



Fathers, Fitness and Fun

Father's Day is the time of year when attention is focused on honoring dear ol' Dad. This year, as Father's Day approaches, dads are encouraged to examine their impact on the health and wellbeing of their children and make sure that they model healthy habits, including being physically active.

Lots of attention is given to the ways that mothers care for and influence children. Warmth, closeness and nurturing are certainly important parts of any parent-child relationship. However, research suggests that fathers greatly contribute to their children's healthy development in ways that are very different from mothers. One study of cognitive development in young children found that mothers promoted intellectual development and social skills through verbal expressions and teaching, while fathers promoted those same skills through physical play.¹

Research indicates that higher levels of father involvement in everyday activities with their children are associated with fewer behavior problems, higher levels of sociability and better performance in school among children and adolescents.¹ Nurturing and being involved with children yields lifelong benefits for both children and their fathers. Through pursuing enjoyable activities together, fathers and children build close relationships, foster a sense of self-worth in children and provide an opportunity to create memories of shared experiences. In addition, fathers have the opportunity to set a healthy example of positive masculinity by demonstrating honesty, humility, empathy and responsibility. Similarly, a close, nurturing relationship between fathers and daughters helps assure girls that they deserve to be treated with respect and dignity, thereby insulating girls from prematurely seeking romantic and sexual attention from males.²

Whether they will admit it or not, children do look to their parents for example and guidance. Given the important role that fathers play in the positive development of children, it makes perfect sense for fathers to encourage children to adopt a healthy, active lifestyle. Children will imitate their parents' behaviors. Fathers are encouraged to harness children's natural tendencies to imitate and play to help establish physical activity as a routine part of each day. The key is to promote daily activity, not exercise. Helping children to understand that physical activity is a part of the daily routine will go a long way toward establishing healthy habits that will last a lifetime.

Fathers and children should enjoy their time together, and active play is an excellent vehicle to create that shared time and as well as meet the United State Department of Agriculture's recommendation for a minimum of 30 minutes for adults and 60 minutes minimum for children and teens, of moderate physical activity for most days of the week.³

Setting a good example takes a bit of effort and determination on the part of the parent; essentially parents must be physically active and involve children in the activity. The emphasis should be on having fun together while being physically active. Fitness should be fun! While organized sports and dance are two great ways for kids and fathers to exercise together, take cues from the children and allow their natural curiosities to drive the kinds of activities that are pursued. A nature hike, a canoe trip or a bike ride through the neighborhood are also great ways to squeeze in a little physical activity.

Fathers, fun and fitness are a natural combination. Fishing, playing catch, hiking, sports and good, old fashioned goofing around are all great ways for dads and kids to connect and be active. Fathers who take the time to play with their children help establish healthy habits that will serve their children for a lifetime. So go on, get out there and have some FUN!

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Sources:

1. ChildTrends Research Brief. May 1999. What Do Fathers Contribute to Children's Well Being? <http://www.ChildTrends.org>.
2. Child Welfare Information Gateway. The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children. 2006. <http://www.childwelfare.gov>.
3. United States Department of Agriculture. <http://www.MyPyramid.gov>.