

Getting Active: One Step At A Time

By Liz Fleming

How do you eat an elephant?

One bite at a time.

It's the same thing when it comes to changing family lifestyles...it happens one day at a time.

Says Dr. Stafford Dobbin, the local family physician who founded Heart Niagara in 1978 and still serves as its most passionate spokesman, encouraging young children to be active is essential to ensuring a lifetime of good health.

"We need our children to be active early, so it will become a lifelong habit." As parents, we all know that healthy living for children involves daily activity, but a total ban on television watching, msn chatting and video game playing probably won't get you the results you're looking for. Instead of encouraging your children to go outside for hours of healthy play, heavy-handed, top-down rule-setting will probably result in a full-scale rebellion with everyone far too busy sulking to get any exercise at all!

The way to approach a change in your family's activity level is to use the elephant-eating approach, taking small bites of time and turning them into exercise opportunities.

Dr. Dobbin recommends making activity a part of daily living.

Need a bag of milk? Instead of hopping in the car, grab your sneakers and walk to the convenience store, taking your children along. Not only will your kids get some exercise, you will too...and you'll have some rare quiet time for chatting.

Turn the walk into a game. See if you can make your way back from the store more quickly than you walked there. Count how many steps it takes to get from your house to the first corner. Will there be more or fewer steps to the next intersection? Who can take the longest strides? Whose are the shortest?

Take the opportunity to enjoy the world around you. Collect leaves or flowers as you walk or stop for a snowman building session at the park. Kick a stone as you walk along – kids have loved doing that since time began. As long as you keep moving, your bodies will be getting the exercise they need – you don't have to run a marathon to give yourself a healthy activity boost. Don't make the scale a success measurement tool, even if weight loss is a goal for you or your children. Focusing on numbers that may not change as quickly as hoped will only lead to disappointment and frustration.

Kids love gadgets, so instead consider investing in some inexpensive pedometers to help keep track of the steps your children are taking towards a healthier lifestyle. Kids also love stickers and...let's face it...we all love praise, so make a chart to keep track of your healthy living progress, using stickers to help record and celebrate achievements.

Work at adding small bites of active time to your children's daily schedule, aiming at first for an extra 30 minutes a day but keeping an ultimate goal of 90 minutes per day in sight. You'll be surprised by how quickly that elephant starts to disappear!