several low-cost products that will make education into a game, including these three:

- The Funtastic Food Tracker (\$19.99) allows children to record what they eat each day by placing magnetized discs on corresponding color-coded columns that represent the five major food groups. At the end of each day, the child's eating pattern can be seen at a glance, helping parents and child to make better choices.
- Balance Bands (\$14.95) are a visual tool to remind kids to eat their five to nine servings of fruits and vegetables every day. Each kit comes with five balance bands. To start, just put all the bracelets on your right wrist in the morning. Every time you eat a serving of fruits or veggies, you move one of the bands to your left wrist. The goal is to have all the bands on your left wrist by morning.
- Neat Solutions "Weekly Exercise Chart" (\$5.99) is designed to motivate kids to set exercise goals and develop a sense of accomplishment. The charts break down exercise into daily boxes and include 100 sparkle-star stickers for rewarding progress.

Try setting nutrition and exercise goals for a little family-friendly competition. Then let the family member who wins pick the next meal or activity.

3. Engage kids in the kitchen

Studies show that eating a family dinner is associated with healthful dietary intake patterns, including more fruits and vegetables, less fried food and soda, less saturated and

trans fat, lower glycemic load, more fiber and micronutrients from food and no material differences in red meat or snack foods. Also of note: Kids are more likely to eat healthy foods when they're involved in the kitchen.

The first step is to demystify the kitchen. Williams-Sonoma, for example, now makes kid-specific kitchen items such as a Kids' Chef Jacket (\$42), Dot Vintage-Print Kids' Apron (\$34), Dinosaur Vintage-Print Kids' Apron (\$34), Kids' Tools & Tongs Set (\$36.95), Kids' Kitchen Tools (\$39), and Kids' Times (\$10). Check your local bookstore for one of the many children's cookbooks now available. Also, family cooking schools are becoming increasingly popular around the country.

Some simple ways to start include: involving your kids in making grocery lists and shopping; having them prepare handmade menus; holding "theme" nights (for example, a Japanese night with pillows/table on the floor and dining on healthy Asian food); focusing on kid-friendly presentation such as dipping stations, taco building and carved veggies; and conducting taste tests.

4. Get your family moving

Got a family of couch potatoes? Get them moving! Physical activity can boost self-esteem and family bonding. Kids, especially those struggling with weight, like to feel like they're accepted as part of a team.

Try having colored jerseys available to build team spirit. A simple relay race or impromptu game of flag football with a neighboring family can help build collegiality. Jerseys are available at most sporting goods stores.

Also, try a high-tech hook. The Discovery Store sells a Discover Virtual Distance Football (\$19.95) that includes a sensor that accurately determines distance the ball is thrown as well as a Discover Spy Laser Chase (\$19.95) that encourages kids to play tag with a high-tech twist. Infrared "lasers" strap to your wrist and fire quickly and accurately even when you're running. Special "five lives" mode lets you take five hits before you're out.

Of course, if your kids really are glued to the TV, there are some good options there, too. The Nintendo Wii "Sports" and "Boogie" (\$389.96) video game encourages kids to get moving while playing one of five sports games. Disney's "High School Musical" Dance Mat (\$29.99) video gets players dancing, and Fisher-Price's "Smart Cycle" (\$99.99) is a great bike/video game that gets little kids moving. Both are part of Toys "R" Us's new "Get Up! Get Active!" campaign.

Bottom line, becoming a fit family doesn't have to be painful. All it takes is some creativity and a desire to come together.

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