

Off the couch!

Childhood obesity is reaching epidemic proportions in Australia. But if your kids would rather watch TV than lace up their footy boots, don't panic – help is at hand

With online social networking and gaming, children no longer have to go outside or even get out of their chairs to interact with friends. Many kids spend large chunks of their time in front of a screen and it's starting to show. One in four Australian children is overweight or obese, putting them at risk of serious health problems and causing the Australian Medical Association to predict that this generation may well be the first not to outlive their own parents.

Is your child getting enough exercise? Lack of exercise is a major contributor to obesity and, while schools have now introduced more physical education, it's important that parents do their bit, too. Figures from 2006 released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that even children who are involved in organised sporting activities only spend an average of six hours over two weeks on sport. Compare that to the time spent on TV, video and DVDs – 20 hours over two weeks – and you can see why we have a problem.

The National Physical Activity Guidelines state that children need at least an hour of exercise every day, made up of both moderate and vigorous activity. So some of their exercise should have them huffing and puffing. Not all children are natural athletes and many will avoid exercise, so here are some strategies to get your mini couch potatoes up and moving.

● DANCE!

'Dancing improves fitness, flexibility, mobility, creativity and stamina,' says Jeff Meiners, who lectures in dance education at the University of South Australia. Younger children love to jump around to the Wiggles or Hi-Five, but dance is good exercise for kids of any age, and Meiners believes it should be included in the school curriculum. For many teenage girls, dance is their only physical activity, but in recent years there has also been an increase in the number of boys interested in dance. Check your local directory for classes in your area.

● SCRAP THE SCREEN

Exercise scientist Martha Lourey-Bird, author of *Exercise And The F Word... Fun!* (\$24.95, Insight), suggests taking stock of 'bottom business'. 'If you calculate the time spent sitting in a classroom or being driven to school, there's a lot of time spent sitting on your bottom,' she says. 'Reduce this by gradually cutting back on screen time and encouraging children to play more actively.'

● DITCH THE CAR

Join a walking school bus, a program for primary school children that allows them to walk safely in groups to and from school with supervision by at least two parent 'drivers'. By leaving the car at home you'll be reducing traffic and pollution around the school and doing your bit to reduce greenhouse gases. For more information about the walking school bus visit www.travelsmart.gov.au.

● FLY A KITE

Keeping the kite in the air provides focus and distraction, so you're often exercising without even knowing you're doing it! Kite flying is a healthy outdoor activity that requires eye-hand co-ordination without the benefit of an electronic games controller, making it an ideal activity for kids and parents to enjoy together. This is not usually a competitive sport but it is often a social activity and a great way to make new friends.

● HAVE A GO!

Your kids may not be Olympians but they can still enjoy the fun of sport. The trick is to play a game for the enjoyment and not the glory of winning, says Martha. 'There are so many sports to try. It's all about participation rather than competition.'

Make it fun and they won't even know it's exercise



FEATURE BY LYNN LLEVELLYN PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

● LEAD THE WAY

There's no point simply nagging your child to get up and be active, says Martha. If you're active yourself and positive about the health benefits of regular exercise, your children will be, too. 'Children pay attention to what you do rather than what you say,' she explains. 'Start off gradually and try stop-start activities rather than prolonged exercise, especially for younger children who can become bored easily.'

● GIVE GENEROUSLY

Give gifts that encourage physical activity. 'Roller blades, bikes, trampolines, tennis racquets – the possibilities are endless,' says Martha. 'These sorts of gifts are much healthier in the long run than a computer game.'

● GET A JOB

Get a job. A paper run or delivering pamphlets is a great way to exercise because it's a regular activity that requires walking or cycling and carrying some weight. Parents are often involved but if you're on driving duty, park the car and walk a reasonable distance – throwing the paper from an open car window defeats the purpose. Earning pocket money and developing a sense of responsibility and a healthy work ethic are the bonuses, especially for older children.

● PLAN AHEAD

We can all increase our kids' active time by planning healthy weekends and holidays, Martha says. 'Instead of sitting in a cinema, why not go for a bike ride, organise a game of cricket or football? Every weekend, choose to do something active as a family and plan fun, active holidays, too.'

● GET A DOG

Walking is an exercise that suits all ages and fitness levels and is a great thing to do with your kids each day. 'It gets you out and about and is an excellent opportunity to catch up and have some one-on-one time with your child,' says Martha. 'Children can also take a skateboard, scooter or bicycle.'

▶ Home gym for kids

If you have trouble getting the kids to turn off the TV, there are a few active alternatives available to get them off the couch, if not necessarily out the door.

Go for a Wii. As games consoles go, Nintendo has come up with a healthier approach with the Wii. The motion-sensitive hand controller means children are doing more than just pressing buttons – you need to actually move to make the Wii work. Activities include throwing a ball, swinging a racquet and boxing. Add the latest Wii Fit program and you'll have more than 40 different aerobic, muscle and yoga exercises designed to improve strength, balance and co-ordination.

Cost: Around \$400 for the console and \$120 for Wii Fit.

Get activated! *Active Kidz* is a DVD fitness program based on the popular ABC TV program of the same name. Designed for children aged three to 12, the DVD is broken into five-minute segments covering healthy eating, physical activity and fun. Hosted by two very enthusiastic kids' fitness instructors, each segment ends with an aerobic routine that kids can pick up easily. There are also *Active Kidz* music CDs and board games available from www.activekidz.com.au.

Cost: \$20 for DVD and \$15 for CD and cassettes.