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Supporting Families

# Active Dads: Parents Article on Dads and Exercise

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Fathers play an important role in the lives of their children. Children who have supportive, close and positive relationships with their fathers do better mentally, academically and physically in life. In addition, studies have shown that children whose fathers embrace being a parent confidently have lower levels of behavioural issues as teenagers. Despite this, many fathers struggle with practical actions that they can take to have a constructive impact on their children.

One key area that fathers have been shown to have a particular role to play is physical activity. Parental levels of activity in general and supportive attitudes are important indicators of how active a child is. The most important single factor, however, is paternal activity levels. In other words, having a physically active father makes kids more likely to be active too.

## Introduction – What does the research say?

A report by the University of Northern Iowa found that there was weak relationship between children's activity levels and their mother's levels of activity. They did, however, find a consistent relationship between the child's activity level and the father's activity level. Similar results were found in a study by the Boston School of Medicine, which suggested that the results were the same irrespective of age or weight. The degree to which specifically dad's levels of activity was impactful is high – children were twice as likely to be active if their mother was, but three and a half times more likely if their father was.

In addition, a surprising finding from studies was that dad's physical activity had a bigger impact on girls than boys. The traditional image of fathers encouraging sons to play team sports is accurate, but what this research shows is that dads should also consider the influence they can have on their daughter's health.

Another important aspect of children's activity is support. This can take a number of forms including providing resources, lifts or just encouragement and attendance at games. This is a vital element when seeking to establish a pattern of activity in later life. Studies showed that children who had one parent who was supportive were more likely to continue being active, and even more likely if both parents were. Crucially, having one parent be supportive made the other more likely to be supportive as well. Thus, fathers can improve children's activity by being supportive, and are more likely to encourage mothers to be supportive as a result (or vice-versa).

## How do I do it?

The easiest and potentially most rewarding way to encourage physical activity in your children as a father is to include them where possible in the activities you do. The NHS has a helpful guide for how much physical activity is suitable for children of various ages:

- Babies should be encouraged to active throughout the day E.g. When they begin to crawl, stimulating play is good;
- Toddlers who are able to walk unaided should be active for around 3 hours a day. Active play, such as at a play park, ball games or skipping is suitable;
- As children get older, from age 5 until 18, it is recommended that they are active for at least 60 minutes a day. This should be moderate to vigorous activity such as sports, running or other exercise.

Children should also be encouraged to partake in moderate activity such as walking to school, cycling recreationally or walking a dog. The importance of play is also central to a child's wellbeing. Life can be busy and it is often difficult to find time for free from play in between school, family

commitments and the like. There are benefits associated with unstructured activities like playing in the park, or outside with friends as well. Play without rules can help stimulate creativity and imagination, social skills and problem solving. Fathers should encourage their children to take part in both structured and more freeform activities. Another option is to include your child in any clubs or sports groups you are already a member of. Many football, GAA, Rugby and other sporting associations have children's specific clubs. An added bonus to this will be that your child will feel "part" of the same sporting community that you belong to, and this can help to improve the relationship between your child and yourself. It is important to talk to your child about the importance of exercise – and to listen if they tell you that they do not enjoy a particular sport or activity. Communication can help to alleviate feelings of frustration around getting your children involved in sports.

Obviously, not all exercise is suitable for all children. If for example, you take part in combat-related sports such as mixed martial arts or high endurance exercise like ultramarathons it is not immediately obvious how you can include your child. In these cases, it may be useful to speak to your child about other options, and see what they are interested in. From there, contact can be made with local or national associations to facilitate your child's involvement.

Children will inevitably go through phases of being more or less interested in a particular sport. A friend joining a club for example might stimulate an interest in a seemingly random activity. Equally, a negative experience like a loss or injury might lead to a lull in interest. As a father, it is important that you maintain lines of communication and listen to your child's feelings.

You should encourage them to remain committed in light of minor setbacks, but be careful not to "force" a child to continue to take part in something they have clearly stopped enjoying. Instead, explore alternatives, and be conscious of the impact your support can have on their choices.

## Conclusions

Fathers are a central element in children's physical fitness and health. Put simply, the healthier and more active you are, the better chance that your child will be. Provide a positive role model for your child, and encourage their behaviour. Seek out opportunities to include your child in the sports you are a part of if you can. Listen and support their choices, and communicate to ensure that they do not get "burnt out" or lose the drive to be involved.

Remember that physical activity is something constructive. While it can be challenging on occasion, be careful to ensure that it remains a positive and fruitful experience for you and your child.