WellSpring

SHARING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY KNOWLEDGE

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Physical inactivity is a considerable public health issue across all age categories. Only 9% of children and youth (ages 5 to 17 years) and 15% of adults obtain the recommended amount of moderate to vigorous physical activity needed for health benefits. Physical inactivity negatively impacts health and wellbeing, poses a threat of unnecessary illness, and increases the risk of premature death. These statistics and the negative health consequences highlight the need for children, youth and adults to be more physically active on a regular basis.

When it comes to physical activity, parents often provide equipment, lessons and sports opportunities for their children. This type of support is often not what children want or need to adopt a physically active lifestyle. Children and youth often prefer to have their parents directly involved or participating in physical activity with them. When parents are involved in physical activity with their children, the children are 5.8 times more likely to be active than a child of inactive parents.

Being aware of the benefits of physical activity is a good start, but generally it is not enough for people to modify their inactive habitual behaviours. More assistance and direction is required to help families adopt and maintain a physically active way of life. Practitioners can start by having an open and understanding conversation with both parents and children about how physical activity can fit into their current lifestyles and how their lifestyles can be adapted to be more physically active.

Discussions about physical activity don’t only have to occur during family interventions. One-on-one exercise consultation with a personal trainer, an exercise specialist or other health care professionals (e.g., nurses, pharmacists, dietitians or physicians) can be an optimal time to talk about physical activities the family does together. Some clients may have not considered family time as a key time to engage in physical activity.

Conversations to Have When Talking with Families

When consulting with clients, ensure the conversation and ideas are generated from the family member(s) and not simply a prescription for physical activity. What works for one family, may not fit for another. Help families find the appropriate resources, such as low income supports for memberships or equipment, schedules for their local pool, municipal websites with event calendars, or a simple workout they can do together in their own home.
1. **Plan in advance**

Family life can be hectic. However, the more prepared a family can be, the better. Encourage families to have and use a family calendar to schedule weekly physical activity. Schedule a “family physical activity event” in the calendar as any other important appointment like a doctor’s appointment, swimming lesson or piano recital. If a family is having difficulty finding a consistent time and day each week, the family can sit down weekly to choose an appropriate time for the upcoming week.

When the family considers the “family physical activity event” as a priority, there’s a greater likelihood the family will participate regularly.

2. **Include the whole family when creating the list of physical activity choices**

Encourage families to create a list of physical activities in advance. This allows the family to have a voice in the decision and prepare for the upcoming activity.

Create a system for choosing the physical activities. For example, if there are four people in the family – each week of the month, a different family member picks the physical activity.

3. **The more, the better**

Consider all the factors that go into choosing physical activities, such as weather, cost, access, availability, skill set required, etc. Reflect on these barriers when developing the lists. Include indoor and outdoor choices for all seasons. What happens if it rains in the summer? What happens if it’s a beautiful winter afternoon? What happens if dad’s knee is “acting up”?

It doesn’t have to be a costly physical activity each week, as there are many low cost options; instead of the swimming pool, try an outdoor spray park.

Plan creative physical activity events for special occasions. Have a list of physical activity choices that can be used for birthdays, summer holidays, etc.

4. **Don’t always play a sport or do exercise**

Families can become involved in volunteer activities that are active. Whether it’s a one time event (community running race) or helping out weekly at a local non-profit organization, combine volunteering with being physically active.

Other ideas to try include:

- Explore new city parks.
- Plan to bike all of the city or county trails over the course of autumn and keep track on a bike route map.
- See what exercises can be done at a local playground.

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• Compare family members’ heart rates when doing the same activities — which ones are the same? Which ones are different?
• Learn about the city, the environment and themselves while being active.
• Plant a backyard garden together. Allow everyone a say in deciding what to plant. Try having weekly gardening time.

If a family is competitive, help them develop a challenge that each member could be successful in. For example, work towards increasing the number of push ups someone can do, or how many steps are taken each day, or how many days in a row someone uses active transportation. Create meaningful prizes or incentives for the winner.

Remember
For family physical activity time or events to be successful:
• Family members need to commit to giving the activity a try.
• Parents and kids need to be active, not just spectators.
• Consider activities for all age ranges and skill levels.

Include everyone in family physical activity. Whoever is living in the house should be involved. Families may even want to occasionally invite extended family members.

All activities on the list must be enjoyed by at least one family member so they can encourage others to try it. If no one likes the physical activity, don’t include it! It’s that simple, no matter how “good” the activity may be for the family.

Conclusion
For some people, including the whole family in physical activity is a natural way of life; but for many, it involves changing how they structure their leisure time. As a practitioner, supporting families in making this transition, rather than using the “just do it” message, can help them be successful. Encourage families to plan, problem-solve, and connect while seeing the health benefits that come from being more active.

References

About the Author
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She counsels patients on making lifestyle changes around physical activity, provides exercise prescription and supervised exercise training in the community, and leads physical activity education groups.
Rhiannon also has presented numerous lectures and workshops for students and healthcare providers.

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