

Fit City!

Turn your little couch potato into a mover and a shaker.

By Grace Bennett, Courtesy of the Sesame Street Workshop

Ok, so your child spends hours at home fixated on the TV or computer with his tushy glued to a cushy chair. He's getting the exercise he needs at school, isn't he? Not.

More and more school-age children are becoming less and less fit. Although studies say that kids now watch less TV than they used to, they make up for it by sitting at the computer. And most kids are engaging in far less than the 150 minutes per week of school phys-ed activity recommended by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) in Reston, Virginia. This is despite numerous studies highlighting the benefit of exercise to children, from keeping them alert in the classroom to preventing high blood pressure and undue weight gain. In one recent California study of children's health, 8% of 10 year olds had high blood pressure. This is an alarming statistic, according to Don Morris, Ph.D., a spokesperson for the San Francisco-based Project Fit America. "Inactivity plays a strong role in promoting this condition." The upshot, according to experts, is that it's largely up to us parents to help our children get moving. Here are some tactics to counter common kid excuses.

1. **"I'm on the computer, Mom!"** Yours isn't the only child to overindulge in Web surfing at the expense of large-motor skills. *What to do:* Get out of your chair first. Research shows that active parents are likely to have active kids. "Parents need to show kids that fitness is important to them, too," notes Dorothy Singer, Ed. D., co-director of the Yale University Family Television Research and Consultation Center in New Haven, Connecticut. So ease into a walking regimen or swim program at the local Y. Once you get going, make a point of letting your child know about it. Before long he may be ready to join you.
2. **"But I'm watching The Simpsons!"** If after-dinner tube gazing is a regular family ritual, the suggestion of, say, an evening walk may be met with resistance. *What to do:* Plan ahead. Tell your child you'd like to schedule a few twilight strolls together each week. Then make them fun by skipping for example, or seeing how long you can hop on one foot or walk backwards. Or pop in a Tae-Bo tape for a home session of this hot new martial arts-style workout. Your child's more likely to stick with an activity that's fun, so indulge his fancy and go fly a kite, kick a soccer ball, or roller blade together.
3. **"It's too cold to go out!"** Dr. Morris says that "too many parents, and thus their kids, subscribe to a belief that if the weather isn't perfect they should stay home." *What to do:* Dress appropriately and help your child discover the joys of activity in almost any weather. Shoot hoops out back or take a hike to rev up body heat. If your child like to ice-skate or swim, head out to an indoor rink or pool.
4. **"I'm on my Game Boy."** Playing with gizmos can be mentally stimulating but physically unchallenging. *What to do:* Offer gadgets as workout incentives. Some examples: those Velcro mitt-and-ball sets kids love; a stick with a sash attached for a rousing ribbon dance; a new flat, doughnut-shaped Frisbee (easy for young hands to catch); and the good old-fashioned pogo stick and hula hoop.
5. **"I'm too tired."** A child who makes a habit of high-fat foods, sugary sodas, and late nights is likely to be lethargic and exercise averse. *What to do:* Offer energy insurance by providing a balanced diet high in fruits, vegetables, and grains, plus plenty of water. And enforce a reasonable bedtime. "No matter what his interest in exercise," says Dr. Singer, "proper nutrition and rest go a long way towards helping your child feel ready to rock."