

Parents Can Increase Children’s Activity by Increasing Their Own

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DENVER — Parents concerned about their children’s slothful ways can do something about it, according to research at National Jewish Health. They can increase their own activity. In the July 2012 issue of the *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*, Kristen Holm, PhD, Assistant Professor of Medicine at National Jewish Health, and her colleagues report that, when parents increase their daily activity, as measured by a pedometer, their children increase theirs as well.

“It has long been known that parent and child activity levels are correlated,” said Dr. Holm. “This is the first intervention-based study to prospectively demonstrate that when parents increase their activity, children increase theirs as well. The effect was more pronounced on weekends.”

In the study, 83 families were enrolled in a family-based intervention designed to prevent excess weight gain among overweight and obese children ages 7 to 14. Parents and children participated in a program based on the small-changes approach promoted by the America on the Move initiative. Children and parents were encouraged to increase their physical activity by walking an additional 2,000 steps per day. Mothers in all 83 families participated in the program, while only 34 fathers participated.

On days that mothers reached or exceeded their 2000-step goal, children took an average of 2,117 additional steps, compared to 1,175 additional steps when mothers did not reach their goal. Father-child activity showed a similar pattern. Overall, for each 1,000 additional steps a mother took, the child took 196 additional steps.

The effect of parental activity was most pronounced on Saturdays and Sundays. The researchers speculate that this increased effect may occur because parents and children exercised together more frequently on weekends, and that weekends may be a particularly effective time for parents to foster additional activity by their children.

The effect was relatively short-lived. A parent’s current day’s activity had the most effect, while the previous day and week had an attenuated effect. Parents’ baseline activity did not predict a child’s change in activity, although a child’s baseline activity did; children who were less active at baseline took more additional steps than did more active children.

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