

Active parenting

Regular exercise can help you handle the demands of being a successful parent and nurture common bonds with your children, writes Patricia Carswell. But if it's motivation you need, look beyond the gym

My aversion to sport was always a point of pride. "I don't do sport," I would sniff, citing a hamstring injury sustained during a mothers' race as evidence that games were bad for you. But as my children grew older and sport became a central feature of their lives, I started to feel a bit left out. I watched with envy the satisfaction they got from exercising – not to mention the sheer amount of food it enabled them to eat.

I can't be sure if it was curiosity or greed that finally peeled me off the sofa, but either way I found myself taking tentative steps towards a life of fitness – and with it discovered common ground with my children that I hadn't expected. Just as other parents were lamenting the lack of communication with their grunting teenagers, I was debating with mine over personal bests and running techniques. Instead of bickering over pick-up times we were discussing press-ups and planks.

As I started to develop a more youthful physique, my kids developed a grudging respect for their hitherto aged mother. "My mum can run that faster than that," laughed my son as his friends staggered across the line in training. A backhanded compliment, perhaps, but a compliment nonetheless.

It's not just finding topics of conversation with teenagers that becomes easier when you take to the treadmill. Christine Knight-Maunder, a lawyer and mother of three, 40, finds that the benefits extend to her whole life.

"Since I started training seven years ago, I am stronger, a lot thinner and generally healthier. Exercising first thing in the morning puts me in a good mood for the rest of the day and I am definitely slower to rise to the bait, whether it is thrown at me at work or by my children."

Most importantly, Christine values her exercise routine as "me time". "I think it's important because some time away from your responsibilities as wife, mother, employee and general grown-up is incredibly refreshing."

Corey Oliver, the founder of the Original Fitness Co in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, is equally passionate about the benefits of an active life



It's important to make the time to keep fit and a family day out jogging is a great way to exercise now that the weather is getting cooler. iStockphoto

for busy parents. "The older we become the more sedentary we tend to get. We need to reverse that trend and become more active if we want to be in peak condition to handle the demands of being a successful parent. It's important to maintain your health and keep fit, as parents are responsible not only for themselves, but for their family."

Of course, it's easy to be aware of the advantages – anyone who's tried to outrun a toddler will vouch for the need for sprinting skills – but for many parents it's finding the motivation and the time that is the greatest challenge.

If you're lacking in inclination and the thought of spin classes fills you with horror, there are plenty of other options: sport doesn't have to be gym or class-based.

A growing number of parents in Dubai have taken up rowing – a sport which, perhaps surprisingly, works the lower body as much as the upper

Monty Khwaja, the founder of Monty's Rowing School in Dubai Creek, talks enthusiastically of a sport that keeps him fit while taking him past flocks of flamingoes: by anybody's reckoning a more enticing view than the four walls of a gym.

"We do have mums and dads that row," he says. "We take pride in showing people the art of rowing and seeing them discover all the benefits of this truly great sport."

Other spirited parents take advantage of their proximity to the sea to go scuba diving. Many hotels run PADI courses, and some go on overnight diving trips to Musandam: a watery world away from pumping iron.

Even if this sounds heavenly, though, the chances are that what holds you back is time. Oliver acknowledges that it's not easy to fit anything else into a crammed schedule.

"It's no wonder parents get out of

shape; they don't have time to take care of themselves. Working parents spend at least eight hours a day working outside of the home; they also have to work taking care of the home".

Nevertheless, Oliver insists that it's worth making the time and advocates diarising exercise in the same way that you would with any other appointment.

For fitness fanatic Knight-Maunder, the answer was to hire a personal trainer; it was harder to find excuses when someone else was involved. Meeting once a week, he got her started, encouraged her and, crucially, never laughed at her initial attempts at press-ups or bicycle sprints.

"Now I can hold my own with a group of younger men and women with whom I get together for a group exercise session."

If a personal trainer is beyond your reach and you can't manage time

away from home, making use of the hours you spend with your children can be the solution. Now that the temperatures are starting to drop, heading outdoors for a family outing can be an attractive option.

The Corniche in Abu Dhabi and Jumeirah Beach in Dubai are perfect places for a family swim or even a cycle ride, and there are tennis courts in most residential areas. If you fancy getting out of the city, you could take the kids hiking in the desert. And if you crave some cooler air, there's always Ski Dubai or the skating rink at Zayed Sports City to raise the heart rate.

Whatever your age, body shape, interests or lifestyle, with a little determination and imagination you're bound to find something active that you can do. And if you start now, who knows? When it comes to next year's sports day, you might even pick up a medal instead of an injury.

* corey oliver's fitness tips for parents

Make fitness a priority

Set aside 20 minutes three times a week and put this in your calendar in the same way you would any other appointment.

Start slowly

If you're new to exercising, start slowly and work up to 20 minutes. Do some research to determine what your exercising heart rate should be.

Make it fun

Enlist your friends to join you and you could all feel better.

Get your family involved

Take a walk after dinner or ride bicycles. If you have a pool, swimming is a great form of exercise.

Manage your time

If you're too busy to take 20 minutes out of your day, write down what everyone in the family does each day. Decide what activities can be cancelled so you can all take time to take care of yourselves.

teen life

Living as a green teenager takes a lot of energy

Everywhere we go nowadays, we are bombarded by encouragement to be more environmentally aware. You would think that the green revolution had been around for a long enough time for people to realise that all the fuel they're consuming driving to the recycling centre is not going to be offset by the couple of bottles they're dumping into the recycling bins.

The teenager is often the most affected, seeing how we are reminded, every day in school, of the importance of practising sustainability and bequeathing to future generations a planet unspoiled by human activity. See? There's no way I could have made that up on my own, or remembered words such as "bequeath" or "sustainability" if they hadn't been drummed into my head regularly for years and years. I had a joined the Eco Club at school a year ago, being younger and less experienced than I am

now, to make my report look better. We sat about for a bit discussing Kyoto protocols, then took an oath – yes an oath – but refused to sign anything in blood, as suggested by an eager member. The oath was to pledge to promote the idea of eco-friendliness whenever we could.

The next day, as we sat colouring in and cutting up bits of paper, which are the most important skills you need for geography classes, a fellow member of the Eco Club turned to the class and ordered that they put their waste paper in the recycling bins instead of the rubbish bin. Never the leader, I watched apprehensively as he delved into a mini lecture about the importance of preserving the Earth's carbon sinks. The resulting stares he received were enough to put me off showing my feelings for the Earth too blatantly, if at all. I know all the talk about why learning about this at an early age is

so important. Don't take care of the planet, and the planet gets choked up by carbon dioxide. The planet gets choked up by carbon dioxide, and we can't survive. We can't survive, so we die. I get all that. I just don't think there's the need for global warming to feature as part of the specification in at least three different subjects, every year, since Year 7. And now I'm in Year 11, so that's saying something.

When I was a po-faced 13-year-old, my wasteful family had, in my narrowed eyes, a shockingly large carbon footprint, so I took it upon myself to stop them from wreaking destruction upon our world. I am ashamed to admit it, but I did take teachers reasonably seriously in those dark days. Door-slamming episodes were rife in my house, only it was because I felt it was disgusting that the bathroom lights had been left on for well over an hour when no one

was using it. Under my stern surveillance, ordinary, perfectly functioning light bulbs were replaced with energy saving ones that were too dim for reading. I made sure I purchased special reading lamps, so I wouldn't have to squint while flipping through magazines when it was dark. I didn't care enough about the planet to bear the discomfort of the faint glow of the energy-saving bulbs; it was just the action of installing them that counted. A teenager who cares about the welfare of anything other than himself (which does not cover teenagers who want to save the planet so it doesn't get choked up by carbon dioxide and they die) is an oxymoron.

Once when I was at my friend Jenna's house, I put forward the admirable proposition that we double glaze the windows – one of the solutions we have been writing down in all our essays on global warming

and alternative energy and so on. Jenna managed to procure a screwdriver, and we drilled a hole into the wall. We had been hoping to come to the gap in the wall, which numerous websites and textbooks assure us exists, so we would be able to fill the gap with sand or cotton, thus providing an extra layer of insulation and minimising heat loss (I don't even know if double glazing works for AC units too). Anyway, all we succeeded in doing was cause some white paint to flake off and a handful of rubble to dislodge itself from the wall. Jenna's dad came in before we could get any further, and I made myself scarce. It was an uncomfortable moment. To tell the truth, I'm a bit tired of all this eco-warrior stuff.

* Lavanya Malhotra

• The writer is a 15-year-old student in Dubai.

dad matters

The hypnotic pleasures of a trip to the Night Garden

"Igglepiggle iggle-ogg. We're going to catch... the Pinky Ponk." So begins another episode of *In the Night Garden*, a children's television show first broadcast by the BBC in 2007, and which sadly, it was announced last week, will now no longer be made. The programme, now past its hundredth episode and sold to 35 countries, has become a global phenomenon in three years, and like millions of parents around the world, I received the news that there will be no more fresh encounters with its gentle, charming characters, with great dismay.

Astrid is fanatical about *In the Night Garden* and demands to watch it at least 100 times a day. She indicates this desire by running the index finger of her right hand around the palm of her left hand. She picked up the gesture from the programme's title sequence. It begins with a child in bed. The child, who is different in each episode, traces a circle on the palm of his or her hand while drifting off to sleep. The scene cuts to a stop motion animation of a furry blue character called Iggle Piggle sitting in a one-man boat on a dark and foreboding sea.

In rich and mellifluous tones, the narrator Derek Jacobi, a veteran actor more accustomed to iambic pentameters and Shakespearean verse than children's rhymes, explains that this little boat is going round and round the child's palm. Iggle Piggle is also going to sleep and as his boat heads towards the horizon, its lone light mingles with the stars in the sky and the camera pans upwards. The stars blossom into big white flowers which part to reveal the night garden, a realm populated by a host of characters including Iggle Piggle. The sequence, which lasts just over a minute and is accompanied by a memorable, if soporific, tune, is one of the clearest and most elegant explanations of going to sleep for children I have seen.

Sleep looms large in a child's life. It happens at least twice every 24 hours, but it is pretty difficult to explain to a young child what it is and how it happens. You can go to sleep at the same time as your child, but you cannot go to sleep with them. It is a lonely expedition, one that the programme's title sequence explains through metaphor so effectively.

The main problem with *In the Night Garden* is that it is just too good. Unlike *Teletubbies*, which was created by the same production company, this programme has a range of excellent conceits to keep parents interested as well as children. It toys with scale in ways reminiscent of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Its music and songs are so catchy, you find yourself singing them intermittently during the day. A chorus of birds called the Tittifers, who move in time to the music to give the impression they are playing instruments, are a surreal joy and never fail to raise a chuckle. The show can be watched across the Middle East on the Baraem children's channel with Arabic translation. I haven't seen this version as we watch it on DVD on the computer, but I'm intrigued by how the translators cope with the barrage of nonsense neologisms that make up so much of the show with the exception of the narration.

If parents find a children's programme annoying, they are much more likely to enforce the viewing guidelines set out by the American Academy of Pediatrics, which discourage watching television for children younger than two years old and suggest limiting the time spent watching television to one to two hours for older children. Astrid is nearly 18 months old and, according to these recommendations, should be screen-free. It is so hard to do, especially when I look forward to a trip to the night garden almost as much as she does.

* Robert Carroll