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# fitness as a family

When you exercise as a family, you're getting fit while setting a good example for your children.

**G**etting fit as a family has great benefits. Whether you go out for a nightly bike ride together or a stroll around the neighborhood, you're spending time together without a telephone or television to distract you. In addition, you all are getting what is probably some much-needed exercise. You're also setting a good example. In 1996 the International Life Sciences Institute, a nonprofit research foundation focusing on health issues, surveyed more than 1,500 families about their exercise habits and found that physically active parents have very physically active kids.

Therefore, the first step toward getting active together is for parents to act as role models. "Children

BY CAREN OSTEN GERSZBERG  
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Each weekend Kathleen, Evan and Bruce Swanson take a hike through the Santa Monica mountains together.

assume that the way to live life is the way the adults around them live," explains Judith Young, PhD, executive director of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education. "So by being active themselves and participating regularly in physical activity, parents are showing that fitness is a routine part of life."

The younger a child is when she gets involved in physical activity, the greater the chance that it will become integral to her everyday life. A mommy-and-me postpartum exercise class, an infant swim program and a ride in the jogging stroller are all good ways to begin. And as children get older and start going to school, Young adds, the physical activity you do together need not always be structured for the entire family to reap benefits. It can be as simple as gardening, bird-watching or going for a family walk or swim. "Free time spent together doing physical activity is a chance for everyone in the family to release tension," says Young.

When it comes to exercising with children, the key is to focus on fun—it's as much about play as it is about getting into shape. So be flexible, and remember that veering from an intended route may bring more enjoyment for everyone and prevent any "I'm too tired" or "This is boring" remarks. "One way to keep various ages happy is to think of activity combinations," says Susan Kalish, executive director of the American Running and Fitness Association and author of *Your Child's Fitness* (Human Kinetics, 1996), who gets active with her kids in the following way: "Sometimes

I'll be jogging, my 8-year-old son will be on in-line skates and my 5-year-old daughter will be riding a bicycle."

We talked with four families where the parents and children exercise together on a regular basis. Each family has found a unique way to bring fitness into their life and make it fun for everyone involved—including the kids.

#### TAKE A HIKE TOGETHER

When Kathleen and Bruce Swanson of Encino, California, received a book about going hiking in Los Angeles as a wedding gift, they placed it on a bookshelf, where it sat and collected dust for 10 years. But last winter, in an effort to shed a few pounds and get into shape, Kathleen pulled out the book and decided it was time to start hiking. However, she wasn't going to approach hiking as simply a way to exercise—this would be time for both fitness and family.

Now, each weekend, along with their 7-year-old son, Evan, the Swansons pick a different hike from

## finding a class

*If you're interested in finding a family-oriented fitness program or class in your area, here are some places to try.*

- **YMCA/YMHA** and local recreation and parks departments often offer postpartum exercise classes for mother and baby, and infant swim classes for parent and child.

- **Martial arts schools** sometimes have classes where parents and children can learn together. One that does: Tiger Schulmann's Karate Centers, which has 32 schools in the Northeast and Florida (800-52-TIGER).

- **Health clubs** may offer parent-and-child activities. For example, the East Bank Club in Chicago offers parent-and-tot tennis classes (312-527-5800); the Spa 23 & Racquet Club in Wayne, New Jersey, has a daddy-and-me swim program (973-839-8823).

- **Smart Start**, a program of the National Alliance of Youth Sports, offers parent-and-child (ages 3 to 8) workshops to work on throwing, catching, kicking and more. Call 561-684-1141 to locate a local program.

the book and set out to explore the terrain along the Santa Monica mountains. "We liked the idea of hiking," says Kathleen, "because it's something we can do together, regardless of how fit we are. And, in addition to getting some exercise, we talk a lot and get to enjoy nature."

Kathleen's intention is clear—she wants to set a good example for Evan so fitness becomes a regular part of his life, but she also realizes that it helps to be flexible. While the family's primary goal is to take a hike, it's okay if "we stop to see waterfalls, sit by a creek or have a picnic lunch," says Kathleen.

Family hikes have become a weekend ritual for the Swansons, and they're even getting a little creative. "When the weather gets too hot, we may start night hiking," says Kathleen.

They're also starting to plan for future goals. "I'd like us to try an 11-mile hike that starts in the San Fernando Valley, goes across a mountain range and ends on the beach," she adds. "After that, maybe we'll try some backpacking overnight."

#### **DOWNHILL BOUND**

It's not easy to come up with a family fitness goal—something that everyone,

**Skiing is the Reny family's sport of choice. Below: That's mom Audrey with Danielle and Gillian; right, dad Steven, with the girls.**



at different ages, wants to achieve. But during last year's ski season, the Reny family discovered, and achieved, theirs. "We couldn't wait to take the gondola to the top of the mountain and ski down together," says Audrey Reny, of Boston. Before making it to the summit, Audrey, her husband, Steven, and daughters, Danielle, 6, and Gillian, 4, had worked their way up the mountain together, first using the rope tow, then the short chairlift rides and on to longer ones. This past year, Danielle and Gillian had finally developed the skill, control and endurance to ski down from the summit with their mom and dad. "It was a big deal for our girls, and for all of us," adds Audrey.

Skiing has always been a part of Audrey's life, and she's thrilled that it's

become a family sport. Aside from the fun factor, though, skiing can be hard physical work, and Audrey says she's seen noticeable changes in her daughters' abilities. "It was incredible to see how much Gillian's body control had changed over last year's season," says Audrey. "Skiing is a great way to improve gross motor skills and coordination." For Danielle, skiing has also proved a great ego booster. "If you ask her what she's good at, Danielle always says skiing," says Audrey. "Skiing progressively harder trails has really built her self-esteem."

The Renys had both girls on skis by the time each was 3, and they've watched each child's endurance build with every year. "They started out skiing at 15-minute intervals, and now

Danielle skis for both the morning and afternoon," explains Audrey.

The three-hour drive up to the Stratton, Vermont, mountain they ski on winter weekends also gives the Renys a chance to spend time together and talk about the past week. When they're not schussing down the slopes, the family tries other activities together, such as snowshoeing, ice skating and even snowboarding. Well, at least Steven and Danielle tried snowboarding; Audrey and Gillian sat it out. But skiing is first and foremost in the Renys' future plans. "It's great to have a sport that we can grow into," adds Audrey. "It's something our kids will enjoy for a lifetime."

#### KARATE IS A KICK

When Philip and Ellen Huntoon were 4 and 6 years old, respectively, their parents, Diane and Dave, had a goal: to find an extracurricular activity that would increase Philip and Ellen's self-discipline and attention span, teach them to protect themselves and be fun for both of them to do. They decided on the martial arts and, soon thereafter, enrolled Philip and Ellen at a nearby karate school. A few days later, the sensei, or instructor, offered Diane a month's free lessons, because he thought she might enjoy the sport as well. He was right.

Today, Diane, Philip, now 10, and Ellen, 12, of Telford, Pennsylvania, are all brown belts preparing for their black belt test. It was only one year ago, though, that Diane decided to add a twice-a-week class with her children to her karate curriculum of four adult classes a week. That way she could be out on the mat with Philip and Ellen, helping them learn and, at the same time, learning about them. "I can see how much stamina and flexibility my children have acquired," says Diane. "And because part of learning karate

## excellent exercise equipment

Exercising with children is easy, thanks to a number of specially designed sports products and accessories.

**Baby Jogger**, below, is a sturdy stroller for walkers, runners and hikers. \$287; 800-241-1848.

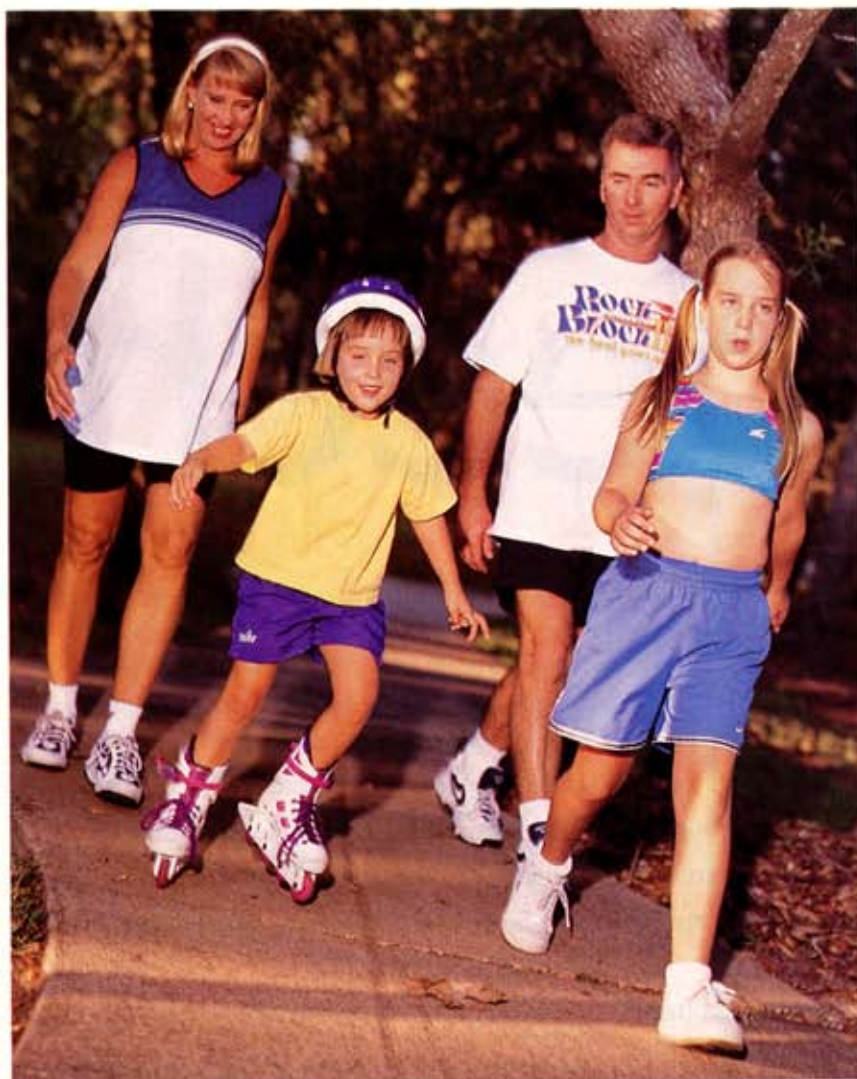


**Kelty "Elite" Backpack** is ideal for day hikes and neighborhood walks. \$120; 800-423-2320.

**Rollerblades Xtenblade** is an in-line skate that extends four full sizes. \$99; 800-328-0171.

**Burley Piccolo Trailercycle** attaches to an adult bicycle, creating a tandem ride. Fits kids ages 4 to 10. \$350; 800-311-5294.

**Little Bear snowshoes** are scaled down for kids ages 2 to 10. \$40 to \$50; 800-655-8684.



**Kimbra, Keira, Geoff and Erin Hennessy embark on their regular evening walk together by following a one-mile walking trail that loops through their neighborhood. Sometimes Keira rolls along on her in-line skates.**

Kimbra and Geoff—she's a former college tennis player and he's an avid surfer—used to take turns exercising after they came home from work. But a couple of years ago, after noticing that their daughters were less active than they'd like them to be, the Hennessys decided to turn evening time into active time. Four times a week Kimbra, Geoff, 9-year-old Erin and 5-year-old Keira set out on a 45-minute, fast-paced family walk along a one-mile walking trail that loops around their neighborhood. Sometimes when Keira doesn't feel like walking, she'll roll along on in-line skates or her bicycle.

Although they begin the walk together, Kimbra, who is pregnant with their third child, sometimes stops with Keira after one loop, while Geoff and Erin continue on. "I've watched Erin's stamina increase," says Kimbra, "and she's so proud of herself when she finishes and tells me how far she's gone with her dad." Soon after the baby is born, the Hennessys plan to buy a jogging stroller and keep the activity rolling with their new family member.

Kimbra reminisces about her childhood and how she played outdoors for hours after dinner. She knows that times have changed and, yes, it may now be more structured, but she and her husband have found an ideal way for their kids to play in the evening, too.

involves sparring with a partner, they've learned how to control their body and recognize that they have certain limits."

Although Diane's initial attraction to karate was for her kids to learn discipline, focus and self-defense, she herself became motivated. "Karate is aerobic and strength-building, and it clears the mind," she says. Even more, it's an activity with physical and emotional benefits that she and her children can share. "As a parent, it's nice to know what my kids are going through," says Diane. "I understand the sport because I do it myself."

#### **WALK THIS WAY**

When Kimbra and Geoff Hennessy of Orlando, Florida, take their two daughters on an evening walk, they don't just walk. They may count how many wild mushrooms they see or stop to admire horses at a local stable. Sounds leisurely, but it's been a successful strategy for keeping fitness fun for the whole family.

### **fitness pamphlet**

The National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) puts out a free pamphlet, "99 Tips for Family Fitness Fun," with informative and innovative suggestions. Send a legal-size, self-addressed envelope with 55 cents postage to NASPE, 1900 Association Dr., Reston, VA 20191.