

Fit Facts™

FROM THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EXERCISE®

TEENS, FITNESS AND YOU

With all the pressures today's teenagers have to deal with, it's no wonder so many are in trouble. Statistics show that teen suicide and teen pregnancy are on the rise, as is the firearm-homicide rate for teens. Smoking among teens is in vogue, and two-thirds of eighth-graders report that they have tried alcohol. And only about 38 percent of them get enough exercise — which means the other 62 percent are setting themselves up for a sedentary life and all the problems that come with it.

Now's the time to change these statistics. Research has shown that kids who play sports, or who are physically active, are less likely to have these problems. But getting kids to exercise is no easy task unless you're willing to spend time with them and learn to speak their language.

QUALITY TIME, QUALITY TALK

It's impossible to have good relationships with teenagers if you don't spend time with them. Don't expect teens to automatically think you're cool and trustworthy — you'll have to prove it. Accept them for who they are and show them that you are genuinely concerned about them. Look past the way they dress or wear their hair, and learn to understand their language so you can relate to what they have to say.

A person who is a good listener has a good chance of developing relationships with teens, since most of them would rather talk than listen. Whatever it takes, learn to listen to teenagers, and offer your words of wisdom only when necessary. It's the only way to figure them out.

THEY'RE LISTENING — WHAT DO YOU SAY?

The number-one thing you can do to help teens get active is to be a good role model. Live the life that you advocate; show them that being active can be fun, and they will follow your example. Let them know that being physically active does not necessarily mean going to exercise classes or playing sports, although these are two great options. Hiking and camping, body surfing and playing Frisbee or paddleball are activities the whole family can enjoy. And, since they're having so much fun, teens will hardly realize that what they're doing is actually good for them.



Teenagers can participate in just about any fitness activity, whether it be weight training, mountain biking or martial arts. Many gyms are lowering their age requirements and offering family memberships and discounts to reach the younger market. Organized sports also are an excellent means of improving socialization and developing discipline and teamwork skills.

COMPETING WITH THE NEGATIVE

It's not easy to get your message of good health and fitness across when you're competing with the lure of television and video games. That's why it's so important to appeal to a teenager's sense of fun and need for social interaction. Whenever possible, include others, such as their friends, in your fitness activities. Encouraging a teenager (or an adult, for that matter) to become more active can be discouraging, particularly when they seem to be tuning you out. At some point, that encouragement may become counter-productive. Instead, continue to serve as a role model for an active lifestyle and perhaps they will one day follow your lead.

The most important thing you can do for today's youth is to help them value their lives. Being healthy and fit will put them in touch with their bodies, increase their self-esteem and help them to establish a desire to set personal goals. Bottom line, however, is that in order to get anyone to exercise, teenager or not, it has to be fun. Teenagers aren't likely to do something just because they're told it's good for them. But with your support and encouragement, you can help put them on the path to better health that lasts a lifetime.

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