

Modelling Behaviours

The holidays are fast approaching and parents often ask us, "What can we do to get our children off the couch, away from the television and computer and outside playing?" We all know that promoting physical activity in our young people is highly desirable, but how can we make it happen? In fact how can we make our children do anything?

It's a fair question about getting our children outside to play and there are many factors which have made this harder for modern parents. The lure of online connection with their friends keeps many of our children reluctant to put down their phones and iPods. Many of us are reluctant to allow our children to head down to the local park or beach, or even walk to school unsupervised.

The answer we most often give is, "Model the behaviour you want to see in your children." A current TV advertisement tells us, "Kids learn their attitudes to alcohol long before they are old enough to drink." This same principle applies to many other things. If you want your children to prefer playing outside, take them outside to play and play with them. Take them to the park or the beach and engage in the very behaviours you think they should be doing. Swim, play cricket, kick the soccer ball or build a kite and fly it. Use the holidays to plan family outings, bushwalks, BBQs and bike rides. Engage the children in the decision making and planning. If it's raining and you think it's a good day to read, read to them or be seen reading. Tell them why you love a good book, know what they are reading and talk to them about the stories and plots in their books.

Sometimes children need to "learn" that to play outside can be fun; that a bike ride can be both challenging and rewarding. Set achievable goals, congratulate them for their efforts; even reward them with a destination prize like walking to the local beach, and a hot chocolate when they return. Let them see you having fun kicking the soccer ball around. Kids love to see their parents having fun. They especially love having fun with their parents. Verbalise your own pleasure in your own achievements. "Wow, I really enjoyed that. I love being outside on a sunny day. It really makes me feel good." Children are positively influenced to do the things their parents believe they are good at, "Good job! That was a hard walk. I reckon we could make it as far as Grandma's next time. What do you think?" Don't hold back on your praise and support of the efforts your children make to engage in desirable activities. Create opportunities for them to overhear you singing their praises to others.

We all know that children learn by imitating adults. It is a universal human activity. Modelling behaviour is a very powerful teaching and learning tool. Behaviours that are consistently modelled to children will be "caught" and modelled back both to adults and to each other. Do you smack your child for hitting her sister? or argue with the child who is arguing with you? How do your children witness you resolving conflict or de-stressing after a hard day? What do your children hear you say about your work colleagues? Be assured they are learning these behaviours and attitudes too.

Computer games have it all; they're fun, there are challenges, scores to beat and new highs to achieve. Our challenge as parents (their primary educators) is to teach our children how to discover these challenges and rewards through other means. Modelling them is the way. Be the adult you would like your child to become.

Gai Bath and Andrea Maver

SMC Counsellors

gbath@smc.tas.edu.au

amaver@smc.tas.edu.au