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Keeping kids active during COVID

CC PARENT | Ashley Meyer

Caregivers know intuitively that kids love to move, run and leap. While we’ve always known that letting kiddos run around will make for an easier bedtime, it may be surprising to learn that this kind of active play is also essential for growing a strong body and promoting social well-being. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that kids age six to 16 engage in at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous activity every day. It doesn’t have to be all at one time – it can occur in spurts throughout the day such as a brisk 10-minute-walk, a quick game of tag before lunch and perhaps a YouTube dance party after dinner. The bottom line is they have to move in a variety of ways every day.

And coincidentally, grown-ups, so do you. We all need to play in some form or another – to feel our hearts pound and to enjoy fresh air and sun on our faces, in even in the dregs of winter. Remember, there’s no such thing as bad weather, just bad layering. A vast body of research suggests that moving your body on the regular maintains much more than just physical fitness – vigorous activity actually improves cognition and decreases anxiety and depression in both kids and adults.

As much as kids inherently love to play, it can be surprisingly hard to motivate them to get up and move. Often, the hard truth is that you have to get up and move with them. At the beginning of the remote school year I told my daughter that if she wanted to play video games with her friends after class that we’d have to go for a walk first, lest she spend her entire day in front of a screen. In truth, I don’t really feel like going for a walk most days, but frankly, I need it as much as anybody. In all the months since we began this routine I’ve never once regretted the walk once we got going.

Though many structured, in-person activities have been on pause for months, some have managed to reach kids despite pandemic restrictions. Ashley Krstulovich, owner of FLOW Midwest Yoga in Springfield, has been teaching yoga and mindfulness in schools for years. When remote schooling became the new reality, she pivoted and began offering a kids’ class each day over Zoom, Monday through Friday, to schools and anyone else who wants sign up. The introductory class is $5 and families or teachers can contact FLOW to discuss scholarship options. Illinois has recently moved to Tier Four mitigation, which allows for the resumption of in-person fitness classes. However, FLOW will continue to offer a virtual option for all of its classes even as in-person classes resume.

Similarly, John Greyson’s Martial Arts Academy in Springfield began offering virtual classes soon after the shutdown began last spring.

“We went straight virtual after never having done online classes before,” said Brian Blankenship, program director at JGMAA. “But we were up and running within 24 hours, and even now that we’re back in person, we’ll continue offering a virtual option for all of our live, in-person classes so that as many people as possible can participate.” Blankenship said that consistency has really been grounding for many of their families throughout the pandemic, and he feels it’s helped the kids build and maintain...
In addition to providing an outlet for kids to get their wiggles out, activities such as yoga and martial arts often have a profound behavioral benefit. “Even before lockdown, there were issues with self-regulation,” said Krstulovich. “The work I do with kiddos – and adults – really focuses on mindfulness and communication. Kids learn self-calming techniques; they’re learning not just to move their bodies and flail around, but to be mindful of how their bodies feel when they’re moving them, which then circles around to help them regulate internally.”

For families looking to get out of the house, the Springfield Park District has resumed many of its programs, with some restrictions. The Henson Robinson Zoo will open for the season on March 20. “This has been a really popular outing since COVID began, and we have lots of fun things coming up in 2021,” said Lynn Saputo, director of recreation with Springfield Park District. “It’s become clear that we’re more than just a zoo, we’re a place where families can gather while still social-distancing.”

As of Jan. 22, the Nelson Center ice rink is open for skating on weekends. Skate sessions are limited to 50 participants, with 40 tickets sold in advance online and 10 tickets available at the door. In addition, programming will begin to resume at Eisenhower Pool, including public lap swim, with capacity limits.

Check out www.springfieldparks.org for more information and to reserve skate times.

Ashley Meyer is a freelance writer who lives in Springfield with two active children.
Teaching sustainability
Small steps kids can take to help save the planet

As parents, my husband and I strive to equip our children with the tools they'll need to grow into healthy, happy and successful adults. We teach them good manners, talk to them about the importance of personal hygiene, help them with their homework and tell them to eat their vegetables. We make sure that they say please and thank you, that they respect their elders and that they know how to save money for a rainy day. Our hope is that they grow into compassionate adults who remember to call home every once in a while, and that they never underestimate the importance of a kind word. We've spent their entire lives teaching them how to be the kind of people that the world needs, but just recently, I realized that perhaps we've overlooked one very important lesson.

Standing in the bathroom one night, I watched my youngest daughter enthusiastically brush her teeth and tell me about her day through a mouthful of mint-flavored bubbles. What she was saying was important to me, and I wanted to give her my full attention, but all I could focus on was that she hadn't turned off the faucet. As she brushed and talked, I stared in disbelief as water gushed out of the tap and swirled down the drain. Finally, unable to take it anymore, I shouted, “Turn off the water!” With her toothbrush wedged into her cheek, my daughter slowly reached out, turned the faucet off and looked at me like I’d completely lost my mind.

Out of all the lessons I’ve taught her over the years, how had I failed to teach her about the importance of sustainability? Quickly, I told her that she hadn’t done anything wrong, but there was a better way to brush her teeth. I explained to her that the simple act of turning off the tap while she brushes her teeth could help our family save up to four gallons of water a day. When she asked me why saving water was important, I took the opportunity to explain that taking it easy on the tap helps conserve energy and reduces carbon pollution. Seeing that this information was a little confusing, I described to her the difference between finite resources and infinite resources. That small, unexpected, conversation opened the door for her to ask me what other things kids could do to help us live a more sustainable lifestyle.

Of course, there are a lot of things we do every day that teach our children the importance of being environmentally conscious, but if your family is anything like ours, there’s always room for...
improvement. For instance, most of our kids know that they should be recycling, but it might surprise them to find out why we do it, and that it’s a little trickier than just sorting the recycling into separate bins. Furthermore, they might be shocked to find out that sustainability extends far beyond paper or plastic. There are dozens of ways that kids can chip in and feel like they are an important part in the green movement, and most of them are really fun.

In the wake of that conversation with my daughter, our family has made it a priority to make better environmental decisions. While out riding her bike, my 10-year-old often picks up trash she finds on our street. It’s tough for her to see litter everywhere, and being proactive in cleaning up our neighborhood makes her feel like she’s making a difference.

My husband likes to follow the kids around the house turning off lights, unplugging appliances and reminding them to close the door when they go outside. He’s also a pro at weatherproofing our home and switching our lightbulbs over to more energy efficient ones. These small changes have greatly reduced the amount of energy we use and have been quite cost-effective.

As for me, I’ve been trying to be more conscientious about food waste by planning (and sticking to) a weekly menu and shopping local when possible. My six-year-old has taken it upon herself to educate her younger brother about the importance of turning off the tap and has enthusiastically started helping me plan a native pollinator garden for the spring.

In the grand scheme of things, these changes may seem small, but as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote in one of the Sherlock Holmes novels, “The little things are infinitely the most important.” Teaching our children that their daily choices have a direct impact on their environment is one of the greatest gifts we can give them and a life lesson that will benefit generations to come.

Lana Shovlin is a Springfield mother of three who has broken up with plastic water bottles for good and can’t wait until we can start bringing reusable bags to the grocery store again.
It is said February is the shortest month for a reason. Even in a year with full access to in-person school and a variety of indoor places like children’s museums to visit, cabin fever is hard enough. With pandemic restrictions in place for nearly a year, this February has hit parents and kids harder than usual.

The best antidote to misbehavior and cranky attitudes due to pent-up energy is to use that energy in a fun and active way. Kim Leistner Root, founder and president of SpringfieldMoms.org says, “Winter is always a time where we need to be more mindful to find and create outlets to release energy. Whether you have your child join you doing fitness videos or yoga at home or find a place they can have dance party outbursts, rearrange furniture and breakables out of the way and make space to move!”

Here are some ideas for fun and lively activities to help you through this shortest month.

Indoor scavenger hunt ideas can be found online, or simply walk around your house taking notes on what you see. Include vague items like “something yellow” or “something with five sides” along with traditional items such as “a blue sock.” One of the drawbacks of a scavenger hunt is putting away all of the found items, so in our house, once our eyes have found an object, we cross it off the list. For another layer of fun, do a scavenger hunt with flashlights after dark.

An obstacle course can be constructed with a variety of objects found around the home and tailored to the size and age of your children. Hula hoops can be vertical or horizontal to
test jumping and wriggling abilities. Hop between couch cushions, crawl under a table, run around plastic cups or balance on a line of tape.

Family dance parties are a good way to get the whole family active. Put on some tunes, jump around and sing along. For an element of surprise, add in a game of freeze dance, where the DJ stops the tune randomly to pause dancers in mid-motion.

Balloons can provide hours of fun. Bat the balloon with hands to keep it off the lava-floor. Attach a balloon with a string to a doorway above your child's height, and encourage them to jump and tap the balloon. Have a balloon race by having your children blow a balloon down a hallway. Play balloon hockey with brooms or fly swatters, with a laundry basket serving as the goal.

Building a blanket fort is a surprisingly active endeavor. Gather sheets and blankets and anchor them in place on chairs and other furniture by using binder or chip clips. Forts can be bigger than one room, and providing a crawl space between forts provides for additional activity.

Drama time gets your child’s imagination going, as well as their body. Give your children roles to play out, such as a tree losing its leaves, a car on the highway, a happy puppy or a volcano exploding.

Ball tossing games can be tailored to fit your space. Laundry baskets or stock pots can be used as targets, with farther targets getting more points than closer ones. Or play tic-tac-toe with balls or bean bags.

Winter and spring holiday parties not only celebrate the passing of our year together, but can provide a theme around which to build. Plan a menu and cook together, decorate your home and provide holiday-themed activities such as heart relay races, leapfrog and bunny hops or dance parties.

On sunny days, consider taking an outdoor hike, even if just around the block. Games like I-Spy and scavenger hunts lend themselves well to this activity.

Sensory tables are not usually active places, but they can do a lot to take the edge off winter stagnation, especially for children on the autism spectrum or others with enhanced sensory needs. A kitchen sink can function as a wet sensory table. Plug a basin and fill with a few inches of water. Place towels around for easy clean-up. Measuring spoons, a clean honey bear, any other utensil or container that allows for pouring or squirting works well. Also include some items that float, such as a rubber duck. A dry sensory table can be made out of a large food storage container, or even a kiddie pool. Fill partially with rice, beans and/or pasta. A variety of small toys can be hidden within, with small shovels or any sand toys useful for scooping and sifting.

Try a few of these activities to keep your kids occupied, and just remember, spring is almost here.

Carey Smith is a Springfield mother in her 20th winter of helping her kids burn off energy for mutually assured sanity.
Action movies aren’t my thing. If I have a choice of what movie to sit down and watch, you won’t see me picking an action flick. However, if my husband chooses the movie, I may be stuck with an action-packed film, and oddly enough, I often get engrossed in the movie.

Recently, the same thing happened with the latest chapter book I read with my kids, *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky* by Kwame Mbalia. Just like action movies aren’t my jam, the fantasy genre isn’t really my thing, either. However, it’s my 11-year-old daughter’s favorite genre (she started with *Harry Potter*), and my 9-year-old son likes action, so I decided to pick a book they would enjoy, even though I wasn’t convinced I would myself. And luckily, all three of us enjoyed it.

*Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky* is about seventh-grader Tristan Strong, who lives in Chicago but is going to spend some of his summer down in Alabama with his grandparents to help him deal with the recent death of his best friend. The thing is, one night while he’s out on his grandparents’ land, he ends up punching a tree, and that rips a hole right into the sky. Tristan ends up going through the hole and into MidPass, a land where he encounters many Black American gods, like John Henry and Brer Rabbit, who are in a battle to save their land. Since the hole Tristan made is part of the reason for their drama, he becomes part of the team that is trying to save MidPass.

Besides all the action and drama among characters in this book, it was nice to encounter characters we already knew. Both kids had heard about John Henry before, and I remembered reading stories about Brer Rabbit in my own childhood. Another one of the reasons we loved this book was because it was also unexpectedly funny. There’s one character in particular, Gum Baby, that had me and the kids cracking up laughing, so much so that they were begging me to reread her scenes over and over again. *Tristan Strong Punches a*
Hole in the Sky is the first book in a series, so we’ll be reading the next book soon, I’m sure.

Another book we recently enjoyed that was not action-packed, but still a little out of the box for us, was Eyes that Kiss in the Corners by Joanna Ho and illustrated by Dung Ho. It’s a beautiful, poetic picture book. In this story, the main character explains how her eyes are different than others because they are slanted and “kiss in the corners.” The main character is a young girl, and I so admire how confident and appreciative she is about the shape of the eyes of the females in her family. When talking about her grandma’s eyes, she says,

"Amah’s eyes that kiss in the corners and glow like warm tea don’t work like they used to." My kids and I don’t normally gravitate to this type of poetic language, but can appreciate the beautiful message, along with the gorgeous illustration. This made Eyes that Kiss in the Corners a winner in our house.

So, even though a book may not be you or your child’s first choice, you may want to give it a chance anyway. You may end up turning pages while sitting eagerly on the edge of your seats.

Deana Metzke is a wife, mom of two, blogger and book lover who is trying her best to raise children who will enjoy reading long after she’s gone. She is a literary coach at a Springfield elementary school. You can find her talking about children’s books on Twitter at @DMetzke or her blog, raisingreaders.site.
As far as illness goes, winters in our home used to be pretty brutal. In the past, it seemed like every time I turned around, someone had a runny nose, a low-grade temperature or a dreaded night cough that would keep the entire family awake, leaving us all sleep-deprived for days. I was constantly adding Kleenex and cough drops to my shopping lists and asking my husband to stop at the pharmacy on his way home from work to pick up saline spray and children’s Tylenol.

I’d walk around with a can of Lysol in one hand and a tub of Clorox wipes in the other, wiping down and spraying every surface of our home in a pathetic attempt to keep germs at bay, but it was useless, really. When I wasn’t watching my children like the sanitation police and reminding them to cough into their elbows, they were busy eating out of unwashed hands and sharing lollipops with one another. Last night, while I was lying in bed reading a book, I looked over at my husband and asked him the last time anyone in our house had been sick. Staring back at me, I could tell that he was mentally counting back to almost a year ago when my son had a night cough that came in such rapid succession that I remember wondering how on earth he even managed to take a breath. That night, my husband and I attended to all of our son’s needs. We rubbed Vicks vapor rub on his tiny chest, refilled his humidifier and propped his mattress up to help...
clear his airways. When none of those tricks worked, my husband bundled our son up and took him out into the cold night air, which has been our ace in the hole ever since our pediatrician mentioned that sometimes a dramatic change in temperature can “shock the body into reset mode” and help calm an aggravating cough.

No matter what we did, nothing seemed to work, though, and through the closed bedroom window I could hear my exhausted son’s cough echoing out into the silent winter night. The miserable sound was mixed with muffled words of comfort whispered to my son by my ever-patient husband, and my heart broke for all of us. I knew that they were both tired and cold, but I also knew that we had lost this fight. I wanted so badly to be able fix everything, but I knew we were going to have to write the night off as an utter sleep failure. If by some miracle we could fall asleep at the exact moment my husband and son came back inside, we would only have two hours of sleep before we had to get our other two children up and ready for school. Part of me wanted to curl up in a ball and cry, but the other, more seasoned parental part of me climbed out of bed and headed downstairs to start making the morning coffee two hours ahead of schedule.

This winter, we’ve been incredibly lucky that no one in our home has been sick. There hasn’t been a single night when my husband or I have been woken up by the sound of a nagging cough or by a child standing next to our bed telling us that their tummy hurts, and for the most part, I was completely oblivious to it all. The remote learning, the mask wearing and the social distancing (that I so often find myself complaining about), has had a beautiful, unexpected silver lining that I will not take for granted.

In the future, when I look back on these days when life felt so hard, I’ll try to remember that despite all the things I could complain and worry about, a sick child wasn’t one of them.

Lana Shovlin is a freelance writer from Springfield with three kids who is trying to keep their illness-free streak going.
Years before having a family of my own, I had a conversation with my brother-in-law in which he admitted that his favorite time of day was in the morning, before his children had woken up. Not understanding how exhausting parenting can be, I was shocked by his admission and judged him harshly. I pegged him as a “bad” father who didn’t appreciate how amazing children are and I imagined my future parenting mornings filled with sunlight, making homemade pancakes and lots of cuddles from little people whom I loved more than words.

Now, having been a parent for over 10 years, I understand exactly what my brother-in-law was saying. Parenting is wonderful, but it’s nonstop work, and sometimes I need a break from the minutiae of it all. Much like my brother-in-law, I’ve found that the only moments I have alone are early in the morning, when no one else is awake. During that time, I love tiptoeing downstairs, pouring myself a hot cup of coffee and scrolling through Instagram.

For months, this has been my go-to morning routine and I’ve relished every single indulgent, brainless moment of it. I love that golden hour when no one needs anything from me and I’m able to zone out, laugh at silly memes and compare my insides to other people’s outsides.

Recently, though, I noticed that even after an hour of alone time, I wasn’t feeling recharged and ready to tackle
a new day. Instead, I found myself feeling resentful when I heard my family waking up and shuffling around upstairs. Those sleepy sounds signaled that I was seconds away from being back on mom duty, and I still had a lot of things that I wanted to accomplish before the day began. Plus, after seeing all of the amazing things other people were doing on social media, I couldn’t shake the nagging feeling of never being quite good enough. That frustration, coupled with a great article I recently read about how our daily routines have the power to change our lives, made me seriously question how I’ve been spending my free time.

Being on social media for an hour each morning did not mean that I was in some kind of habitual crisis, but I knew that using that time more productively would help me to feel less frazzled throughout the day. Plus, studies show that spending too much time on social media can have a negative impact on our mental health, so I wondered if limiting my time on Instagram might actually make me feel happier.

Making even the smallest adjustments to our routines can seem difficult, so the first thing I did was come up with a plan for how I wanted my mornings to look. I tried to be realistic about the changes I wanted to make and decided that the best way for me to accomplish my goals was to divide my free time into two blocks. My hope was that I could use each block of time as a way to make my mornings more efficient, which, in turn, would make my entire day run more smoothly.

Now, instead of staring at my phone while I wait for the coffee to brew, the first thing I do in the morning is some light stretching. Standing in my kitchen, I spend my first block of time taking some deep breaths, doing some sun salutations and touching my toes a few times. I hate exercising first thing in the morning, so trust me when I say that these small movements are nothing fancy, but I’ve been amazed at how they’ve helped me feel so much more energized and ready to face the day.

My second block of time is devoted to making lists. As it turns out, the extremely simple act of jotting things down on a piece of paper has been a great motivational tool for me. In the past, I’ve often felt overwhelmed by all my daily tasks and excelled in procrastination, but being able to physically see my daily goals has made me feel much more grounded. Plus, there is no better feeling than striking through items on a to-do list.

I’ve been practicing my new morning routine for a few weeks now, and I’m amazed at how much more productive and relaxed I feel. No longer does it seem like my free time has been wasted, and when I hear my family waking up in the morning, I’m excited to see their sweet faces. By putting forth a little effort, I’ve been able to make a few positive changes to my life, and that’s worth taking a break from Instagram.

Lana Shovlin is a Springfield mother of three who loves her family as well as the occasional times without them.
A New Kind of House Call

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