

# Fathering for Family Health and

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**A**s we move forward into the second decade of a new century, the importance of individual fitness and healthy nutrition is at an all-time high. Regular exercise and sound nutrition have been validated by extensive research to be cornerstones of physical well-being, stress reduction and healthy living. Among the variety of resources available to individuals and families on these vital aspects of healthy family living, I'd like to focus awareness on help from an unexpected resource — fathers.

I often claim that fathers are the most important and underutilized resource in America today to strengthen families and improve family health and well-being. How can men take steps to promote family health through fitness, nutrition and family togetherness?

Parents have a few “family keys” they can use to help their family function well and move toward healthy family living. Perhaps the most important family key is family meal times. This article provides several “family keys” that fathers and father figures can use to further family health and be a positive influence in the physical well-being of family members.

## **Make family meal times a central priority in how your family functions, connects with each other and promotes healthy family living.**

- Arrange work schedules, if possible, so each family member can come together for an arranged family meal time four or more times a week. Such consistency takes planning and dedication. For men, this means leaving work regularly at a reasonable time, being at home with family members and taking an active part in meal preparation and support.
- Make meal time a genuine family time without other distractions. Men can put aside their own distractions (newspaper, TV, etc.) and assist children or others to focus on being together and communicating. Listen, ask questions and engage each other

in positive conversations. Make sure that meal time is family fun time, not family fight time (leave disagreements for other times).

- Model a positive example of healthy nutrition at meal time by watching portion sizes and eating a variety of healthy foods (grains, vegetables, fruits, proteins, etc.).

## **Set personal guidelines for regular exercise efforts and healthy nutrition practices that can serve as a positive example to other family members.**

- Fatherhood is leadership, and it is the most important kind of leadership. Be willing to assume this responsibility among family members by establishing your own exercise program and staying actively engaged in physical activities (walking, biking, swimming, hiking, etc.).
- Children and other family members are encouraged in what to eat and how to eat by the example that adults set in family life. As a father, be a positive example by learning about nutrition, eating in a healthy manner and avoiding unhealthy substances or using them in moderation only (alcohol, tobacco, etc.).

## **Support other family members in their efforts to learn about healthy living, make healthy choices and improve their own health habits.**

- Support from other family members, especially from a spouse or father, can make all the difference for family members who are trying to improve their own healthy living practices. For example, men can give positive support and encouragement to weight loss efforts, healthy eating or exercise programs that family members pursue. Also, avoid criticism or put-downs of a family member's efforts to eat more healthfully or exercise regularly.
- Engage with a child, spouse or other family member in learning about healthy eating options and

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exercise options. Study together, ask questions and support children in school projects that may teach them about healthy living. Select two or three healthy living practices that you'd like to pursue together at home (for example, drink more water daily, walk 20 minutes a day).

- Be positive and encouraging instead of discouraging or dismissive about body size, physical image or activity levels. Men have a big influence, especially on boys and girls at home, by what they say and encourage regarding healthy living.

## **Pursue with family members an active lifestyle that involves healthy nutrition, physical activity and positive lifestyle choices.**

- We live in an increasingly sedentary world where we communicate via cell phone or electronic networks and observe activities rather than participate in them. Limit “screen time” (computer or television) in the home and disconnect from electronic activities for a substantial portion of each day, focusing instead on direct family interactions and activities.
- Fathers like to play, and active play is one of the best ingredients for family fitness and fun. Get involved in family activities that involve play and physical effort, such as hide-and-seek, tag, basketball, swimming, hiking or any other meaningful physical activity.

Men occasionally may need to change habits or focus on more healthy living efforts regarding exercise or nutrition, but they can have a big influence on the direction of family health and well-being. These family keys can enable men, fathers especially, to be the positive influence that their children and other family members need as they learn a positive and healthy lifestyle.

