

EXERCISE

The world has changed a lot since I was a kid. Back then, we used to ride our bikes in the street without helmets, we used to walk to and from school without adult supervision, and on long trips we would lie down on a mattress in the back of the station wagon. We also used to play outside after school until dinnertime, and then go back out until after dark. I think that is the most striking difference between the 1970's and the 21st Century – back then, everyone played outside after school. Everyone. Every day. Exercise was a given, not something that had to be planned.

The “simpler time” of my childhood seems practically medieval to my children. We had four channels on the TV (three when it rained), no video games, and no computers. There certainly were not as many after school activities, and the demands of school were significantly less, especially during our elementary school years. So, we spent most of our spare time running around our relatively safe neighborhood, playing outdoor games, climbing trees, and burning lots of calories. When it was cold, we put on coats. Even the kids who were not particularly good at sports got a lot of outdoor exercise.

Thirty or forty years later, this generation tends to have a very different lifestyle. Now, for one reason or another, a lot of kids never get any exercise after school. Some kids never get outside after school at all. They do have PE in school (sometimes only once or twice a week), and they do have recess in elementary school, but that is just not enough. Video games have become much more commonplace than outdoor activities. We have also become much more safety-conscious, and parents are not always able to supervise their kids when they are playing outside (when I was in elementary school, we had practically no supervision as we wandered our neighborhood). With all of life's obstacles (work schedules, safety concerns, and the myriad of after-school activities, some of which are active and some of which are not), it sometimes takes an extra effort to make sure that safe outdoor activities and exercise are on the calendar.

At this point, I want to make something clear: this is not an article about the obesity epidemic. There is little mystery surrounding the causes of obesity. For growing children, it is simply a matter of eating more calories than they require, but I have already written many articles about that. This time, the take-home message is not that good nutrition and exercise can prevent obesity. Physical fitness is not just for people who need to lose weight!

This time, I want everyone to think about the cardiovascular benefits of exercise, whether you are overweight or thin. It is no secret that people who exercise tend to live longer. Next, I want everyone to try to get their children to establish exercise habits that will continue throughout adulthood. We all know how hard it is to start exercising when you have not done it for a while, and making it a part of daily life is the best way to make sure that your kids never stop. Finally, I want the primary message to be that physical activity

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simply makes you feel better and more energetic. Everyone jokes about endorphins, but they are real! Exercising all the time can improve your mood, your stamina, and your ability to focus and learn new things. This is true for adults as well as children, where the benefits to school performance are obvious.

So get the whole family involved. Now that the days are longer, there may actually be some daylight left when you get home from work, and setting aside 30-45 minutes to exercise with your kids will not only make everyone feel better, it will also make an impression on your kids that will last a lifetime.

One of my family's favorite things to is to go for a bike ride on the Tobacco Trail bike path. There is a section that passes right through Woodcroft. If you have more time, there are access points to the main section of the bike path off of Fayetteville Road, just south of Southpoint, and on Scott King Road, which intersects Fayetteville Road near Highway 751. You can ride for miles and miles through the woods south of Durham; it is such a wonderful way to spend time with your kids and get aerobic exercise at the same time.

Set an example for your kids. I know you're tired when you get home, and it is tempting to turn on the TV or hop on the computer, but try taking the outside for just a few minutes. Do what you have time to do – I do not want to give you an unrealistic goal, but before you know it, you may find that there is a shift in priorities away from inactive pastimes toward the more active ones. If you start the ball rolling in the warmer months, your kids may start to look for ways to continue to exercise during the colder months. Who knows? You may start feeling more energetic as well!