

# The Healthy Lifestyle Wars

## 4 Steps to Convincing Your Child That Fitness Is Fun

by Mark Stackpole

Through video games, television programs and the Internet, today's youth have a seemingly endless supply of action and adventure at their fingertips. They can travel the world, fight super villains and score touchdowns without ever leaving the comfort of their couch or being out of reach of their soda and snacks.



If a child only experiences the world through a TV or computer screen, those fingertips (and thumbs, for the video gamers) will be the only things getting any exercise at all. With so many electronic and sugary temptations around, how can a parent convince a kid that a healthy lifestyle not only is possible, but can be fun as well?

### 1. Get Creative!

"Creativity and fitness both begin at home with the family," says Debbie Mandel, fitness and stress management expert. Mandel believes that "both creativity and fitness get rid of stress and generate self-esteem and positivism. Combining them together is synergistic – mind and body work together as a whole unit."



Given the rapid pace of modern life, it can be hard for busy parents to live and model the kind of lifestyle that will lead to healthier habits for their kids. When the weather is nice, trips to the park, bike riding and walks are all fairly straightforward ways to get big (and little) hearts pumping. Don't be afraid, though, to tap into more creative ways to get the family moving. "Nothing deadens the heart like routine," Mandel says. "We all need to be stimulated. Children are creative souls and love to express themselves. Adults need to step outside the box to shed stress, increase health and feel happier."

### 2. Make Smart Choices

Lianne Randolph and her husband, Christopher Kelley, are lawyers in Oakland, Calif. As the parents of two boys, Seth, 4, and Jack, 1, they have made family fitness a priority in their busy schedule. "My parents were very sedentary, so I have made a conscious effort not to make the same mistakes they did," Randolph says.

Several years before they had children, Randolph and Kelley purposely chose a house in a neighborhood with "walkable streets and nearby stores" to promote traveling on foot rather than by car. They are very concerned about the level of physical activity that their children get. "We stopped using the stroller for Seth as soon as possible," Randolph says. "Sometimes Dad needs to carry him on his shoulders, but not until he walks for awhile. He can walk for two or three miles on his own."

Not only does the family hike, swim and bike ride on a regular basis, they spend time scheduling bigger activities in advance to make sure they don't miss any opportunities. Randolph has found that putting together a weekend calendar "helps us see the big picture and make sure we are not getting caught up in an endless loop of weekend chores."

No matter what the time of year, Randolph and her family are committed to making the most out of their opportunities for healthy fun. "We have gone car camping, and we will have a few weekends set aside to go cross-country skiing in Tahoe," she says. "I hate getting to the end of a season and feeling like we didn't do anything to take advantage of it."

### 3. Connect with Nature

This connection to both family and nature can be an important and interesting way to help children develop a love of outdoors, with all its promise of adventure. Debbie Mandel recommends "a family hike to discover new terrains and the various plants and animals native to the region." Be smart about, but don't be afraid of, seasonal changes (always dress appropriately and plan a safe route) – "different seasons for the same hike will provide different things to see."



While mowing a lawn isn't usually much fun, gardening together can be a rewarding family fitness activity. "Everyone can work a patch and grow what he or she wants and then share the harvest," Mandel says. "Gardeners lose track of time, which is envied by many gym members." She goes on to say that families without access to their own plot of land might be able to volunteer to beautify a cityscape, perhaps growing flowers or vegetables.

### 4. Commit to Your Family

It can be very easy to skip an early morning run or a trip to the gym. Knowing how real those temptations are, making a commitment to the whole family might make it easier to stay focused. Mandel believes that when the family exercises together, "lifelong habits of good health are forged for children and reinforced for parents who tend to get caught up at work or with busyness." After all, children are counting on their parents for a variety of reasons – parents who take care of themselves are much more likely to have children who do the same. Everyone has heard that charity begins at home, but health and fitness clearly begin there as well.

#### Plain and Simple Exercise

Not feeling creative about your fitness activities? Remember – activities don't need to be complicated in order to be fun and successful. Fitness and stress-management expert Debbie Mandel has some suggestions for you:

- Create your own interval training course. Use mats to roll on, draw chalk boxes for broad jumps, have a jumping jack station. It's a lot of fun for the entire family, and you can change it up all the time.
- Transform an ordinary walk with sprints. Walk alongside your child, then burst into a run. Walk for a few more blocks, then repeat that sprint. Make it competitive!
- Run family relay races in the backyard.
- Put on your own dance show, with each member of the family creating an original dance and

performing it for the whole clan.

- Can't get your child to get off the couch and stop watching TV? Fortunately, there are many commercials. As soon as there is a commercial break, exercise begins: squats, jumping jacks, knee lifts, marching in place, etc.
- Jump rope – kids love it and parents will feel like kids again.