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Lead by example to kickstart their fitness

Parental support for physical activity is critical, and finding a sport they enjoy will reap greater long-term rewards than looking for high results, writes **Helen O'Callaghan**

WHEN it comes to why young people participate in sport, **parents** are important. "Because of my father" was cited as one of the top reasons for sports participation among post-primary students in the **Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity (CSPPA) Study 2022** (exa.mn/participation). "Because of my mother" was also a motivating factor among the almost 9,000 10- to 19-year-olds surveyed across the island of Ireland. "Boys were more likely to say 'because of my father' — 10% of boys versus 5% of girls — and girls more likely to say 'because of my mother,'" says Sport Ireland director of research and innovation Benny Cullen. "It shows that gender-specific roles in leading by example are very important. Active **parents** are much more likely to have active **children**." The CSPPA study authors find it encouraging that a number of **children** in the Republic of Ireland meet WHO guidelines of 60 minutes daily moderate-to-vigorous physical activity has increased since 2018 — back then it was 13%. But while the 2022 figure is higher at 15%, they say it is still "unacceptably low". "Moderate activity is not running a marathon. It's not an uphill sprint," says Stephen Behan, assistant professor at DCU's School of Health and Human Performance. He sees **parents** role as paramount in encouraging **children** to be active. "There's a misconception among **parents** as to how active their **children** are. They may not be getting as much activity at school as **parents** think." Like Cullen, he says **children** are more likely to be active if their **parents** are — and they enjoy being active with their **parents**. He recommends using the ongoing school holidays to walk, cycle, and go to the park or playground. "This kind of engagement is what **children** want. Find some middle ground — if you like to walk and your **child** likes to cycle, do a bit of both. Maybe the walk can be to the playground, or somewhere you'd both like to go." But while **children's** physical activity guidelines may not demand sprinting up a steep slope or running a marathon, they do still mean "anything beyond a nice brisk walk," says Cullen. Parental support for physical activity is vital, he says, pointing to a top reason cited by post-primary students for stopping sport: "It takes up too much time." "**Parents** can help **children** balance the workload of school through developing a good routine. Particularly teen girls, who spend almost twice as long as boys doing homework and are more likely to say they haven't



enough time for sport." But **parents** need to examine their relationship with physical activity in order to support their **children** to be active, says Dr Rachel Flanagan, senior counselling psychologist with the **Child and Adolescent Obesity Management Service at Children's Health Ireland (CHI), Temple Street**. "Can that relationship be improved," Flanagan asks. "Is it [physical activity] something you enjoy? **Children** tend to learn more from our actions than our words. Seeing you genuinely enjoy doing physical activity, or even noticing how you feel afterwards, can inspire the young person looking up to you." She urges **parents** to watch how they talk about sport and exercise. "Avoid labelling and stereotyping. **Children** tend to move into others' expectations of them. If a **child** is told they're not sporty early on, this doesn't leave much room for building on any skills they do have in that area. It also sends a message of not belonging in a particular category — which could influence how much they put themselves into those situations as they grow up. Instead, send the message that finding something enjoyable and fun is more important than 'being good' at it." Nor should **parents** frame physical activity as something punitive. "It's not helpful to see physical activity as something we do to 'offset' food intake — or something we must do to 'earn' food. Thinking [like this] can lead to an unhealthy relationship with both exercise and nutrition," cautions Flanagan. She instead recommends conveying to **children** that physical activity benefits health in and of itself. "Hopefully it can be something enjoyable, where we notice its positive impact on how we feel, especially if we're consistent with it." **Show compassion to encourage** If **children** are reluctant to be active, be curious about what the barriers are — and try not to assume anything, Flanagan advises. "Some may struggle with coordination and [so] avoid certain sports. Some may experience judgement or comments from others. **Children** with disabil-



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ities may feel excluded from games or activities their peers are [doing]. **Children** with body image concerns or low self-esteem may need support around engaging in PE." It is best to meet a **child**, struggling with physical activity, where they are at. "Showing compassion for how they're feeling is a good place to start — before collaborating with them on what the best next step might be," says Flanagan, who recommends working with **children's** activity interests. "Some will love sports, others won't — that's OK. And it's great to feel motivated, but neither adults nor **children** can always rely on this. It's more helpful to focus on how the family can build activity into their day-to-day life so it becomes the norm. Scavenger hunts, outdoor games — simply bringing indoor activities to the outdoors can instantly make **children** more physically active. Avoid all-or-nothing approaches to exercise. Set small achievable goals — if some weeks are better than others, that's part of life." Cullen says it is important for teens to feel a sense of competence and mastery. "**Parents** would do well, he says, "to celebrate their **children's** achievements, to recognise their personal development, regardless of field of

play, or results they might get". Among post-primary students surveyed for the CSPPA study, keeping fit was their number one reason for sports participation. "The message that sport and exercise is good for them is percolating down to teenagers," says Cullen. This is great because the benefits of being active last a lifetime and, says Cullen, one of the best gifts we can give our **children** is to encourage them to be active. **Benefits to developing bodies** Lucinda Case, clinical specialist physiotherapist in **Child and Adolescent Weight Management at CHI, Temple Street**, sees the benefits firsthand. "Increasing **children's** physical activity really helps improve muscle strength, endurance, and balance. It benefits their cardiovascular system, regulating blood pressure and improving heart and lung fitness. "It improves flexibility — really important in growing **children** because as they grow it's common for muscles to get tight, which can cause pain and put them at risk of injury. Exercise is important for bone health and strength, for reducing risk of fractures, and for sleep patterns. It's really very important for their overall growth and development." The **Child** and Adolescent Weight

Management Clinic sees about 250 **children** annually. Aged from two to 16, they're referred because of obesity-related health complications. "I see **children** who have pain and whose balance is affected. I see younger **children** with delayed gross motor skills," says Case. "In older **children**, I see higher blood pressure than would be normal for their age." Once patients' activity levels increase, Case sees "loads of positive effects" over a year of monitoring. Behan says "active **children** make active teens make active adults". He's passionate about encouraging physical activity in **children** from a young age, pointing to its protective role in the transition to adulthood. "Being active decreases chances of getting a lot of non-communicable diseases in adulthood." In 2021, Sport Ireland-commissioned research on "The Value of Sport in Ireland" (exa.mn/valueof-sport) which found a 35% risk reduction in coronary heart disease/stroke; 20% in breast and colon cancers; 40% risk reduction in diabetes; 52% in hip fractures; 25% in back pain, and 30% risk reduction in depression. Cullen says upping **children's** activity levels is about improving physical literacy, which spans three domains: "Physical competence to do the sport. The affective domain — do **children** enjoy, love it, feel connected to a community, valued for who they are? And the cognitive domain — they understand the importance of physical activity." **Children** with high physical literacy will most likely achieve what Case describes as the ideal scenario. "We want to teach **children** to be consistently active, to form a habit, so we're not constantly pushing them to do it." **Sport Ireland resources:** ■ www.getirelandactive.ie/ — find range of activities in your local area; over 10,000 sports clubs/facilities. ■ www.hermoves.ie/ — resources/advice/activities for teen girls/their **parents**. ■ www.sportireland.ie/winter-initiative-ideas/programmes for keeping active during winter.