

Imitation plays a huge part in how kids get to know the world around them – a one-year-old can start walking after watching her father stroll around the house; a toddler can learn to talk by listening to his mother on the phone. As the primary role models in their child's life, parents have an enormous impact on how children view fitness and nutrition, and the example they set is often for life. Unfortunately, adults who had negative experiences with exercise during their own childhoods (such as being picked last for their school sports team) frequently pass that example onto their own kids, creating a cycle of fitness apathy that's hard to break. If this precedent has been set, it can be overcome with a few changes to your mindset and routine. Here are a few easy ways to help make it happen.

WHAT STANDS BETWEEN FAMILIES AND FITNESS?

Aside from a fundamental unwillingness to start exercising, being short on time and not having the motivation are the two major barriers to families adopting a healthier lifestyle.

Lack of free time

Let's face it. Life in these modern times is busy, and fitting fitness into a packed schedule of work, friends and family commitments can be something of a juggling act for adults, even before they try to set an example for their kids. If you're pushed for time, learn ways of multitasking (see box above).

Loss of motivation

One of the biggest contributors to fitness apathy is a cultural shift towards sedentary behaviour as technology progresses. A recent Australian government study showed that a large portion of families are living largely sedentary lifestyles, watching TV or playing video games on weekends instead of playing outdoor sports. So how can we motivate kids (and each other) to swap the PlayStation for a pair of runners?

GET OFF THE COUCH TRICKS

Start gradually and family members may not even realise the changes you're making. Introduce them to exercise by taking 'long cuts', such as leaving the car in the garage and walking to school, the shops or train station. Allow for time to walk to destinations, as it's great for bonding – you and your kids can chat and listen without interruption. Increase your activity levels, disguising the effort factor by making it

DOUBLE DUTY

These easy multitasking ideas will help you squeeze exercise into your busy schedule.

Wash the car by hand. You'll get a workout filled with stretches and bends, and your car will appreciate the attention. The same applies for gardening.

Study or make telephone calls while you're walking, jogging on a treadmill or working out on a stationary bike.

Walk to school, the office or the local shops instead of driving.

fun. Play games and organise outings, such as a family bike ride, rather than sitting on the couch and watching a movie.

Use exercise as a reward

Provide gifts that encourage activity, like a skateboard, bike or hula hoop. Treat your kids to a trip to the park instead of to a fast-food restaurant. Remember that participating in sports without the competition factor is more enjoyable for younger kids. Be aware of how you communicate about body image and exercise so that your message is a positive one.

Make exercise fun for everyone

Kids are going to struggle with fitness if they aren't enjoying what they're doing. Here are some age-appropriate exercises that will encourage the whole family to get out there.

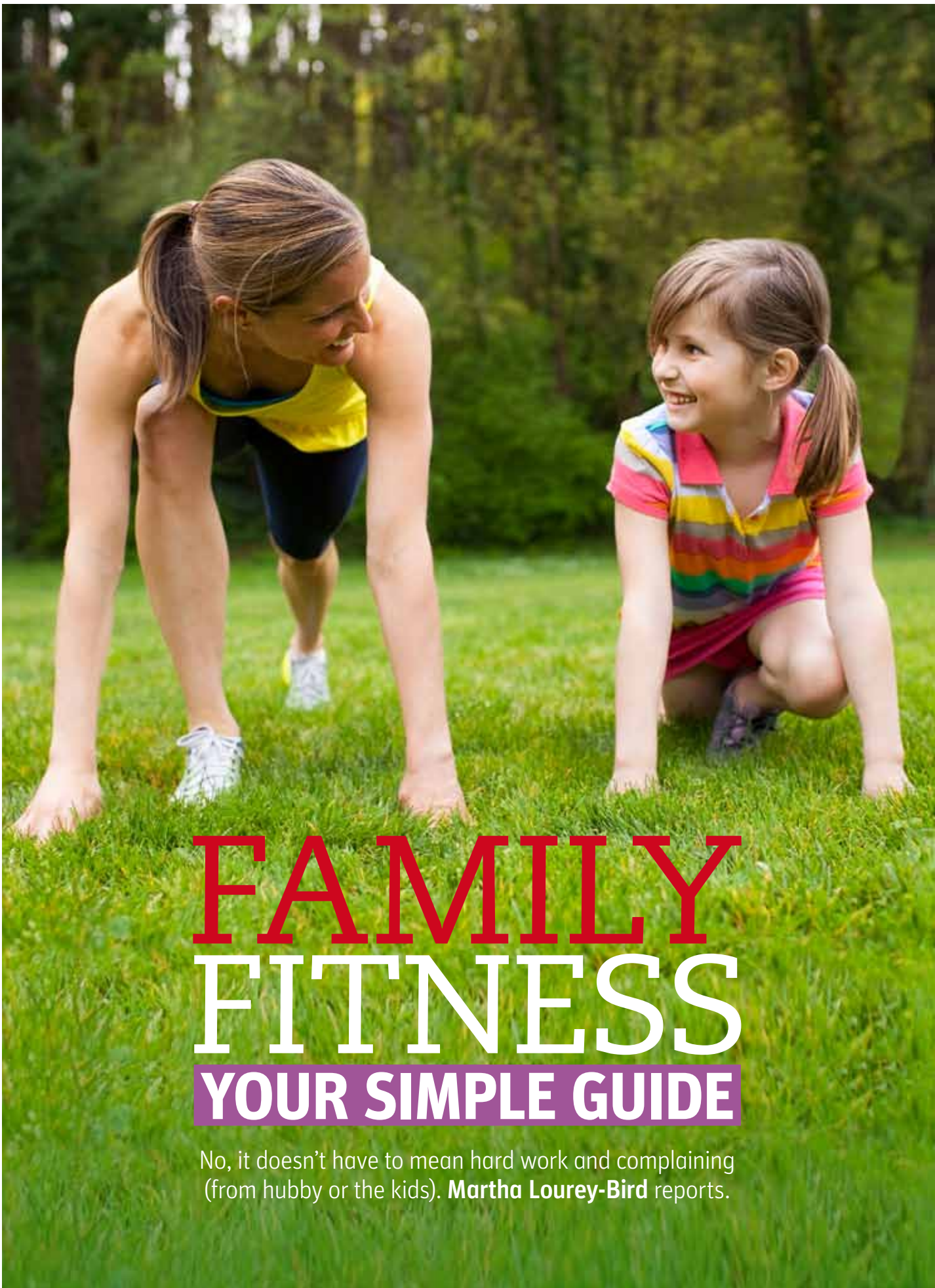
Ages 1–5 Buy active play equipment, such as tricycles and balls. Arrange daily outings to a playground that has climbing equipment, enrol in weekly swimming lessons and let your children walk rather than always sitting in a pram.

Ages 6–11 Encourage activities such as swimming, bike and scooter riding, Frisbee, bowling, bat and ball, kite flying and trampolining. Organise family fun excursions to the beach, park, rock climbing centre or ice-skating rink.

Ages 12–18 Support active interests, such as bike riding, skateboarding and surfing. Encourage your children to walk to the bus stop and local shops or play competitive sports on the weekends, such as netball, soccer or rugby.

Ages 19–55 Join a gym, go to Pump or Pilates classes, train for a fun run or get friends together for a weekly game of football or tennis. Book active holidays rather than trips where you end up lying under a beach umbrella. Try social outings, like a 'walk and talk' for mums (instead of coffee and cake) or touch footy for dads (instead of beer at the pub).

Ages 55+ Continue doing incidental exercise, such as housework, gardening and walking, but keep exercise fun and social by joining gym classes or Tai Chi, line dancing, aqua fitness, or playing golf and bowls with friends. **WWW**



FAMILY FITNESS

YOUR SIMPLE GUIDE

No, it doesn't have to mean hard work and complaining (from hubby or the kids). **Martha Lourey-Bird** reports.