Exercise provides individuals with AD/HD with an outlet to expend excess energy, while increasing the enzymes in the brain that are responsible for learning and memory. There are many benefits to regular exercise regimens, and the key to making them work is motivation.

Keeping Up the Motivation to

Exercise

by Stephen C. Putnam, M.Ed.

EXERCISE IS ESPECIALLY GOOD FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH AD/HD. It builds self-esteem, improves focus and can help in relieving depression.

Unfortunately, despite the benefits, many children and adults have a hard time becoming motivated to exercise on a regular basis. Michael S. Wendt, Ed.D., a proponent of "Time-In" exercise in schools, points out that most children won't exercise regularly on their own. Unless the children are young, parents may have difficulty encouraging them to exercise (Wendt, M.S.).

Because AD/HD has a negative impact on motivation, discovering the conditions that motivate us is especially important. One fortunate aspect of exercise is that the more you work at it, the easier it becomes. Endurance workouts can be self-perpetuating—once you get started.

Many people even develop a positive addiction to exercise (Sachs, M.L.). In one study, individuals with depression were more likely to continue their treatment by running than to continue treatment by taking medication (Blumenthal, J.A.). While this effect has not been studied specifically with AD/HD, W. Mark Shipman and Susan Elsom have noted that children have continued to exercise after a program ends, usually with a parent (Shipman, W.M.). The psychological stages of aerobic exercise are such that we need to make ourselves overcome lethargy's inertia for only the first few minutes.

Why Exercise?

LAB EVIDENCE suggests that play is a "mammalian birthright," that it is a necessary ingredient for normal child development, and that exercise provides a natural means of regulating mood and behavior. The effects are not universal, but there is enough research to suggest that everyone benefits in some way.

Aerobic exercise increases the enzymes that produce dopamine and enhances the production of stem cells in areas of the brain that are responsible for memory and learning. Exercise also directly increases dopamine, serotonin and endorphin levels.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that even short durations of low-intensity movement (such as walking) can have immediate short-term effects. Classroom and field research suggests that aerobic exercise can provide the following benefits:

- Twenty to 45 minutes of jogging immediately before class can reduce hyperactivity and inattention in elementary students for three or four hours.
- Exercise effects have been likened to the effects of stimulant medication. In one study, psychostimulant medication dosages were reduced for children who ran consistently.
- Parental ratings on the Conners Behavioral Rating Scale improve after their children participate in a jogging program.
- A high school disciplinary database suggests that disruptive students who become involved with sports that require aerobic effort become less disruptive. While this report is anecdotal, it is consistent with the results of exercise studies conducted with elementary children.
- In normal adult populations, exercise reduces depression and has positive effects on job stability, optimism and self-image. It can also increase the likelihood of recovery from substance abuse. (Note that these are often problem areas for adults with AD/HD as well.)

—Stephen C. Putnam, M.Ed.

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If you or your child dislike the thought of running, you can warm up by walking fast or jogging slowly for 15 to 20 minutes. At that point, you might become more talkative, a stage which lasts roughly 30 minutes. If you keep jogging or running at an aerobic rate, you can become euphoric after 45 to 60 minutes. By then, emotional and creative energy might become more dominant characteristics (Elsom, S.D.).

The same strategies that work for adults may also work for children and adolescents. There are a few caveats for parents who try to exercise with their children (see sidebar, page 23). Tune in and learn to recognize the dynamics between you and your child.

Parents who are already jogging themselves might want to hold back and avoid being the teacher, unless the child actively welcomes this role. Every situation is different. Just remember that the goal is to make the child want to exercise; if it just seems like another homework assignment, it won't work. The best motivational efforts are so subtle that they are not seen as efforts to motivate.

In a sports world that now includes activities such as extreme golf, don't take any specific activity too seriously. The goal is to obtain the benefits of exercise with an activity you enjoy. Identify fears that might keep you from exploring options. Do you need to overcome a fear of going to a health club? If you can overcome initial inhibitions, the change in atmosphere and surroundings may help to motivate you to continue. Keep alternative activities in mind. If the weather

prevents an outdoor workout, what can you do instead—aerobics with a video or ride an exercise bike?

Always warm up and always set realistic goals. A slow, 10-minute warm-up followed by stretching makes a 30- or 40-minute session easier. If you are out of shape, make sure that your initial workouts aren't too intense. Start with easy ones and then gradually increase the workloads. For some, half-hour walks may be ideal, while others may want to jog or run.

Try interval training—alternating sprints with slower paces. For example, you may want to run as fast as you can for five minutes and then slow down to a relaxed pace for one minute. Repeat this routine several times during a workout, varying the intervals to accommodate your comfort level.

Accommodate your idiosyncracies. If you are impulsive, go for a run without planning it. If you're feeling lazy, delude yourself by taking a break and just doing the warmup. As your muscles become more elastic and your mind loosens, you may have an enjoyable session—even if you didn't want to do it initially.

What if you over-do a workout and get hurt or depressed? Pay attention to how your body responds. A minor injury or fatigue-related depression should serve as a warning sign that can help you manage workouts at an optimal pace in the future.

Seek variety. If possible, look for scenic courses. Vary workout times and intensities. Juggle activities. Run for ten minutes, bike for ten, then run again.

Athletes often use "personal best" records as motivators. Add a challenge to a workout. Set difficult or hard-to-attain goals and appropriate milestones for your age and physical condition. To recognize milestones as the days and weeks progress, record workout length, distance covered or how much time it took to go the distance. Buy an inexpensive pedometer or step counter. If you enjoy competition, run a road or cross-country race. Tack your race number on your wall.

Find interesting distractions. Use a portable radio with headphones. Watch television while peddling an exercise bike. Talk with an exercise partner. Getting together with a friend or family member can become a binding commitment that becomes one more reason to stick to it.

Monitor your heart rate. Take your pulse or use an electronic wrist monitor. Track your resting heart rate for incentive to continue exercising. Over time, you should notice that your resting heart rate decreases.

If you enjoy technology, upload data from your step counter onto a website to compare your progress with that of other users. Interface a stationary bike or rower with your personal computer, and exercise in a virtual 3-dimensional world. Depending on the activity, you can race against an electronic pace bike or boat, or join on-line competition.

Exercise provides individuals with AD/HD with an outlet to expend excess energy, while increasing the enzymes in the brain that are responsible for learning and memory. There are many benefits to regular exercise regimens, and the key to making them work is motivation. ■

Stephen C. Putnam, M.Ed., is a marathon canoeist who has raced with his children. An adult with AD/HD, he collects anecdotal and scientific evidence regarding exercise and AD/HD and has written *Nature's Ritalin for the Marathon Mind: Nurturing your AD/HD Child with Exercise*. He can be contacted at **www.steveputnam.com**.

How to Exercise with your Child

- If your child is young, compliment her natural ability to run when she's playing on her own. Go for a walk or hike and do short sprints. Have fun.
- For young children, warming up can mean skipping for a few hundred feet.
- Many children want to avoid competitive situations. Emphasize the value of participation, particularly to children ages 12 and under. If your child does want to compete, you might find a running or canoe club that sponsors short, fun races for young children.
- Create an atmosphere that values athletics. Let your child hang sports pictures in his or her bedroom and wear workout clothing around the house. If your child admires a sports role model, that's worth encouraging.
- Take advantage of dynamics that might motivate your child. Sharing activities with other parents and children may make exercise more enjoyable for all.
- Keeping a journal can arouse intellectual curiosity as well as motivate some children. However, if keeping a journal is an additional chore that makes it less likely that your child will exercise, don't push this idea.
- Negotiate—it's okay to use non-monetary bribes. Allow your child a privilege in exchange for a half hour of exercise.

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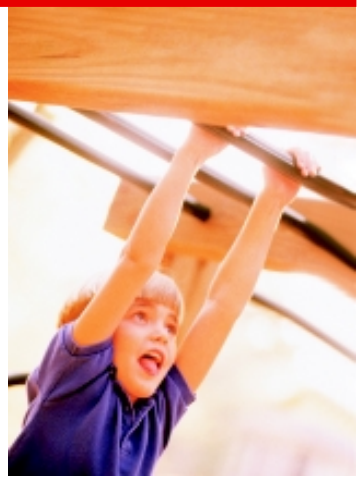
The younger school-aged children are, the easier they are to motivate.

Working with Children with AD/HD

by Michael S. Wendt, Ed.D.

- Along with knowledge of first aid and fitness, instructors should be familiar with the needs of children with AD/HD.
- Limit group size to a ratio of one supervisor to eight children.
- Commitments to a group exercise program should involve a minimum of three or four weeks.
- To prevent the stigma of "disabled" or "special," allow students from the general population to participate.
- The younger school-aged children are, the easier they are to motivate.
- Use verbal encouragement and recognition of accomplishments to build confidence. For endurance activities such as running, use stickers as rewards for every lap. Children will work hard to obtain the stickers, which help them track their own progress.
- Choose activities that don't allow children to hit or run into each other. In a game of tag, children should use something soft, like a foam ball, or pull ribbons from one another's belts.
- Be flexible. Vary exercise environments to prevent boredom and to maintain aerobic heart rates.
- Maintain individual space. When one child invades the space of another child, problems surface. Identify each child's space with a plastic disc that the child can exercise on or around. Hula hoops can also help establish spatial boundaries.
- Music can motivate children and help to keep them under control. Active children respond well to rhythm. Also, the group leader can signal the class to stop by stopping the music.
- Limit distractions on the sidelines, including distractions from parents, spectators or construction equipment.
- Monitor day-to-day activity levels. If exercise on a previous day was strenuous, children may be less responsive. Reserve high intensity exercise for Fridays.
- Verbal abuse or teasing should not be tolerated.
- Children can and should be accountable for misbehavior. Discipline can be exercise-based, without being regarded as punishment. If a child does something wrong, you may need to keep him after for brief additional exercise or a short run. However, do this in a way that will not give exercise a negative connotation.
- If a child refuses to participate, allow him or her to exercise in a separate setting if that is possible. ■



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Motivation to Exercise