



A Family Affair: Resolve to Be FIT

The family that practices good health together gets healthy together.

by Sarah McCoy

Sandy Lieto witnessed the lifesaving power of a family when her 17-year-old son, Nick, needed help.

“At Nick’s checkup, his weight was out of control. We tried everything and nothing seemed to have lasting results,” Lieto explains. It was then that she enrolled in MPOWER, an intensive family-focused weight management program at the University of Michigan.

“We’ve changed the way we eat, the way we shop. Everyone in the family was on board—five sons, a grandma and grandchildren to boot! Nick is doing great, has lost 34 pounds and is still going strong,” Lieto says.

Losing weight, shaping up and getting healthy is often presented as a solitary exercise, but history tells a different tale and evidence shows that when family members work together on a common cause the chances of success rise.

“If you look at societies in other countries, families do athletic things together. They go hiking or up into the mountains to chop wood or plant fields. Things our ancestors did naturally brought them to-

gether emotionally and challenged them physically. That’s a very important determinant of longevity and good health,” says Dr. Mehmet Oz, cardiac surgeon and founder of the New York-based nonprofit HealthCorps, which educates youth and families to live healthy lives.

According to Oz, who frequently appears on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Americans need to be healthier, and the country’s health renewal depends upon families making commitments to be fit. “Our goal is to get one kid in a family to understand what healthy food and exercise is about. Once one kid gets the story, it becomes cool because knowledge is power, and the rest of the family follows,” Oz says. “Our program has grown rapidly and many in government say it’s good politics and policy, and better yet, it’s working.”

But while Oz acknowledges the role government officials play in the health renewal, he stresses that success will come from average Americans. “It’s not going to happen in Washington. It’s going to happen because families become proactive,” he says.

It starts with the family meals and continues with family activities.

What’s on the Menu?

What a family eats can be just as important as how it eats, suggests Cristina Caro, RD, program coordinator with Healthy Lifestyle at Children’s Healthcare in Atlanta.

“Kids eating burgers in the back of minivans on their way to after-school activities is normal today. You trade one problem for another. Kids are physically active, but not eating correctly,” she explains. Making time to plan meals and eat healthier foods, even on those busy days, helps improve poor diets. “Parents need to plan a sit-down meal together. It doesn’t have to be every night but at least once or twice a week.”

Oz agrees that the most important aspect of eating right is eating together. He believes that eating a good breakfast together can go a long way toward better health, and keeping healthy snacks like nuts and fruits easily accessible the rest of the day will also help.

“When the families make changes

together versus one overweight individual, that's going to facilitate permanent changes versus temporary," Caro says. "What you do is more powerful than what you say."


Let's Get Physical

Sitting in the stands watching your child play soccer shows support, but that sedentary lifestyle does not project a healthy role model. Get moving and lead by example.

Chrissy Robert, MS, the MPOWER Program's head exercise physiologist, also sees over scheduling as a primary impediment to family exercise time. As a countermeasure, she recommends families be ready for anything when free time becomes available. "Pack a box in the trunk that holds balls, baseball mitts, a Frisbee, (and) running shoes to take wherever the family goes," Robert says.

Many people believe exercise is different for adults and children, but Robert debunks the myth saying the only difference is the amount of exercise. Adults should aim for 30 minutes of exercise a day, while children need 60. To lose weight, adults need 60 minutes and kids 90.

A few simple ideas to get everyone exercising together include: Build walking into your family's day by parking the car in the farthest spot from the door; take the stairs; walk the dog; limit sedentary activities such as watching TV; plan an outdoor family sport night or go to the local YMCA on rainy days.

The Lietos are living proof that a family committed to being healthy together is the best way to lasting success. "What we have learned as a family will stay with us for a lifetime," Lieto says. 



SNAP! The Job's a Game

Fitness experts and moms can attest that getting kids to eat a balanced meal—never mind their Brussels sprouts—is quite a feat.

Cristina Caro, RD, program coordinator with Healthy Lifestyle at Children's Healthcare in Atlanta, suggests making a family game out of eating right. "We encourage eating the rainbow—M&Ms don't count," she says. There are five major fruit and vegetable color groups: green, red, orange, yellow and blue/purple/black. The way to play is by eating all five colors in a week. It doesn't have to be at the same meal or on the same day.

"Kids love it! They'll come home and say, 'Mom, I had yellow and orange for lunch today!' And Mom can say, 'Oh good, because we're having green for dinner.' It keeps everybody on the same page and focused on what you can have, not what you can't," Caro says.

Another idea is to have a themed meal once a week. "When *Pirates of the Caribbean* came out, all my kids wanted to be pirates," Caro explains. "For dinner, we ate foods a pirate would eat and watched the movie afterward. It was the perfect opportunity to have a healthy, fun meal together."

The National Fitness REVOLUTION

Family-oriented health programs have sprung up around the country, providing families with the medical guidance, education and goals for long-term success.

HealthCorps was founded by Dr. Mehmet Oz, cardiac surgeon, best-selling author and health expert on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. The organization's mission is to tackle childhood obesity through school-based health education, community events and outreach to under served populations.

HealthCorps' coordinators are recent college graduates who deferred medical school or graduate health program studies to participate in public service, to empower teens to become educated consumers and health activists. The national program is supported by public and private funds.

Other programs are sponsored by local hospitals or health care providers such as MPOWER at the University of Michigan and Healthy Lifestyle at Children's Healthcare in Atlanta. These help kids and families improve their health through lifestyle changes and medical care. They include a multidisciplinary team of health care providers: pediatricians, psychologists, social workers, registered dietitians and exercise physiologists.

To locate a HealthCorps program near you, visit healthcorps.org. For more information on MPOWER, visit med.umich.edu/MPOWER. For Children's Healthcare in Atlanta, visit choa.org.

