

- Exercise / Child development

Work it out at home

With schools closed, it's easy to let children's fitness slide. Peta Bee checks out exercise programmes to match their age and interests

Irish Examiner · 29 Jan 2021 · 15

One study last year reported that even small amounts of activity and less time sitting down in childhood is linked to better mental health by the age of 18



Escaping to the gym or yoga studio seems a luxury of a bygone age as, holed up at home (again). And thanks to the winter weather, going outside for a family walk or cycle doesn't hold the same appeal it did in the summer.

There's a tendency among kids – and, yes, their parents too – to want to cocoon at the moment, a growing reluctance to get outside that is not helped by the wintry cold snap.

With schools and sports centres closed and PE and clubs off the agenda, activity levels are on the slide. A recent study conducted researchers at the Department of Physical Education and Sport Science (PESS) in the University of Limerick (UL) found that half of post-primary school students did less physical activity than usual during the first lockdown.

Professor Catherine Woods, chair of the Physical Activity for Health Research Cluster in UL and an author of the study, recruited 1,214 students aged between 12 and 18-years-old and interviewed them about their exercise habits when schools were first closed due to the pandemic. The closure of sport and exercise facilities, a lack of coaches and instructors the absence of school PE lessons were all cited as reasons for the downturn in activity.

Maintaining physical fitness is important for mental as well as physical health. One study last year reported that even small amounts of activity and less time sitting down in childhood is linked to better mental health by the age of 18. Of the 152,978 12, 14 and 16 year olds who took part, those with the lowest combined aerobic and muscular fitness had 98% higher odds of depression and 60% higher odds of anxiety by the end of the seven-year study.

“Reports that people are not as active as they used to be are worrying, and even more so now that global lockdowns have closed gyms and limited how much time people are spending out of the house,” says Aaron Kandola, a researcher in psychiatry and one of the authors of the study published in The Lancet medical journal. “Physical activity is an important part of our lives and can play a key role in preventing mental health disorders.”

According to guidelines set by Healthy Ireland and the Department of Health, all children and young people

should be active, at a moderate to vigorous level, for at least 60 minutes every day. If your children are getting nowhere near that – or even if they are climbing the walls after hours cooped up in online lessons – what else is on offer?

TODDLERS AND PRE-SCHOOL

Personal trainer Lucy Wyndham-Read is already a hit with adults – she has more than 1.6 million subscribers to her YouTube channel – and, as a qualified instructor in ‘health related exercise for children’, she has compiled a series of fun 6-10 minute workout videos (exa.mn/FitnessKids) all with an integrative background and story book setting – imagine you are climbing mountains, swimming in a lake or exploring in a jungle – that you can do with your preschoolers.

One workout called “Find the Magic Seeds’ requires you to ‘swim’ across a magical lake, breaststroke-style, and ‘run’ sideways through an imaginary maze. All are to be done by parents too, so plenty of opportunities to join in.

COSMIC KIDS YOGA

Views of this channel’s yoga videos reportedly went up ten-fold in 2020 (it has 1.03 million subscribers on YouTube), and it’s hard to imagine they will dip at least over the next few months.

Each video features British-based founder Jaime Amor practising childfriendly yoga against a brightly coloured, themed digital backdrop – including Frozen and Super Mario. The classes are aimed at three to eight year olds (although all of the movements are suitable for any age, so do join in).

There’s also a Yoga Pose 90-second series in which Jaime introduces authentic postures with a twist – she teaches the ‘washing machine pose’ – sit cross-legged, hands behind head and rotate upper body from side to side – to strengthen the core and open the shoulders and the crab pose – excellent for building children’s gluteal muscle strength – with a

sideways upward plank waddle. Many of the online sessions are available free on YouTube and there is a two-week free trial of the Cosmic Kids app (which costs around €8 a month or €50 a year after that) with its own exclusive yoga club and mindfulness sessions for kids.

GO NOODLE

A colossal free library of everything from two-minute mini dance routines to 20-minute workouts created by a team of US-based child development experts. Some of the routines feature an educational element (teaching about shapes and mindfulness), but are mostly ridiculously silly (but fun if you are five) routines.

For younger children sessions are rarely longer than five minutes duration, but fast-moving enough to burn off surplus energy. There's often an underlying educational theme. Take the four-minute 'clap it out' routine in which a trio of male dancers perform fast-moving designed side steps and throw forward air punches while signing about the relevance of syllables. Good to stick on when you need a distraction. Expect your child to be hooked – 14 million kids worldwide use it every month. (gonoodle.com)

PRE-TEENS VIRTUAL CHALLENGES

Pre-teens (and teens) respond well to goals and there are plenty of virtual challenges for charity that you can take on together. Weekly parkrun 2km and 5km events are off the agenda during lockdown, but you can join in virtually at (not)parkrun (parkrun.ie). You'll need a free parkrun account to participate and then you simply submit your 2km (age four to 14) or 5km time – performed anywhere you like, even on a treadmill – via your profile page. The competition element will keep the whole family motivated.

YOGA

Once they have outgrown Cosmic Kids Yoga, there are more grown-up alternatives. You can't go far wrong with free sessions by Yoga With Adriene on YouTube (yogawithadriene.com).

Yoga queen Adriene Mishler has been catapulted her to a new level of stardom during lockdown and now has more than 9m subscribers. There are dozens of teen-specific sessions and Mishler pitches herself as the perfect starting point for anyone who hasn't tried yoga and provides endless beginner level classes, starting with gentle 20-minute introductory routines. Perfect for flexing together.

CIRCUIT-STYLE WORKOUTS

If attention span is an issue, a short circuit style workout is probably more appealing to pre-teens than a full-on 45-minute class. Choose something with a simple structure and an inbuilt element of competition (they are bound to be better than you at many of the bodyweight exercises) and you are on to a winner.

On the Freeletics app (as the name suggests, it's free to download) there are dozens of five to 30-minute circuit style workouts most involving little more than your own bodyweight to complete. Workouts are graded from beginner to advanced and with each being timed and logged once you register — you can compare and compete with your results and progress. They are guaranteed to get them (and you) stronger.

TEENAGERS COUCH TO 5KM

By this age, children want a taster of adult-style workouts and there's no reason why they shouldn't join you in a challenge to get from couch to 5km in nine weeks. Again, there are

dozens of freebies, but the Irish Heart Foundation's free downloadable couch to 5km programme (exa.mn/IrishHeart5k) is a great place to start. It's gently progressive with the aim of gradually building up your fitness so that you can run 5km after six weeks.

DIGITAL FAMILY FITNESS OK, so they might not want to work out with you at this age which makes shared digital workouts all the more appealing. Apple has been clever with its new Fitness+ platform as the €9.99 per month fee for unlimited access to classes allows you to share it with five family members and there is plenty to appeal to this age group, particularly in the dance and strength department. Downside: you will (of course) need an apple device to use it (one month free for Apple watch owners).

Elsewhere, the DJ Locksmith of the band Rudimental (who also has a degree in sports science) has launched a HIIT style circuit for teenagers on his 'Unlocked' channel (theycallmelocksmith.com). No equipment required and the sessions are short (around 20 minutes) and fast-moving for guaranteed improvements in fitness.

LES MILLS ON DEMAND

Gym regulars will be familiar with Les Mills' workouts (they include BodyPump, Body Combat and Grit), but the on-demand empire has expanded rapidly and include 20-40 minute teenager-targeted sessions in martial arts, sports conditioning, dance and yoga (to name but a few).

With one of the most comprehensive fitness programmes for 13-16 year-olds, there is excellent instruction in dance, yoga, martial arts and circuit training led by an instructor with a teenage back-up cohort. You can try some free sessions before signing up and there's a 30-day free trial for newcomers with the cost rising to around €25 (which includes a huge library of adult classes too) after that. (exa.mn/LesMillsTeenWorkouts or there's also an app).

BARRE FITNESS

If ballet and barre fitness – a ballet, Pilates and HIIT combo that promises longer, leaner limbs, better posture and raised fitness levels – is more their (and your) thing, check out the online classes from the Dublin-based Rebel Barre studio. Free weekly live Zoom classes are held every Saturday morning at 10am and other online classes are available via the Mind Body or Rebel Barre app for €8 per class. If you are hooked, there's an option of subscribing to the Vimeo On Demand site offers a library of teenage-friendly classes, each around 50 minutes long, for around €17 per month.