

MAINTAINING HEALTH AND FITNESS IN PARENTHOOD— STRATEGIES FOR PERSONAL TRAINERS AND CLIENTS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

Staying fit and active with young children at home can be a challenge. Kids tend to become a priority in our lives, and they require a tremendous amount of time, energy, effort, and attention. As a result, health and fitness can sometimes be placed on the back burner due to a lack of time and energy for exercise, minimal time or resources to craft nutritious meals, sleep deficiency and resulting fatigue, and increased levels of stress. Parents of young children may find that body composition starts to shift toward increased levels of adipose tissue and decreased skeletal muscle tissue. The jobs and daily work routines of many parents are not helping either, as a multitude of jobs are sedentary and require sitting at a desk and staring at a computer screen for most of the day (6). This article will explore aspects of the struggle of parents to maintain personal wellness with pre-school age children and offer strategies that may help personal trainers or their clients increase quality of life and fitness levels. While these are intended to be simple, practical strategies, it is important to note these are not all-encompassing solutions as personal situations vary across communities, families, and individuals.

MINDSET AND PLANNING

As people transition developmentally from children to adolescents to adults, there seems to be a tendency to get busier as well. More demands on our time from areas such as a career and family along with trying to maintain hobbies and a social life can be draining. As with most things in life, if we want to ensure that something gets done, we must make it a priority. Healthy habits are no different: we must value physical activity enough to make time for it during our day. Physical activity from chores inside and outside the home, playing with kids, or walking to the store can burn calories just like structured sessions of exercise at a gym. Also, exercise sessions do not need to be 1 – 2 hr to be considered successful or produce meaningful change (17). Sessions can be as short as 15, 20, or 30 min, and if structured properly, can still produce health benefits. Consistency is more important for long-term health and fitness benefits than the duration or intensity of isolated sessions.

One prudent thing to do is to strive to build exercise into the daily routine as much as possible. For example, walking is one of the most underrated forms of exercise in the sense that many people underestimate its potential value since it lacks intensity. However, when steps accumulate over time, there can be tremendous health benefits such as a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke, stronger bones, improved cardiopulmonary fitness, and improved management of conditions such as hypertension, high cholesterol, diabetes, and joint or muscular pain (11). One suggestion to increase steps is to park the car a little farther away from your destination at work or while running errands. Other ideas include taking the stairs instead of the elevator, going for

a 15-min walk during your lunch break, and taking your children out for a walk or run around the neighborhood after dinner. Look for opportunities to incorporate physical activity and exercise into your lifestyle as much as possible. Many employees who spend much of their day working on computers find it helpful to follow either a 25-5 or 50-10 strategy. The 25-5 or 50-10 strategy states that for every 25 (or 50) min of work, take a break of 5 (or 10) min to move around, stretch, relax, and refocus the mind. While this sounds counterintuitive to productivity, research suggests there are no adverse effects when breaks are relatively short (9). Additionally, active breaks with a change in posture may be effective in reducing pain and discomfort that is commonly associated with prolonged sitting (20). A higher quality and quantity of work may even be accomplished due to the increased focus and efficiency and decreased likelihood of distraction during the larger blocks of time.

It is recommended to form an activity plan at the beginning of each week or month. A key component is being able to execute the plan, so it depends on your individual capability to stay consistent. Set aside the days that you intend to exercise along with the days that you intend to rest and recover. Note that the health benefits of exercise will only be maximized if you balance the volume and intensity of your exercise with adequate amounts of rest and recovery (7). Also, set aside the time of day that you plan to exercise—morning, afternoon, evening, or night. This level of intentionality makes it more likely that you will follow through with action. There will certainly be days that you will not want to exercise, but making it part of your routine will help keep you consistent. Regular activity can increase energy during the day, improve sleep quality at night, help with stress management, improve emotional well-being, and enhance cognition (13).

WORKOUT PARTNERS

Although it may sound silly at first, one of the best ways for parents to get more physical activity throughout the day is to have children become workout partners. If workout equipment is available at home, kids can exercise alongside the parent. The children can do squats, overhead presses, and core exercises, or could climb around on a bench or power rack, hit a punching bag, swing from hanging rings, or make obstacle courses using dumbbells, barbells, and jump ropes while parents perform their workout. While the opportunities available to each family will be based on prioritizing the safety of everyone involved and the equipment present, such creative physical activity with children lets parents get their exercise while spending time with their kids and positively influencing their future fitness habits.

Informally, you can play games with your children that involve actions such as running, climbing, throwing, or kicking. Such activities can range from organized sports to games that are

made up on the fly. For example, a parent could lift their child in a fireman's carry position while they count the number of squats. It adds to the level of physical activity for the day, and kids may enjoy it because they may view it as a counting game. Other ideas include running around the yard, using a sturdy tree branch for pull-ups, or giving a child piggyback rides. Strangely enough, one of the best places to get your physical activity for the day can be the playground. If the weather permits, parents can take their children to a public park with a playground and let them play for a predetermined length of time. This situation can be a great opportunity for adults as well as kids to run, climb, and move in ways that are challenging and involve muscle groups (e.g., those needed for grip strength, lower body power, core stability) or aspects of fitness (e.g., balance, coordination) that may not otherwise be targeted regularly.

Parents can include children in the hobbies and physical activities that they enjoy doing. Once the children are old enough to tag along, take them on a hike, visit the golf driving range, or go out for a couple games of bowling. Everyone gets some physical activity, quality time, and fun, and the children are exposed to new things that they may grow up to value and enjoy throughout their lives as well. Alternatively, parents can ask their kids if they want to participate in a workout. Parents should show their kids that exercise can be fun and dynamic rather than boring and mundane. Some children may lose interest halfway through and go back to playing with their toys or asking for a snack, but it is a start.

Prioritize finding time for you and your spouse or significant other to perform physical activity that both of you can enjoy together. This not only keeps both of you active and healthy, but it also provides an opportunity to talk, laugh, and share experiences, which can help strengthen your relationship. Between careers and raising children, the relationship with your spouse can often be neglected, but that relationship is the one most likely to impact other facets of your life and it is vital to keep it strong and healthy (2). Some strategies might include performing exercise before the children are awake, during nap time if your schedules permit, or after the children's bedtime. A critical question to consider is, "What time of the day would I be most likely to follow this routine consistently?" The workouts could focus on bodyweight/calisthenics, yoga, Pilates, fitness videos, weight training (if equipment is available), or a walk or run, depending on the multitude of environmental factors that may influence the type or format of exercises chosen. You can also make family time for a walk or bike ride where everyone is together, communicating, enjoying nature, and being active. Effectively including fitness in your life with children may look different from day to day. Unpredictability is part of life, so do not let these changes throughout your week discourage progress or deter you from your goals.

NUTRITION TIPS

Nutrition is important for overall health, and it can have a significant impact on fitness goals, particularly those related to altering body composition or maximizing performance. However,

finding the time and budget to buy ingredients and create healthy, well-balanced, nutritious meals for the family can be challenging. There are some things to keep in mind that may be helpful for achieving such a goal. First, most grocery stores now offer both pick-up and delivery services that can save you time when compared with traditional shopping methods. The downside to this option is that you will not get the physical activity associated with walking around the store or teach your children the life skill of selecting healthy food among the plethora of poor choices made available. Second, there are many online meal services available that will ship meals directly to your house with wholesome ingredients that are ready to cook. This option can save time because it takes much of the planning and decision-making out of the equation, but these services can be expensive to maintain.

If these companies do not appeal to you and you prefer to prepare your own meals, keep a couple of suggestions in mind: (1) setting aside time once or twice per week specifically for that week's meal preparation can be a useful tool to increase efficiency and take some of the guesswork out of the day-to-day meal planning, and (2) meals do not have to be complicated or fancy to be healthy and nutritious. While dietary needs and preferences will vary by family and individual, a keep-it-simple approach with a few ingredients can offer quick, relatively easy options. For example, for breakfast, consider eggs, avocado toast, or oatmeal with a fruit smoothie and protein powder; for lunch, consider a salad, a taco bowl with fajita veggies and ground beef, a sandwich on whole wheat bread, or tofu stir fry; for dinner, consider various forms of grilled chicken or fish with rice or pasta. Fruits such as apples, bananas, grapes, and berries can quickly be prepped and offered as healthy snacks throughout the day. While fresh is generally best, frozen vegetables such as peas, carrots, corn, or beans also constitute quick alternatives for supplemental side dishes.

After purchasing healthy foods to eat, do not forget to include your kids in the cooking process. Including them can influence your kids to eat healthier, help them learn needed life skills, and involve them in family chores. Additionally, meal preparation and eating together has been identified as a positive factor associated with improved academic performance, behavior, mental well-being, and body composition (8).

SLEEP AND REST

Sleep is a tough topic to address, particularly for new parents and those with very young children. There never seems to be enough time in the day to do everything that we want to do, and this typically includes sleep. Young children may not yet possess a circadian rhythm that allows them to sleep for most hours of the night, so the parents will inevitably be awake at unusual hours until the kids are old enough for more mature sleep patterns. Adequate sleep can vary from person to person, but general recommendations state that for improved health and performance, most adults should strive for around 7 – 8 hr of sleep per night (18). New parents are not likely to achieve these numbers, but there are a couple of strategies that may help. First, work together with whoever you have available to you, whether that is your

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partner, family members, trusted friends and acquaintances, or a paid babysitter. Based on your comfort level and sound judgment, use their assistance at your discretion to create moments and periods of time that you can recharge your batteries, even if that is something as simple as sitting down for a cup of coffee or taking a hot shower. Secondly, sleep whenever you can. This expression is common among military members who often work long hours with little sleep, as they are often encouraged to take naps to enhance performance whenever the timing is adequate and appropriate. This same mindset can help busy parents as well; even a short nap of 15 – 20 min can help to reduce the negative effects of chronic fatigue (19).

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Stress comes in many forms in life, and although it often carries a strictly negative connotation, it can be a good thing. When we are challenged at an appropriate level and we believe we have the necessary resources (e.g., physical, psychological, social, emotional, spiritual), stressors can become an opportunity for growth. However, stress can become negative when the magnitude is overwhelming or we perceive a lack of resources to cope with the issues faced. Parenting and childcare can certainly introduce new and difficult forms of stress; therefore, it is important for parents to seek healthy ways to manage stress. Examples of healthy outlets would include exercise, yoga, meditation, counseling, journaling, or attending social gatherings. It is important to recognize the aspects of your current situation (e.g., people, actions or interactions, circumstances) that are likely to trigger stressful thoughts or feelings (e.g., anguish, anxiety, frustration) and create primary and contingency plans for how to better cope with those scenarios should they arise. This prior planning can be particularly helpful if situations are potentially dynamic and rapidly changing.

SCREEN TIME

Screen time for young children can be a controversial topic, and parents may differ on their views when it comes to allowing them to use electronic devices. Technology has given us many options to entertain ourselves and our children in the form of televisions, streaming devices, computers, tablets, smart phones, and gaming systems. While opinions vary, it is probably safe to say that children need plenty of physical and imaginative play to explore their environment and learn, and we do not want to inundate them with too much screen time too early in life. However, technology can be used to our advantage if the content is properly monitored, and appropriate limits are clearly stated and regularly enforced. Research on children and video games suggests that games can facilitate cognitive benefits related to the processing of stimuli, working memory fact or recall processes, problem-solving skills, and executive function (1,3,4). Other research suggests that excessive gameplay can parallel addictive, disordered behavior and contribute to decreases in physical activity levels at young ages, sleep disorders, and the hindrance of emotional intelligence development, particularly in males (12,14,16). The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children ages 3 – 5 should spend no more than one hour a day in front of a screen

and children ages two and under should refrain from screentime altogether (10).

Regarding such a complex topic, it is important to note that games feature a wide variety of physical controls, objectives, and graphical content, and more research is needed in this domain. Ultimately, it will be up to the parents to determine the degrees of implementation and boundaries based on the unique circumstances of their situation. Other potentially fun and interactive ways for children to learn something new include online educational videos from sources such as YouTube, mobile applications, television or streaming channels, and podcasts, particularly in areas such as science, technology, engineering, and math or in the form of creative arts and crafts (16). While the child is watching this content, it can provide the opportunity for parents to prepare a meal, accomplish a task around the house, or take a break after a long day.

PROGRESS OVER PERFECTION

Parenting is hard—new parents are often tired, stressed, and frustrated at times. Some days will seem better or worse than others. Recognize that you will not be perfect in your parenting, nor will you be perfect in your quest for a healthy, active lifestyle. There are going to be some days when you simply cannot find the energy for a formal workout nor find the time to prepare a nutritious meal. Thus, you must rely on the activities of daily living (e.g., work, play) or order takeout from a restaurant for dinner that evening. Strive for progress, rather than perfection. Remember the power of the compounding effect, which states that small changes that seem unimportant from a short-term perspective will summate into remarkable results if consistency is maintained (5). Focus on the little victories that can add up over time.

CONCLUSION

Parenting can be a complex and challenging proposition, simultaneously wonderful, time-consuming, and energy-draining. As a result, many new parents find their health and fitness may start to decline as they prioritize childrearing over personal wellness, leading to decreased levels of exercise, poor nutrition, inadequate sleep, and increased stress. However, some strategies can address and remedy these issues if the parent possesses an open mind and pursues methods that fit their unique situation. Parents need to set goals and priorities for their lifestyle, form a plan, and seek creative solutions when challenges and setbacks inevitably arise.

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