

# Walk it Off!

by Jill Crawford, LCSW

## The Therapeutic Value of Moving

In my line of work, I spend many hours each week counseling children and teenagers who are experiencing some kind of emotional struggle, very often characterized by symptoms of depression, anxiety, or dysfunctional behavior. The work is delicate, complicated, deep, and often frustrating. The struggles are frequently stubborn, unrelenting, and resistant to change. We spend our time together exploring hardships, developing treatment plans, setting goals, and creating new, healthy coping strategies. Typically, at the end of each hour, I send these kids back out into the world with an assignment—therapy homework. Given the depth and intricacy of our work together, one might assume that this homework would be complex, mind-bending even. But more often than not, I leave them with two simple words to take them forward until we meet again: **get moving!**

While the many and varied physical benefits of exercise are widely touted, there are powerful emotional and behavioral benefits as well, which are far-reaching and deserve just as much attention. To name just a few:

Physical activity...

- \*releases endorphins in the brain, creating a “natural high,” or just a plain old good mood
- \*provides a healthy outlet for anger, agitation, and anxiety
- \*instills a sense of control and competence
- \*reduces feelings of helplessness
- \*provides diversion from ruminating on the negative
- \*creates opportunity for positive change, empowers
- \*improves focus, attention span, concentration
- \*increases confidence, self-esteem, and independence
- \*exposes us to natural daylight and fresh air, both of which improve mood

Now, some kids, of course, are naturally active, enjoy the great outdoors, and can spend endless hours happily running around until they drop into bed blissfully worn out at night. Others, however, are less inclined toward physical activity, and even on a good day, telling these kids to get moving can be met with blank stares and grumbles of opposition. Now imagine throwing depression or anxiety into the mix, two conditions which lend themselves to social isolation, lethargy, and sedentary behavior. Suddenly this uphill battle just grew steeper. So how can you encourage your kids to get on their feet and **get moving??**

First, when I give a physical activity assignment to a reluctant participant, I have two rules: keep it simple, and keep it fun. They often assume I am trying to talk them into a hard-core workout, when I really just want them to move. Some of the fan favorites that seem to yield positive results over and over again include: jumping on a trampoline, dancing (to music of choice, at

volume of choice, provided headphones are available), biking, scootering, skateboarding, swimming, sledding, slip-n-slide, walking, yoga, or just wiggling around. I encourage kids to try just 15 minutes at a time to start, so as not to overwhelm them, and to increase the likelihood of compliance and success. The simpler, the better, and of course, enjoyment of the activity is of paramount importance.

Second, I strongly encourage family and/or friend involvement. Being active with a partner or small group keeps things fun and social, and also increases likelihood of compliance due to the accountability factor in a group mentality. The teen set may prefer to be active on their own, blowing off steam with their headphones on, and if it works for them, then there is no reason to argue.

Third, as parents, remember our influence as the primary role models in our children's lives. The more active we are, the more likely we are to raise active children. Emphasize the value of physical activity in your life, particularly the positive effect it may have on your mood, outlook, and attitude each day. Enjoy fitness as a family and highlight successes. Incorporating physical activity into your regular family lifestyle will increase family harmony, create opportunity for togetherness, and strengthen relationships.

Finally, reinforce any efforts made by your child, no matter how small. Remember that, for a child not accustomed to moving much, every step taken is a challenge overcome. Don't be stingy with your praise and enthusiasm. And when you hear your kids grumble the most unfavorable phrase a parent can hear—"I'm bored"—tell them to "GET MOVING!"

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