

SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

Encouraging Exercise

Question: I am worried my daughter isn't getting enough exercise. Her mood and her behavior seem negative, and I think if she had more physical activity, it would help. What can I do to help her?

As your child gets older, it can be a challenge to find a balance between physical activity and experiences that are less active. Your child spends a lot of her day sitting at school and, as she gets older, computers, television, and video games can become a bigger part of children's lives. By promoting the life skill of Taking On Challenges, you and your child can work together to develop healthy habits.

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University and Roberta Golinkoff of the University of Delaware note that "learning takes place best when young children are engaged and enjoying themselves."

Taking on Challenges: Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

1

Make it fun.

Get creative and think about ways to build on your child's interests to engage her in exercise. Ask your child to come up with different activities that she enjoys that might motivate her to be more physically active.

- Does she love music? Have her come up with a list of songs she'd like to listen to on a walk or come up with a dance routine.
- Do her friends inspire her? Help her find an after-school physical group activity.
- Point out to your child how good it feels to be active: "I had so much fun playing basketball with you! We really worked up a sweat!"

The American Academy of Pediatrics has set guidelines to help parents navigate these issues. They suggest that children engage in 60 minutes of physical activity per day, as often as possible during the week.

Although technology can be a great social outlet and a source of entertainment for children, the Academy also suggests that parents limit their children's screen time to no more than two hours per day.

2

Start small.

Starting healthy habits can seem overwhelming, but try first taking little steps. A ten-minute

walk around the block or taking the stairs instead of the elevator are simple ways to bring physical activity into both your and your child's daily routine.

Learning to problem-solve, plan and set goals around forming healthy habits calls on the use of Executive Functions of the brain. Executive Function is the scientific term that refers to the processes involved in flexible, goal-directed problem solving. Executive Function involves managing thoughts, actions and emotions to achieve goals. Philip Zelazo of the University of Minnesota describes it like this:

If you want to start to characterize more precisely what's meant by Executive Function, think in terms of the sequential steps that people must undertake in order to solve any problem in a goal-directed fashion.

3

Work with your child to come up with a plan for starting an exercise routine.

Change is never easy, but using a problem-solving process with your child can create a clear plan to follow to make a change. When your child is involved in coming up with strategies for getting more exercise, she is more likely to try them out.

- Start with a calm and casual conversation with your child. Let her know: "It looks to me like you feel happier when you get some exercise and unhappier when you don't. I am the same way. I think that finding some way to get exercise would be a great thing we can plan together."
- Ask questions and encourage a discussion about your child's thoughts and feelings regarding exercise: "What are your favorite things to do outside?"
- Get some ideas from your child and give some of your own. Talk with your child about what she will do if she comes up against obstacles, like if she feels too busy, how will she keep up with her exercise goals?
- After trying out a solution, ask her which parts are working and which ones aren't. If you need to, go back to your list of strategies and try something else. One of the biggest part of Taking on Challenges is to be persistent, to try again and again until you are successful.

Studies consistently find that people who take time for themselves experience less stress in their lives.

4

Take care of yourself.

The physical and mental benefits of regular exercise will help you stay relaxed, focused and better able to deal positively with your child. When you show your child what a healthy lifestyle looks like and how good it feels, she is more likely to believe that she can do it, too.

- Start your own exercise routine, if you don't already have one. Invite your child to join you.
- Point out to your child what you do to stay healthy: "When I feel restless or in a bad mood, going for a walk in the neighborhood usually helps me feel better."
- Offer lots of healthy options to eat at home. It is easier to avoid junk food if it isn't available!
- Take time to "unplug" from technology. Turn off the TV, don't answer the phone and take a break from the computer. You can use this time to exercise or connect with each other about the day.

5

Recognize how hard your child is working.

Make sure to acknowledge even the smallest achievements. Having a supportive relationship with your child is the best way to promote life skills and positive decision-making. When your child feels encouraged, she is more likely to try things that are new or that seem difficult.

- Instead of criticizing your child's habits, try a positive approach. Praise her efforts, even if she is unsuccessful. Instead of saying: "You ran so fast," say something like: "You worked so hard to run today."

6

Build a fitness team.

Recruit friends and family members to join your fitness team. Ask them to share their exercise habits and healthy routines with your child. See if your child can join in with some of these activities. For both adults and children, it is often easier to start a new habit or take on challenges with the support of someone else.