

HOW BUSY PARENTS SQUEEZE IN FITNESS

by Melanie Bowden

It can happen to the most dedicated of exercisers once they become parents. Fitness moves far down their priority list amidst the whirlwind of diaper changes, pediatrician appointments, home improvement projects and, eventually, PTA meetings. Yet, somehow, there are parents who manage to work out. What's their secret?

It's a matter of planning and creativity--and determination. If you decide you're ready to fit exercise into your life, you can. Tricks that other parents have found to get in their workouts can help you map out your own plan and stick to it.

BEFORE YOU BREAK A SWEAT

Putting pen to paper about your exercise plan can be a big motivator. As Laurel Davis, a mother of three, says, "It has helped me to make a plan, write it down and follow it." Start with a list of short and long term goals. Be realistic--looking like Cindy Crawford or Ben Affleck should not be one of your goals! A realistic short-term goal: I will walk three times this week for 30 minutes. A realistic long-term goal: I will lose 10 pounds by my high school reunion next fall.

In addition to goals, list the benefits you'll gain through regular exercise: better sleep, more energy and being a healthy role model for your children, for example.

Consider potential stumbling blocks and what you will do if they arise. Having a backup plan will keep you from getting sidetracked or making excuses. What if the weather is so bad you can't get out for your usual run, or the babysitter cancels on you? Plan to pop an exercise video in the VCR or jump rope in the family room. Are you too rushed in the morning to remember to pack your workout clothes? Always keep a packed gym bag in the trunk of your car, suggests Ben Kwock, a health club program coordinator and certified personal trainer. You have no one to watch your children during a scheduled fitness activity? With a little planning, you can sometimes take the kids along. Teresa Garrett brings her two children to her indoor soccer games when her husband isn't available to take care of them. Her teammates watch them when she's playing.

Do some brainstorming to pick what type of exercise you'll do. Think back to the activities you enjoyed as a child. Ask yourself whether you would rather be inside or outdoors when you exercise, and whether you would rather be alone or

with others. Choose activities that meet these needs. Do you want your exercise time to be a period of personal reflection? Walking or swimming would be good choices. Do you want to concentrate on the activity? Racquet sports or kickboxing might work. Do you want to socialize? Consider playing volleyball, soccer or basketball with an adult league. Let your instincts guide you to fun and fulfilling activities.

Once you know what type or types of exercise you want to do, look through fitness magazines for beginner workouts, or do some research on the internet. A good site to try: The Internet's Fitness Resource at www.netsweat.com.

FITTING IT IN

When you have picked your activities, figure out how you are going to squeeze them into your schedule. Many parents find that working out in the morning is optimal. "Make your exercise the very first thing you do in the morning," says Liz Owen-Brune, a part-time graphic designer and mother of two. When you exercise early you don't have to take the time for a second shower, and you avoid the possibility of other activities getting in the way. If morning doesn't work for you, how about during your baby's naptime, your lunch hour or immediately after work?

Look for ways to sneak in exercise throughout your day. You should accumulate 30 minutes of moderately intense physical activity, but it's OK to do it in several mini-workouts, such as one brisk 15-minute walk on your lunch break and another after dinner. Angela Harrington, a stay-at-home mother of three children, who is back to her pre-pregnancy size, is on the lookout for exercise opportunities. "Walk to the store, to the library, to the school, to the park ... anywhere ... instead of taking the car," she says. Do sit-ups during television commercials. Get off the bus stop a few blocks early. Take the stairs. Whenever you can fit a mini-workout into your day jump (literally!) at the chance.

If you can't set aside time solely for exercise, then combine activities. Walk around the track while your kids have soccer practice, read or watch T.V. while you work out on an exercise bike, power-walk the mall between purchases.

WHAT TO DO WITH THE KIDS

Most parents exercise when their children are at school or daycare or when their spouse can watch the children. Busy single mom Anne Dilenschneider--she's a pastor, a writer, and a teacher--walks a trail near her home when her children go to school. "I just head out after the school bus comes," she says. "It's my major reflection time as well as exercise time." Another option is to trade off babysitting with a neighborhood parent so each of you can get in a workout.

Another alternative is to combine workouts with family time (see the sidebar Great Workouts With Kids for more ideas). If you have a baby, walk with her in a back- or front pack or push her in a stroller. Run or skate while your children ride their bikes alongside. If you start exercising with your youngsters when they are little, you're not just being a good role model, you're also laying the groundwork for them to be your workout partners later on. Pamela Fisher, a newspaper editor and mother of two, exercises with her 12-year-old daughter at their health club. "My daughter enjoys the treadmill, and broke her previous mile run record at school after training [at the club]," says Fisher.

You can also avoid childcare issues by working out at home with exercise videos and equipment such as free weights or a jump rope. The ability to work out at home can provide the flexibility you need to fit exercise around your family's schedule.

STAYING ON TRACK

So, you've written down goals and have been keeping up with your workouts. But how do you stay motivated enough not to let exercise fall by the wayside during a time crunch? One way is to find an exercise buddy. It could be your spouse, a co-worker, a friend, a neighbor, team-mates - even your dog! Just knowing that someone else is counting on you to show up can get you out the door. "Having an exercise buddy is my best motivator. I can't let her down or abandon her," says Kris, a mother of two, who works out with a friend. Kwock reports that if his clients have a workout buddy, they are much more consistent about exercising.

If you start getting bored with a certain exercise activity, start looking around for something new to try. Don't wait until you're so sick of your current exercise you quit rather than switch to something else. Some people maintain the same exercise for years and are happy with it, but for others, an old adage holds true: variety is the spice of life. It's actually healthy to vary your workouts so you work a variety of muscle groups.

Another motivator is to start training for an upcoming athletic event. Michael Lee, a father of two, uses organized running races to help set fitness goals. "Competing in races motivates me to keep in shape. There's nothing more motivating than being passed by a much older runner!" he says. Not all races are highly competitive, and they're not just for runners; there are also events for walkers, snowboarders, bikers and other athletes. Many fitness stores and health clubs have free publications or bulletin boards listing upcoming races.

Be sure to reward yourself for keeping up with your exercise routine. Whether it's a shopping spree for some new clothes to fit your more shapely body, a sauna or

treating yourself to a rich dessert (just not too often!), having something to look forward to can be a big inspiration.

A SUCCESS STORY

Other parents are fitting exercise into their busy schedules, and so can you. For example, Mark Wogulis, a research scientist and father of two, started exercising a year ago after ten years of being a fitness dropout. He usually works out first thing in the morning when his wife can watch the kids or during his lunch hour. "I work out three to five times a week for half an hour each session and I've kept at it regularly," he says. "I have more energy. I sleep better and I stay awake more easily at work. I just feel healthier." All of that pay-off in less than three hours a week!

Like Mark, you can make the time for fitness. Just don't be surprised if other parents start asking you, "What's your secret?"

SIDEBAR

GREAT WORKOUTS WITH KIDS

You don't have to spring for an expensive health club membership or hire a babysitter to get in your work out. Here are some fun ways to break a sweat with your kids in tow. There's no reason you can't have some fun while you're exercising!

- Crank up some music and dance.
- Fly a kite.
- Have a snowball fight.
- Go skipping. Surprisingly, skipping burns more calories than running. There's even a grassroots movement to get adults skipping again. Check the Web site www.iskip.com for more information.
- Use a park or playground as an obstacle course.
- Go roller- or ice-skating at a rink.
- Play tag.

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