

Less Screen Time, More Active Time

Television isn't the only thing competing with exercise for children's time and attention these days. Computers, video games, handheld devices... youngsters are easily drawn into anything with a screen.

Try these suggestions for limiting screen time and encouraging active fun for the whole family.



Less screen time

Experts recommend no more than 1–2 hours of screen time a day for children. Here are ways to help your youngster cut down.

TV journal. Keep a notebook by the TV. Each time your child watches a program, have her write down the title, the time, and a one-sentence summary. She'll get writing practice, and you'll have a way to track how much—and what—she's watching.

Activity scale. Does your youngster spend more time in front of a screen, or more time being active? Help him make a scale to find out. He can use a permanent marker to label two sandwich bags: "Screen Time" and

"Active Time." Clip the bags to opposite ends of a coat hanger, and hang it on a doorknob. For each 15 minutes he spends in front of a screen or being active, he drops a nickel in the appropriate bag. At the end of a week, have him see which bag weighs the most.

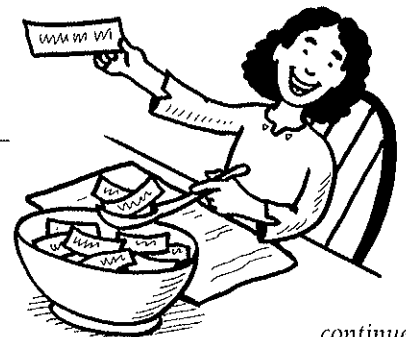


Button jar. Consider setting a screen-time limit (say, an hour a day). On Sunday nights, set out a jar with 14 buttons, an empty jar, and a timer. Each button is good for a half hour of TV, video game, or computer play time. Tell your child she can use 2 buttons per day. When she watches a show or plays a video or computer game, help her set the timer for 30 minutes.

When it rings, she moves a button into the screen-time jar. This system lets your youngster know when her time is up and also tracks her daily screen time.

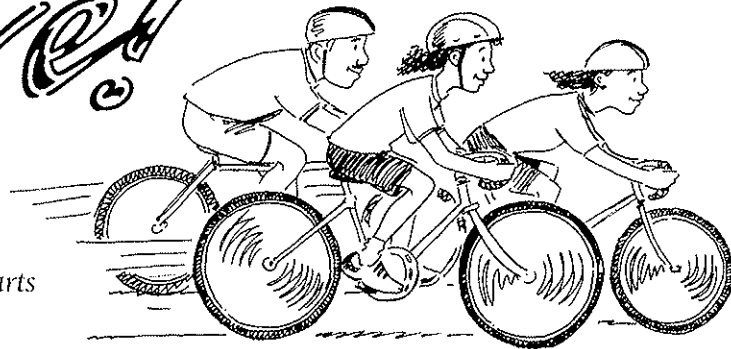
Limited access. Make screen time a little less convenient, and you may find your child naturally cuts back. For example, stash the remotes. Don't put a TV in his room—bedroom TVs are linked with a higher risk of obesity. And consider cutting down on the number of sets in your house. (*Idea:* Donate an extra TV to a homeless shelter or youth center.) If you have a laptop, keep it in one location. Open it when you use it, and close it when you finish so it's not constantly in use.

Talk time. Have meals at the table, not in front of the TV, and turn the set off while you're eating. Also, you might make it a rule that no one brings handheld games or cell phones to the table. Instead, build family bonds by using mealtime for discussions. Ask each person to tell the best or funniest thing that happened that day. Or put a "conversation salad bowl" on the table. On slips of paper, write conversation starters such as "If I could live at any time in history, it would be _____." Here's why," or "My favorite animal is _____ because _____." Take turns picking a slip, and get the conversation rolling!



continued

Be Active!



Keep moving year-round! Teenagers are more likely to stay active when they see their parents getting fit, too. So gather everyone together for activities that will build muscles, get hearts pumping, and increase flexibility—month by month.

JANUARY

Resolution rodeo

Make resolutions do double duty in the new year by choosing goals that involve physical activity. Consider these ideas.

◆ **Spend more time together.** Suggest activities that the entire family will enjoy, such as building a snowman, ice-skating, or playing tag.



◆ **Keep the house straight.** Set up a weekly chores schedule with at least one active task for each person.

Ideas include vacuuming, mopping, washing windows, dusting, and putting away clothes.

FEBRUARY

Healthy hearts

Show your family how much you love them by scheduling “family dates.” The only rule? No sitting still! You might try bowling or laser tag, or find an indoor pool or rock-climbing wall.

Some schools and community centers schedule a weekly open gym where your family can play basketball or volleyball. Also, some malls open early for walkers—you can take a brisk walk around on the weekend. Reward yourselves with healthy smoothies when the stores open.

If it snows, go sledding, slide down a hill in an inner tube, take a snowy hike, or go skiing or snowboarding if you live near any slopes.

MARCH

Step into spring

Look through newspaper listings for an upcoming charity walk. In the weeks leading up to the event, train together.



You can clock a route through your neighborhood with your car’s odometer, or use the track at your child’s school (four laps usually equal a mile). Walk the route as a family,

increasing your distance until you work up to the mileage you’ll be doing.

Even if you don’t sign up for an organized walk, you can make after-dinner strolls a family ritual. Or create a neighborhood walking club, and invite other families who have a child your youngster’s age to join you in getting fit together.

APRIL

Unplugged fun

Turnoff Week is held every year in April. Use it as an opportunity to give your child alternatives to television and video games (croquet, hide-and-seek, planting flowers). Focus on helping her find a special activity that she can continue even after the week is over.

You could encourage your teenager to revisit an old hobby—did she take gymnastics or play softball when she was younger? Maybe she could volunteer at a recreation center or with a youth league that teaches these sports to little ones.

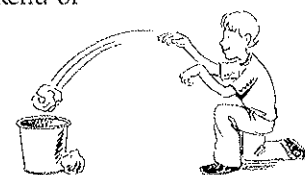
Or help your child develop a new interest by practicing sports skills as a family. For example, make a soccer-dribbling obstacle course in the yard, and take turns dribbling the ball through the course.

MAY

Workout weekends

Wake up to family workouts. Try to get everyone up 10 minutes earlier (set alarm clocks, put on music), and start the day with quick exercises. Try these 10-minute workout ideas: Do jumping jacks, run up and down the stairs, practice cheerleading jumps, or play trash-can basketball with wadded-up paper.

If it’s hard to motivate your teenager to get out of bed, offer an incentive (for instance, a weekend of early workouts earns a trip to the bowling alley or an extra turn with the car).



JUNE

Daylight saving

Take advantage of the longest days of the year by getting outside as much as possible. Here are several ideas to get your family moving:

- ◆ Enjoy a bike ride or a hike along a scenic trail. Wear backpacks, and take along a healthy picnic.
- ◆ Fly kites. Have one for each person so everyone keeps moving.
- ◆ Do outdoor chores. Mow the lawn, wash the car, or weed the garden.

JULY
Water play

On a hot day, there's no place better than a pool! Encourage your teen to join the local swim team—practices and meets will provide plenty of exercise. Also, check your local parks and recreation department for classes in water aerobics or synchronized swimming.

Your child might also consider working toward a life-guard certification. See if your community pool offers a course, or visit the American Red Cross Web site (www.redcross.org) to find nearby life-guard classes. Once your teen is certified, he could be hired as a lifeguard, help coach the younger kids' swim team, or even give swimming lessons.



AUGUST
Pickup games

Organize your own neighborhood kickball or flag football league. Try to find two or three other families who are interested in a weekly game at the school field. You can break into teams of eight or more players (have about the same number of adults, teens, and younger children on each side).

Other ideas: Suggest that your child get a group to play street hockey on the school blacktop. Shoot hoops with your kids at the school or community center basketball court. Or hit tennis balls at a public court.

SEPTEMBER
Family exercise challenge

Does your child participate in physical fitness testing at school? You can set up your own family "test" at home. Pick a date at the end of the month, and encourage everyone to prepare by stretching,

running, and doing push-ups and sit-ups. During your family challenge, keep track of scores and times in activities like these:

- ◆ Stand with your hands against a wall, and see how many "standing" push-ups you can do.
- ◆ Put a hula hoop around your waist, and keep it going as long as possible.
- ◆ Throw a ball against a wall and catch it as many times as you can.
- ◆ Do as many sit-ups as possible in one minute.

OCTOBER
Fall for fitness

Taking part in fall traditions will give the whole family a workout. Rake leaves or work in your garden. Before the ground freezes, plant bulbs (tulips, daffodils, crocuses) that will bloom in the spring. If you don't have a garden, you and your teen can volunteer to help with planting at a school or nursing home.

Another fun activity is to go to a local orchard to pick apples, and see who can fill a basket the fastest. Younger teens and preteens will still get a kick out of running through a corn maze, jumping on bales of hay, and making scarecrows at fall farm festivals.

NOVEMBER
You're on camera!

Stay fit indoors as the weather cools off by filming your own family exercise video. If you don't have a video camera, borrow one from a relative or neighbor.

Start with a warm-up of slow stretches, and cool down at the end

with more stretches. (For ideas, borrow a workout video from the library.) In between, have each family member choose a favorite aerobic exercise. Your son might do a drill he learned in football practice, or your daughter might have picked up a new move from dance class. Each person can teach the exercise to the rest of the family.

After practicing a few times together, you're ready to tape. You'll get plenty of exercise just preparing! Once the video is made, the whole family can use it to work out.



DECEMBER
Active gift giving

Give your family presents that encourage them to get moving.

A new pair of sneakers or hiking boots might motivate your youngster to take up running or walking. Consider a family gift of a YMCA membership so everyone can go to the gym or take sports and fitness classes. Or give your teen sports equipment, such as a basketball, inline skates, or a mountain bike.

Another idea: Get pedometers for everyone, and have a daily contest to see who can walk the most steps!

Editor's Note: Teen Food & Fitness is reviewed by a registered dietitian. Consult a physician before beginning any major change in diet or exercise.



More active time

Kids need 60 minutes of exercise a day. Use these ideas to boost active time.

Family sports. Does your child like to watch sports on TV or play sports-themed video games? Suggest these games instead:

- Set up a bowling alley in your basement or outside. Try to knock down 10 water bottles with a ball.
- Head to the driving range, or play a round of miniature golf.



You can also make your own indoor or backyard course. Help your youngster make “holes” by laying empty boxes and cans on their sides. Using a broom as a golf club, gently sweep a small ball toward the holes.

- Have a race. How many ways can your child think of to cross a yard or a room? Brainstorm ideas, such as hopping, skipping, walking backward, or jumping like a frog. Then, take turns picking one of those ways to race.

Active volunteering. Make your active time even more worthwhile by using it to help others. Contact your local United Way, Red Cross, or place of worship to find out what you can do. You might take wheelchair-bound seniors on walks, volunteer with Special Olympics, or participate in walk-a-thons to raise money for good causes. Also, find out



how you can help sick neighbors or busy parents with babies (walk dogs, do yard work).

Stay-fit field trips. It’s harder to watch TV if you’re not home, so get everyone out of the house for an active family day. You might pick peaches or berries at a nearby orchard or go rock climbing at an indoor center or a sporting goods store. Play Ping-Pong, air hockey, or foosball at a community center game room.

New ways to exercise. At the library, have each family member check out a how-to book about a different type of physical activity (martial arts, yoga, swing dancing). Together, learn a few basics of each one. When you find something everyone enjoys, consider signing up for a class at the YMCA or through your parks and recreation department.

After-dinner walks. The end of the day is a “danger zone” for too much TV—it’s tempting to relax in front of the set from dinnertime until bedtime. Instead, leave the television off, and head out for a family walk. Vary the routine by mapping out different routes in your neighborhood. *Idea:* Take a “left-turn walk,” where you can only make left turns until you get back home.

Home projects. Keep everyone busy, and they won’t even think about turning on a screen. You might clean out a closet and use it for balls and other sports equipment. Register at www.freecycle.org for free items to add to your family’s collection (badminton set, tennis rackets). *Other ideas:* wash and wax the car, paint a room, flip your mattresses, wash all the windows in your house.

Five-minute fitness

Try these five alternatives to TV that can be done faster than you can say “commercial break”:

1. Choose a poem from a volume of children’s poetry and act it out.
2. Take turns calling out addition problems (2 + 3, 5 + 1). Everyone does a combination of exercises based on the equation (2 sit-ups + 3 push-ups; 5 toe touches + 1 lunge).

3. Put on upbeat music, push back the furniture, and dance.
4. Have a headstand or handstand contest. See who can stay up the longest.
5. Press down a line of packing tape on your basement floor or on the sidewalk, and pretend it’s a balance beam. Play follow the leader: the first person does a move, and everyone else copies it (turn, kick, jump, leap).



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