

When It Pays to Play

Remember how much more active we used to be? How to get back in the habit. | **BY KATHRYN CASEY**

WHO COULD forget the late-'60s sitcom *The Brady Bunch*? When Greg, Marcia, Peter, Jan, Bobby and Cindy weren't all gathered around the table eating pork chops and applesauce while gabbing about the triumphs and mishaps of their day, they were riding their bikes or playing ball in the AstroTurf backyard. Or the family might be camping together, competing in a sack race, riding mules into the Grand Canyon—or even just running down the stairs of their mod split-level house to answer the phone. The groovy TV show that aired from 1969 to 1974 may not have reflected some of the harsher realities of Ameri-

can family life in that era, but it did show we moved around more (and ate better!) in those pre-computer, pre-cell-phone times.

Today, many people wistfully reminisce about how Americans lived before video games usurped sandlot baseball and fast food replaced meals around the table. We can learn from the way America lived then, including how to eat healthier and lose weight.

The Home-Cooked Advantage

The family dinner is disappearing, plummeting 33 percent in the past three decades. The result is obvious: "We're eating more calories and getting less exercise than previous gen-

erations," says Lawrence Cheskin, MD, director of the Johns Hopkins Weight Management Center. "Supersizing our food is supersizing us."

Aside from the emotional benefits of sharing a family meal, the real advantage is control—of the quality, ingredients and portions of food. In 1970, 34 percent of America's food budget was spent in restaurants. Now it's

Start Good New Habits

How is it possible to eat dinner together and exercise more when both parents work and kids are overscheduled? It *can* be done, says William Doherty, co-author of *Putting Family First*.

- **Schedule it** Make time for meals together just like you do for soccer practice or dentist appointments. Plan meals in advance, shop for groceries on weekends and freeze what you can.
- **Make it fun** Benefits from a family meal don't happen just by sitting and eating together; it's what you do with that time. First, turn off the TV and talk to one another. But avoid stressful subjects like report cards or work, or power struggles over food. Keep conversation light.
- **Go out and play** Remember that swing set in the backyard, the basketball hoop at the end of the driveway, the bikes in the garage? Even 15 minutes of fun together burns calories, reduces stress and promotes family bonding.
- **Take a break** Limit passive computer and TV time. Get up every 20 minutes and do some stretches, tackle a household chore or go out for a walk. It clears your mind and helps burn off lunch!

nearly half. "And restaurant portions have ballooned," says Lisa Young, PhD, RD, an adjunct professor at NYU and author of *The Portion Teller*. In her research, Young found restaurant portions were *two to eight times* that of standard serving sizes.

Eating while driving or watching television has another unhealthy side effect. Distracted, we don't realize how much we're putting in our mouths. At family dinners, when we pause to talk, we eat more slowly, allowing our stomachs time to signal our brains that we're full.

Little Moves Matter

In addition, so much of what's been designed for our high-tech age keeps us from moving around. We sit for hours at the computer—working, shopping, reading, researching, playing games, even making friends. Without ever leaving the couch, we can answer the phone, change the channel and send e-mails from our handheld devices. Studies have shown that some kids raised on these gadgets may expend almost no extra physical energy in the course of a day.

But here's how it used to be: We got up to change the channel. We walked to the corner mailbox to send a letter. We ran around the backyard to play a game. We got up to answer the phone. We went to the library to do research. We made new friends in the park or at the bowling alley. Parents went for a walk after dinner. Kids went outside and just *played*. And those little expenditures of calories really added up.

Then and ...

Now

CALORIES IN

	Calories & Fat		Calories & Fat
DINNER Salad with dressing, roll with butter, roasted chicken, baked potato and green beans	618 calories, 21g fat	DINNER Hardee's Monster Thickburger	1,410 calories, 107g fat
SNACK 16-oz. soda and small plain popcorn	423 calories, 11g fat	SNACK 44-oz. soda, large popcorn with butter topping, 3-oz. box Milk Duds	1,989 calories, 87g fat

CALORIES OUT

Calorie expenditures vary by age, gender and weight. These examples are for a 140-pound woman.

	Calories burned		Calories burned
Wash and wax car by hand	200	Drive through car wash	9.5
Walk two blocks to mail letter	22	Type e-mail and hit send	9.5
Play tag for 45 minutes in backyard	225	Play video game on couch for 45 minutes	85
Walk a block or two to nearest pay phone, dial and walk back	57	Pull cell phone from pocket and hit speed dial	10
Drive to mall, walk to store, try on clothes, pay, walk back to car and drive home	133	Sit at computer, visit store's website, choose item, type in credit card info and get item from mailbox	17
Walk to co-worker's office and hand him documents	19	Stay at desk, attach documents to e-mail and hit send	4
Drive to photo developer, drop off film and return next day	178	Sit at computer and upload photos	29

SOURCE: FABIO COMANA, exercise physiologist, American Council on Exercise

Today, kids must be productive and prepare for success. From 1981 to 1997, children's free time dropped by 12 hours a week and unstructured activities by 50 percent. "We're so worried about our kids being able to compete that we've created stress for the entire family," says William Doherty, PhD,

professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota. And, as we know, stress can lead to overeating and obesity—something we never saw in the lives of that Brady gang.

Additional reporting by LISA MILLER FIELDS

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