FITNESS & EXERCISE

How to Help Your Teen Move Without Making It Miserable

The best starting point is not a punishing workout plan, but movement your teenager might willingly do again.

The standoff at the front door

You suggest a walk. Your teenager looks at you as if you have proposed reorganising the garage for fun. Mention a sports club and the answer is schoolwork, tiredness or a flat no. Soon, what began as an invitation has become a contest: you supplying reasons, them supplying increasingly creative ways to remain on the sofa.

The temptation is to argue the health case harder. Regular exercise supports overall health and fitness and lowers the risk of many long-term diseases. Physical activity is also good for the heart and lungs. Those are sound reasons to care, but they may not be persuasive reasons for a teenager to put on their shoes this afternoon.

There is a more useful place to begin: movement does not have to mean organised sport, a gym or even a formal workout. Physical activity is any body movement that works the muscles and uses more energy than resting. Walking, dancing, swimming, yoga and cycling all count. Exercise is simply the planned, structured part of that much bigger territory.

Stop selling exercise

If your teenager dislikes "exercise", retire the word for a while. Ask what kind of movement feels least objectionable instead. A walk with a friend is movement. So is dancing, riding a bike or playing an active video game. The goal is not to find the activity that looks most impressive from the sidelines. It is to find one they might choose a second time.

Enjoyment matters because choosing an activity you like makes it easier to turn movement into a regular part of life. Variety can help too. Changing the activity, route, music or social setting may keep things interesting and reduce the chance of burnout. None of this requires pretending that every teenager is waiting to discover a hidden love of cross-country running.

You can also loosen your definition of success. Even modest amounts of physical activity are beneficial, and small amounts can be useful. Activity can be broken into chunks rather than

completed in one grand effort. That makes the first invitation smaller: not "become sporty", but "come outside", "put on some music" or "help me walk the dog".

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There is more than one way in

Some teenagers want company; others would rather move without an audience. Social activity can mean walking with a friend, joining a class or playing a game with family. An accountability partner or group can help someone keep going. But togetherness is an option, not a requirement. Your role is to offer a route in, not turn every outing into supervision.

The menu is wider than aerobic activity. Walking, running and swimming raise breathing and heart rate. Strength work uses weights, resistance bands or body weight. Yoga and stretching can support flexibility, while balance activities develop stability and coordination. A mix has benefits, but a reluctant beginner does not need to embrace every category before the first one counts.

Cost need not close the door. Dancing at home, walking, using body weight and visiting parks require no gym membership. A community or recreation centre may offer lower-cost classes, while home activity can use a mat, resistance bands or a workout video. Outdoors, a bike ride, dog walk or local trail can turn movement into somewhere to go rather than a task to complete.

The brain case is real, but keep it honest

If your teenager is more interested in school than sport, there is relevant evidence. A 2025 umbrella review brought together 133 systematic reviews, covering 2,724 randomised controlled trials and more than 258,000 participants. Exercise improved general cognition, memory and executive function across ages and populations. Improvements in memory and executive function were greater among children and adolescents than among adults.

The review also found benefits from light-intensity exercise. Low- and moderate-intensity interventions generally produced larger effects, while active video games had some of the largest effects on general cognition and memory. That undercuts the idea that movement only "works" when it is exhausting. A teenager does not need to treat discomfort as proof that an activity matters.

Still, do not turn those findings into another sales pitch or promise that a walk will transform tomorrow's test result. The review describes average effects across a large body of research, not a guaranteed result for one person. Its useful message is simpler: movement need not be

intense or conventionally athletic to be worthwhile, and the benefits may extend beyond physical fitness.

Make next week easy to enter

Start with one conversation that leaves room for a real answer. Ask your teenager to name a form of movement they would not mind doing, where they would prefer to do it and whether they want company. Walking, cycling, dancing, swimming, yoga, active games and simple strength work are all legitimate answers. "None of those" means the menu needs widening, not that the conversation has failed.

Then make the first attempt deliberately manageable. Starting slowly and adding activity gradually can help someone build strength, speed or flexibility without pushing too hard at once. Regular practice matters, including short sessions. If your teenager has trouble moving or balancing, has health concerns, or worries that activity may be unsafe, ask a healthcare professional what kind of movement is appropriate.

On Monday, write one chosen activity and one workable opportunity for it on a paper calendar, using a pen. Let your teenager choose both. Add what the activity actually requires-a bicycle helmet, trainers, a resistance band or simply weather-appropriate clothes-and put that object where it is easy to find. The practical step takes a calendar, a pen and the ordinary equipment for the movement they chose.

Where this comes from

- Exercise and Physical Fitness

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- Exercise for Older Adults

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