Family wellness challenges

How can you motivate your child to live a healthy lifestyle? Turn nutritious eating, exercising, and getting enough sleep into fun family challenges. Use these ideas to get started.

Challenge #1: Fruit and veggie bingo
Have each person create a bingo card with five rows and five columns. In each square, write or draw produce (orange, green beans, sweet potato). Then, swap cards and cross out each one you eat this week (a strawberry smoothie counts). Everyone who gets five in a row wins.

Tip: Involve relatives you’ll visit with during the holidays.

Challenge #2: Fit weekends
Brainstorm fitness-related activities to enjoy together. Some ideas: hold a dance-off, play balloon volleyball, have a snowball fight, visit a recreation center. Ask your youngster to write one on your calendar every weekend. As you complete each activity, he can color in that day’s calendar square.

Challenge #3: Sleep tracking
Getting enough sleep gives your child energy to run and play. Let him make a “sleep chart” with a column for each family member. For one week, write down the time you turn out the lights and the time you wake up. Draw a star in your column for each night you get the recommended amount of sleep (kids need 9–11 hours, adults need 7–9).

Edible art
Suggest that your youngster use her plate as a canvas and create a work of art she can eat! Help her select healthy snacks in different shapes and colors. Maybe she’ll make a “portrait” with mini turkey-meatball eyes, a cheese-cube nose, a red bell pepper mouth—and a drizzle of marinara hair.

Active with pets
Need an easy way to encourage your child to move more? Let him help with pet care. He could walk the dog around the block after dinner or throw toys for the cat to chase. Tip: If you don’t have a pet, he might ask to play with a relative’s or a neighbor’s pet.

Did you know?
You’ll save money and boost your youngster’s nutrition by using parts of fruits and vegetables that you normally throw away. For example, peel broccoli stems, then cut them into “coins” to add to soups. Also, consider making a pesto out of leafy green carrot tops or grating citrus peel onto steamed veggies.

Just for fun
Q: Why did the golfer have an extra pair of pants?
A: In case he got a hole in one!

Save on fitness equipment
Inspire your youngster to stay fit by keeping an assortment of sports and exercise gear handy. Consider these suggestions to help her stock up on a budget:

- Ask family and friends if they have equipment they no longer use. Perhaps your brother can pass along a softball mitt his daughter has outgrown. A friend may offer an old tennis racket.
- Search flea markets, thrift shops, and online yard sales. For just a few dollars, you might find a gently used balance ball or yoga mat (disinfect before use). Or you could buy a jump rope, a can of tennis balls, or a Frisbee for less than a dollar.

Note: Always make sure used gear is in good condition.

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Kitchen safety for kids

Confidence in the kitchen can set your youngster up for a lifetime of healthy eating. Before the two of you cook together, share these basic safety rules. Note: Always supervise your child in the kitchen.

Practice cleanliness. Explain that your youngster should avoid spreading germs by washing her hands in warm, soapy water before and after touching food. Point out that it’s also important to wipe counters and wash cutting boards that come in contact with uncooked meat or eggs.

Avoid burns. Show your child how to turn pot handles toward the back of the stove to avoid accidental bumps. Also, teach her to never touch anything hot (pans, plates) with bare hands. She could practice using potholders by carrying dishes that aren’t hot.

Use knives carefully. Demonstrate the “two-hand” technique: One hand grips the knife firmly while the other holds the food in a “claw” position (fingers curled under). Tip: Have your youngster start with a plastic or butter knife and soft foods like bananas or bread.

O&A

Healthier beverage choices

Q: With holiday parties coming up, how can I help my daughter steer clear of soda and choose healthier drinks?

A: One easy solution for parties? Offer to supply beverages! Drop off a gallon or two of fat-free milk—it’s perfect for dunking holiday cookies. Or let your daughter help you make a bowl of healthy punch to share. She could choose a flavor of sparkling water and decide what kind of fruit to mix in.

Before you go to a party, talk to your daughter about making good choices. Keep in mind that banning treats completely may make them more tempting to her. For example, suggest that she drink just one glass of chocolate milk or apple juice, then switch to water or regular fat-free milk for the rest of the party.

Better-for-you appetizers

Chips, mozzarella sticks, and deviled eggs are popular among kids—and they can actually be nutritious. Try these recipes.

Tortilla chips
Cut 6 small corn tortillas into 6 wedges each. Combine 3 tbsp. lime juice, 1 tbsp. olive oil, and ½ tsp. salt. Arrange wedges in a single layer on a baking sheet, and brush both sides with the mixture. Bake at 350° for 15 minutes, flipping once.

Baked cheese sticks
Combine ½ cup whole-grain breadcrumbs with 1 tsp. each onion powder, garlic powder, and salt. In a separate bowl, beat 1 egg. One at a time, dunk 12 part-skim mozzarella cheese sticks into the egg, then coat with the breadcrumb mixture. Bake at 425° for 10–15 minutes.

Vegetable deviled eggs
Peel 6 hard-boiled eggs, and cut in half. Scoop the yolks into a bowl, and add 3 tbsp. fat-free Greek yogurt and ½ tbsp. Dijon mustard. Then, stir in 2 tbsp. each diced cucumber and tomato. Divide the mixture among the egg whites.
Healthy Changes
We’ve Made

One step at a time, your family can become healthier! Share the stories below from tweens, teens, and parents to give your youngster inspiration for eating better and exercising more.

What the kids said…

Remember breakfast
“Twas always rushing to get to school, and I often skipped breakfast. I know it’s important to eat so my body has fuel to make it through the day. My mom and I came up with ideas for healthy foods to grab on the way out the door. My favorites are whole-grain toast with mashed avocado, and a ‘breakfast dog’—a banana covered in peanut butter and wrapped in a whole-wheat tortilla. Then, some days I eat breakfast in the cafeteria.”

Eat smaller portions
“In health class, we talked about how food portions have gotten so much bigger from when our parents were kids. In fact, my teacher said bagels are nearly twice the size they were 20 years ago. She gave us the idea to use smaller plates and bowls when we eat. The size helps me remember to eat smaller, and healthier, portions.”

Squeeze in fitness
“I read in a magazine that everyone should do 60 minutes of physical activity a day. I couldn’t figure out how to fit in an hour a day, so my friends and I brainstormed a bunch of ways to add in mini-workouts. Now we go the long way in the hall between classes, and when we hang out after school, we get a bat and ball and practice hitting and catching. I’m also using homework breaks for crunches, lunges, and other quick exercises.”

Get enough sleep
“Something my PE teacher mentioned one day really hit home. She said that when you’re over-tired, it’s harder to exercise. I’ve been trying to sleep at least eight hours every night. I learned that when I get enough sleep, I’m more in the mood to be active. Plus, a good night’s sleep also helps me do better in school, since I’m more alert.”

Avoid processed foods
“My soccer coach wanted us to bring healthy snacks, like an apple or nuts, to practice. He said that in general, the more ingredients a food has, the less healthy it is for you. I started looking at food labels, and I can’t believe how many ingredients are in potato chips! Now it’s kind of a game I play—to look for snacks that are healthy and have the shortest ingredient lists.”

Rethink dessert
“Whenever I ate dinner at my best friend’s house, they had some kind of fruit for dessert. For me, dessert had always meant ice cream, brownies, or cookies. But the fruit is so refreshing—and I don’t feel gross afterward. Now when I want something sweet after dinner, I reach for fruit instead.”

Picture success
“This spring, I began trying to be more active, and I felt great. To stay motivated, I posted a picture of myself by the bathroom mirror. The photo shows me biking with friends and having fun—it reminds me to keep working out.”

continued
What the parents said...

Lose together
“M y teen wanted to lose weight, but he said he had no clue where to start. I told him I had been thinking about losing a few pounds myself, and maybe we could motivate each other. We decided to make one change each month, like cutting out soda or taking up tennis. It has been three months, and we’re steadily working toward a healthy weight together. It’s fun to cheer each other on—and succeed.”

Enjoy every bite
“My neighbor is a nutritionist, and she offered this easy tip to eat more slowly: Put your fork down between bites. That way, she said, you give yourself time to chew your food and appreciate the flavors. I’ve been encouraging my tween to do this, and we’ve noticed that when we take our time, we are more aware of when we’ve had enough to eat.”

Set a kitchen curfew
“It seemed like our family was always snacking right up until bedtime. I thought that if we ‘closed’ the kitchen at a certain time, we could avoid eating into the night. We agreed on 8:30 p.m. as our kitchen curfew. Once that time hits, we don’t go into the kitchen until the morning. You wouldn’t believe how much better we feel!”

Make an exercise plan
“My cousin posted this idea on Facebook. He put together a monthly workout plan with a fitness activity for each day, such as doing a core-strengthening video or walking the dog. I liked his idea, so I made a copy to show my family. Then, we came up with our own ideas and put together our own workout plan. I’m proud that we are now able to get in exercise every day.”

Blend in vegetables
“I wanted my kids to eat more vegetables, but they weren’t fans. Then, I saw an idea in a magazine for a spinach smoothie. It made a great after-school snack, and my kids didn’t even notice the spinach because it’s blended with plain Greek yogurt, frozen raspberries, and pineapple chunks. Next I’m going to try carrot smoothies.”

Think lean
“When I buy meat, I look for the leanest cuts by checking the percentage of fat. I also get skinless chicken, or I take off the skin before cooking it. And I try to serve fish twice a week. Another idea that has worked well is Meatless Monday—every Monday we have something like omelets or brown-rice-and-vegetable bowls to change things up a bit.”

Choose healthier salads
“I’ve always encouraged my family to order salads when we eat out, so I was surprised when a friend said restaurant salads aren’t always the best choice. She said they often have ingredients that add lots of calories, like creamy dressings, cheese, croutons, and bacon bits. Now when we order salads, we skip the extras and ask for a lighter dressing on the side.”

Editor’s Note: Teen Food & Fitness™ is reviewed by a registered dietitian. Consult a physician before beginning any major change in diet or exercise.