



ParentingNI
Supporting Families

Parents and Exercise

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Obesity and generally poor levels of physical fitness have been described as an “epidemic”. These can have severe, life limiting individual impacts. Unhealthy lifestyles cost the NHS around £5.1bn a year. Levels of obesity in children have been highlighted as a particular concern. Around 4.2% of children aged 10 to 11 in the UK are classified as obese. In Northern Ireland, as many as 40% of teens are overweight. We know that this is something that also worries parents – in the 2018 Big Parenting Survey, health was the second most important hope parents had for their children. Only happiness was more important, and they were often interlinked.

There are two major components to maintaining a healthy weight and fitness level. The first is diet, which is a complicated issue that presents a number of unique challenges. The second, which this article will look at, is physical activity. Most parents understand that physical activity is important – but levels are reducing in young people. Less than two fifths of primary school children took part in an hour of daily physical activity, which is the level recommended by health professionals. Part of this decline is related to an increased use of technology, but it is not solely because of TV, phones and computers.

Physical activity levels in children are linked to several influencing factors. Firstly, there needs to be age-appropriate places for children to be physically active. If the area they live lacks outdoor spaces or indoor sports facilities that are accessible, it can reduce the amount of exercise children partake in. Another challenge can be over-scheduling of non-outdoor activities. One report in Australia suggested that parents, keen to ensure that their children are given a wide range of opportunities, can involve their children in too many clubs or other scheduled activities. This can take up time normally spent outdoors, and leave children too tired to play outside when they are free.

However, the biggest determining factor for children getting exercise is the participation and attitudes of their parents. As with many parenting issues – exercise and healthy lifestyles are best passed on by good role modelling. Children seek to imitate their parents, and scientists have found very strong associations between parent’s physical activity levels and their children’s levels. So, if you want your child to get more exercise, one good piece of event for parents is to get active yourself, and set a good example.

The first steps to improving might be finding age-appropriate activities that match you and your child’s own fitness levels. Eg someone who is relatively inactive should not attempt to run a marathon .. There are many guides online that can help ease parents into exercise. For example, NI Direct has a helpful guide available [here](#) to give parents an idea of how much exercise both they and their children should aim for. Additionally, the NHS “Change 4 Life” programme gives tips and ideas for getting children more active.

Parents could consider taking up activities that they can enjoy partaking in with their children. For example, cycling can be both fun and physically rewarding. Alternatives like walking or swimming may also be appropriate, it is important each family choose what suits them best as every family is unique. There are other, non-physical benefits to playing sports or exercising with your children. Taking part in team-based sports can help your child develop stronger social skills and be more self-confident. The time spent

with your child in this way is also a good opportunity to have good quality parent-child interactions.

Mothers and fathers play differing roles in encouraging their children to be active. While the best results were observed when both parents are active, the relationship between physical activity of fathers and their children was stronger than between a mother and their children. So, this means that it may be particularly important that dad is involved with sport or exercise if parents want their children to be if this is possible.

Another element is a parents attitudes towards sport or exercise. Research found that children are much more likely to remain active if their parents encourage their sporting activities. High levels of family support are directly related to higher levels of activity, and lower levels of drop off. Parents have a role in encouraging their children to be interested in sport or exercise in the first place – and to continue to support them as they grow. One aspect to be aware of in this, is that some parents (particularly mothers) suggest that they often sacrifice their own social or sporting activities in order to facilitate their child. It is important to try and find a balance, if possible, that allows for both parents and children to stay active.

Additionally, children have suggested that parent’s behaviour may inadvertently reduce their enjoyment or drive to be involved in sport or exercise. This is the case typically when a parent is seen to put pressure on their children. This might take the form of ‘forcing’ them to take part in a particular sport or activity they do not enjoy. It might also mean being overly critical or attempting to “coach” their child. Reports suggest that children do not usually want technical or tactical support from their parents, unless they are themselves active in the same sport. Even then, children responded significantly better to positive encouragement. Thus, if parents wish to see their children grow and develop in sport or exercise they should be careful not to reduce their child’s enjoyment through their own actions.

‘Exercise’ is a wide spectrum of activities. It can be challenging to find the time and energy to be physically active, particularly if a parent works and has young children. However, the benefits, both physically and mentally, of being active are significant. It is also important to remember that any activity is better than zero. Even if a family does not have a great deal of “free” time, or finds regularly scheduled activities hard to make work, taking the time when it available is a good start.