

“FAMILY FITNESS THROUGHOUT THE HOLIDAYS”

As the temperature outside continues to grow colder, it is easy to simply want to cuddle up on the couch with a warm cup of hot cocoa, snacks, and your favorite holiday movie. However, with the rising obesity levels, especially among children, staying active before, during, and after the holidays is an important part of being healthy.

A key way to help your children become healthy adults is to encourage an active lifestyle, according to Shelia Lewis, Family and Consumer Sciences Extension Agent in Smith County. Children in the United States today are less fit than they were a generation ago, and physical inactivity has become a serious problem. Americans are increasingly overweight, with the number of obese adults and overweight children doubling between the late 1970s and the early 2000s.

Both children and adults need time to improve their health through physical activity. A pattern of inactivity, also known as a sedentary lifestyle, begins early in life, making the promotion of physical activity among children imperative. Research indicates that regular physical activity has significant health benefits. Even modest increases in activity levels can have health-enhancing effects, including a reduction in chronic disease risk such as hypertension, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and obesity.

So, what can parents do to help increase the entire family’s fitness level? It’s not as difficult as it seems. First and foremost, parents can be good role models. If children do not see the adults in their lives taking interest in hobbies and participating in activities that promote continuous movement for 30 to 60 minutes a day, they are less likely to adopt active lifestyles.

Decreasing “screen time” for families during the holidays is another way parents can increase the family fitness level. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the average child watches about three hours of television a day. And the average child spends 5 ½ hours daily on all media combined, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. Choosing to turn off the television or computer and taking an outdoor family walk to see neighborhood holiday decorations or just dancing around in the family room to favorite music are two ways to keep the family moving. Take every opportunity to establish good viewing habits, and ensure that children have no more than two hours of television and video time per day, as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Parents should also encourage their kids to do a variety of activities. For children, exercise means playing and being physically active. Kids exercise in gym class, walking or playing fetch with the dog, or even playing tag in and outdoors. According to the 2005 dietary guidelines from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services, **all** children two years and older should get 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise on most, and preferably all, days of the week, with adolescents and adults getting at least 30 minutes.

To keep kids away from the TV and off the couch, encourage games to get kids moving, and set a positive example by joining in. What sounds like more fun, 30 minutes walking on a treadmill or 30 minutes playing and laughing with your children? As winter approaches, Lewis suggests some helpful ways to increase your family's physical activity time:

- Designate a space indoors where children can climb, jump, dance, and tumble. Let this space become the "play zone."
- Establish a weekly Dance-A-Thon night, dancing to a variety of favorite fun music from various eras.
- Create either an indoor or outdoor obstacle course of favorite games using household items (i.e., trashcan basketball, blanket volleyball, bean bag tossing, hopscotch, etc.)
- Work together in a family garden.
- Put up and take down holiday decorations outside as a family.

Being active is a crucial element of health for all ages. So this year, resolve to take small steps to help your family make healthy behavior changes that will keep your family moving towards better health in the coming year.

Extension programs serve people of all ages regardless of socioeconomic level, race, color, sex, religion, disability or national origin.