

Building a Fit and Healthy Teen

It's a sad reality but healthy eating and exercise levels decline sharply from the age of 14.

The most important thing you can do for your teens is to help them value their lives. Being fit and healthy means they will be in touch with their bodies, it will increase their self esteem and give them the desire to set positive personal goals. Be conscious though, in order to get anyone to exercise, teen or not, it has to be fun.

The teen years, as we all know, are full of lots of changes – physically, emotionally and on every possible level. This is the time when as a parent one hopes that the lessons that you have taught your children are ingrained enough to be continued.

For the purposes of this article I am specifically referring to the teen years. This age group does too little exercise and spends the most amount of time in front of a TV or computer screen. To keep things balanced it's important to remember that for all the teens that do revert to being couch potatoes, there are still those who keep up with their active lifestyles.

The number 1 thing you can do to help teens get active is to be a good role model. Show them that being active can be fun and that being physically active does not necessarily mean going to exercise classes or playing sports.

Kids, who are not used to being active or playing sport, are not suddenly going to turn into active teens. If you are hoping your child is going to be active through the teen years, the ground work needs to be done in the preceding years. It is so important to get children used to being active from the time they first start to move.

The decline in healthy lifestyles occurs during puberty and the transition from primary to secondary school, as parents generally have less control over their children.

I believe some of the problems stem from the fact that traditional sports can be a complete turn off for lots of kids and parents, and kids don't seem to think there are any other options. School sport can also be pretty uninspiring and if kids do not feel great about it, they will stop as soon as they can.

So often I hear parents talking about how they have to push their kids into doing



a sport – I am a very strong advocator that traditional sports are not the only way to keep fit, active and healthy. There are so many other options out there. Apart from things like Martial Arts, there is also BMX riding, playing frisbee, body surfing and skateboarding.

Finding an activity they truly enjoy is an important start. There are two important things to consider when you're choosing an activity. How much movement does it involve, and how much fun is it? The only way exercise can help is if it is enjoyable enough to do it several times a week.

In terms of nutrition parents need to remember that young children under 5 develop food habits they maintain for life, and hence early nutrition, including the introduction of vegetables, eating more wholegrains, rather than sugars and dairy-rich foods is crucial for optimal nutritional practices.

There are many factors that hinder our teens and contribute to their lack of a healthy lifestyle:

- Smoking and drinking is in fashion – just check out 'schoolies'.
- Teens have very easy access to fast food, all of which are full of sugars, salts and fats.
- TV's, computers, are in almost every household – and on all the time.
- Kids don't walk as much as they used to.
- Easy access to fizzy/energy drinks that are high in sugar content let alone caffeine?!
- Teens often skip meals, especially breakfast, which is not a good idea.

Breakfast helps to 'kick-start' your metabolism, contains essential nutrients and is important for concentration at school or work in the mornings.

So what are some of the benefits of being a physically active Teenager?

- They feel fit, energetic and positive about life. If you've ever suffered from a lack of energy, say after an illness such as glandular fever, you'll know how good it is to have a healthy body.
- Physical activity releases endorphins – these are the body's natural 'feel good' chemicals.
- Physical activity reduces stress and tension, making you a more relaxed person.
- Some activities, like climbing a rock wall or BMX racing, can give you a feeling of exhilaration – enjoy the thrill.
- Get out and walk the dog – a great way of improving general fitness.
- Exercise can also be a way of socialising, making new friends, enjoying the fun of a social team game together, or chatting while you walk, play tennis or bike ride together.
- Exercise can increase your skills set – practice means getting better at what you do.
- More physical activity means you can eat more without gaining kilos.
- Your muscles become stronger with more physical activity.

- You have a better night's sleep when you are regularly active.
- You have more energy and feel less tired.
- Being healthy means you look your best – a great way to improve self-esteem.
- You can use strenuous physical activity as a way of reducing your anger.
- Any physical activity that involves an impact, e.g. walking, running, aerobics, helps to keep calcium in your bones, keeping them stronger for longer.
- Physical activity means a strong heart and lungs – making them strong enough to last a lifetime.

So teens – what activity to choose?

Any regular physical activity can improve health, fitness levels, and the way you feel about yourself. Choose activities that you enjoy, you or the parents can afford, and ones that fit into your current lifestyle. There are lots of different kinds of physical activities to choose from. It is simply a matter of finding what's right for you.

- One of the greatest organisations to get involved in is Scouts/Guides. There is a feast of active fun on offer – climbing, camping, abseiling, kayaking and many other wonderful activities. It's also a great way to make a whole heap of new friends. If you then continue onto Venturers and Rovers the fun just goes on and on.
- Team sports can be a great way of having fun and improving your fitness at the same time. This can be a good way of making new friends.
- There are holiday camps built around fun activities like skiing or wild adventure type holidays where you try white water rafting, canoeing, mountain biking and abseiling. You can also get involved in these kinds of activities on a one-off basis. Look on the internet, search your local area.
- Some teens prefer to take up individual activities that they can do whenever and however they want, without having to rely on other people or time schedules set by clubs and gyms – bicycle riding, swimming, surfing, body boarding or walking.
- There are many other activities you can do with a friend anytime. Walk together on the beach, a park or through the bush, have a game of golf or tennis, or go swimming. Go roller-blading, skateboarding, kick a ball around, or shoot hoops.
- Try your local gym – most local gyms and many community centres offer organised fitness classes. Gyms often have weights where you can practice weight training once your bones have stopped growing.
- Community and Leisure centres often offer activities such as yoga, tai chi and self defence classes.

I think the most important thing to remember is that, because the way we live has changed so much due to computers, TV, computer games and our easy access to them, we now have to make a conscious effort to have physical activity as a part of our daily lives.

It should also be a wake up call for all parents with young children, the time to be getting kids used to physical activity and good nutrition is now, and it's not something that is just going to happen without effort and thought. An inactive child is going to become and even more inactive teen.

I understand this does not happen overnight and it is not necessarily easy, I made a conscious decision when we arrived in Australia six years ago, that our three boys were going to grow up with a deep love for being active and the outdoors, to begin with it was a struggle, trying to make it a habit for them, but the time it took, has paid off.

With the year heading to a close, make it one of your New Year resolutions to get the whole family more active, it might be a struggle to begin with, but if you break it down into manageable pieces, you will be able to stick to it.

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