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A PARENT'S GUIDE TO

FITNESS

Does My Six Pack Honor God? AKA Curls for the Girls—I Mean, God

The world of health and fitness has never been more popular than it is right now. In the US alone it's a [\\$30 billion industry](#) that's growing by 3-4% every year. Chances are that your teen has been affected by the fitness culture through sports, their social circle, or social media. And it takes on many forms. Depending on who is talking, fitness could mean running before school, playing sports, going to the gym to lift weights, posting photos of one's [butt-to-waist ratio](#) (yes, it's a thing; but read the link at your own risk), or doing [Crossfit](#).

At its best, fitness can be used to increase capability and live a healthy life. However, a quick search of [#fitness](#) or [#fitspo](#) (short for "fitness inspiration") on Instagram reveals the darker side of fitness culture: unrealistic standards—that are often highly dishonest and sexualized—held up as inspirational role models against which to compare ourselves.

What does this mean for our teens? Are they using fitness as a way to support their favorite sport? To have more control of their diet? Because they like being active? To get huge biceps? How does the pursuit of physical fitness help or hinder their relationship with God?

— Why are we even talking about fitness?

Our physical bodies—and therefore our level of fitness—are a big part of our experience here on earth. After all, what we can and can't do are often directly impacted by our physical abilities. Want to walk on the beach? You need fitness. Want to [powerclean your cousin](#)? Yep, fitness. As Christians, we're often taught that there's a separation between the spiritual and the physical, with a higher value being placed on spiritual growth rather than on physical development (more on this below). The problem with this view is that we aren't just souls with legs (otherwise skipping leg day would be a cardinal sin); we were given physical forms. God's salvation encompasses our total human experience—mind, spirit, *and* body. Each component is important for and part of our growth and relationship with God.

So rather than viewing physical pursuits as separate from (or lesser than) spiritual growth, what if we acknowledged that physical fitness could help us with our spiritual journey? Perhaps by putting so much emphasis on our spiritual selves to the exclusion of our physical selves, we allow other aspects of our relationships with God to suffer. Can we help our teens use fitness as a way to fellowship with others and grow closer with God? Is it possible to respect and honor our physical bodies without making them into an idol?

— How do Christians view fitness?

Christians have historically had 4 responses to the physical body.

The first, [asceticism](#), is the practice of denying worldly and physical pleasures, such as sleep and food, in order to achieve a closer relationship with God. Though modern asceticism mostly takes the form of [fasting](#), historical distortions took perhaps a healthy dose of self-denial and turned it up to 11, resulting in bodily harm through the use of pain,

even flagellation and self-mutilation. The underlying idea is that the physical body gets in the way of or distracts us from the higher pursuit of spiritual well being.

The second, [hedonism](#), is the opposite. It's the idea that pleasure/happiness is the ultimate good in life so one should pursue whatever gives one pleasure or happiness. This, when applied to one's health, generally isn't helpful for longevity. For example, if eating a doughnut would bring you pleasure, you should eat one. Or even two. Conversely, if exercising isn't pleasurable, don't do it. Of course, the argument can be made that oftentimes our health is tied to our happiness, as [this article](#) does, but the motivating force behind taking care of our bodies is still our own personal happiness. [Christian hedonism](#)—which says that when God is our greatest desire, our happiness is a natural product of our relationship with Him—is actually growing today, with [John Piper](#) being one of the biggest proponents.

The third and perhaps most common way Christians have viewed fitness is that it isn't particularly helpful for growing our faith, and therefore we should simply ignore it. After all, in [1 Timothy 4:7-9](#) Paul tells Timothy that though physical training has some value, godliness has value in every way. It's easy to see how in our busy lives, where there is more pressure on our time than ever before, we would choose to forgo the gym and healthy eating because there are too many other things demanding our time, attention, and effort. After all, it's fairly low on the hierarchy of being a good Christian.

The fourth and final way of looking at diet and fitness is a much more balanced approach. Even in [1 Timothy 4:7-9](#), Paul tells Timothy that physical training does have value in some ways, so why not pursue that value while also pursuing godliness? It's telling that Paul does not tell us that the two are mutually exclusive. Pastor Jonathan Parnell asks in an [essay](#):

What if we train our minds, our souls, to default on grace? What if, in that moment of intense exertion, our motivation became the demonstration of God's grace in our sweating, straining, desperate effort? We can't lift that bar. We can't breathe on our own. We didn't create ourselves. And yet, we will lift that bar. We will breathe. We are God's creatures. By his grace.

And when we lift that bar—the very moment of lifting that bar—we are bearing witness to our person that God's grace mobilizes us to do things. Everything in that moment is given to us, and yet, we are working. Grace and effort. When we set our minds on the demonstration of God's grace, in the actual experience of His grace behind our effort, the gym becomes a spiritual training compound.

— So what does God's Word say about fitness or exercise?

The Bible has plenty of insight into how we should conduct ourselves. [1 Corinthians 6:19-20](#) tells us that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and that, because we were bought for a price, we should glorify God in our bodies. The passage occurs in the context of sexual misconduct, but the point rings true for physical fitness as well. Our bodies are the temple for the Holy Spirit inside of us, and we should honor them as such. Paul later says in [1 Corinthians 9:27](#), "But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified." He uses physical discipline to model self-control

(a [fruit of the Spirit](#)), showing intertwined the two are, since he doesn't want people to disregard his *spiritual* teachings because of his *physical* state.

Lest this be used to promote an over-emphasis on fitness, Paul conditions his other admonitions. As mentioned above, in his first letter to [Timothy](#), he also writes, "Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come." Though our physical form is important, we must not neglect our quest to become more like God in our minds and spirits as well. In [1 Samuel 16:7](#), God also tells us that He does not value physical appearance (which can be, but is not always, different from physical ability) like the world does, but rather cares about what's in our hearts.

Beyond simply looking at individual passages of or mandates in Scripture, it becomes clear that God values our physical form because He created us to take up physical space. If our physicality didn't matter, He wouldn't have designed us to have bodies. This is further reinforced by the fact that He sent His Son to earth to inhabit a physical, human body in order to interact with humanity and go through everything we experience: fatigue, hunger, thirst, sexual desire, aches, pains, pleasure, etc. Even after His death, when He was resurrected He inhabited a physical body that was eventually taken up to Heaven (see [1 Cor. 15:35-58](#), [Acts 1:1-10](#), [Luke 24:50-53](#)).

Of course, there is no mention of Jesus setting aside specific time to exercise during His years of ministry (or even before that), and none of what we mentioned above speaks directly about fitness, exercise, or body fat percentage. But it does show that our physicality matters and is purposefully linked to our spirituality and our experience on earth.

— So can exercise honor God?

Absolutely. Just as we can honor Him through our bodies by abstaining from sexual activity before marriage or by not getting drunk, we can also honor Him by taking care of our bodies through exercise and what we do (or do not) eat. Being disciplined with our bodies not only communicates that we value that with which God has entrusted and blessed us, but it also becomes a physical embodiment and demonstration of the fruit of the Spirit for others to see.

The caveat, though, is the word "can." Yes, being fit and/or exercising *can* honor God, but that doesn't mean it always does. If we engage in exercise for the wrong reasons, it ceases being a holy or spiritually beneficial pursuit. If we and our teenagers aren't careful, these good things easily become twisted.

For example, it's not rare for teenage girls to think something like this: "I need to eat less so I can be skinnier and get more likes on Instagram and not feel worthless and ugly." It's also not rare for teenage guys to feel the compulsion to go to the weight room every day in order to impress the people around them with their chiseled pecs, and if they miss a day, they freak out. Notice how the focus is shifted from wanting to take care of what God gave us to marrying how we look and act with our identity and self-worth. We can use diet and exercise to honor God and become closer to Him, but when we turn them into an idol, into *the* focus, we hurt our relationship with Him and hinder our potential impact on those around us.

— Are there other benefits my teen might get from exercise?

Community. Most types of fitness thrive on the community that emerges out of them. Crossfit is perhaps the best example of this. Allison Truscheit of *The Box Mag* [describes it](#) like this:

People from all walks of life end up in a class together, sweat together, suffer together and work hard on weaknesses together. Through these experiences they become friends and walls are broken down. People become friends with people they never would have expected.

This isn't just true of Crossfit, either: Runners are part of the running community, weight lifters are part of the gym community, and soccer players are part of their team. Fitness allows people to be part of something bigger than themselves and to interact with other people in vastly different walks of life. That community can have a lasting impact on their life and give them something to belong to outside of their normal day-to-day life.

Perseverance. There's nothing easy about exercise, which is exactly why it can be such a useful tool for teenagers. When confronted with those last 5 miles of a marathon or being down 1-5 in a tennis match, the act of persevering and then overcoming something is so powerful! Imagine the work it took just to run a marathon in the first place, or all the days on the court practicing footwork, strokes, and mental toughness in order to not give up against terrible odds. It's a beautiful and tangible picture of how much they can accomplish when they're disciplined and push through hardship. Lessons learned through exercise, sports, and fitness transfer well to the rest of life, too. Do they have a difficult test coming up? Well, they know that capability is earned through hard work, so get to studying! When they embrace the intentional hardship of exercise, it isn't a big jump to being able to weather other unintended hardships well.

Emotional outlet. Perhaps not surprisingly, exercise [has been linked](#) to a decrease in both anxiety and depression. There's something special about using our bodies and accomplishing goals with them, especially in our screen-based world. After sitting in class all day long taxing their mental capabilities, working out can be a welcome change for teenagers. Having an outlet that's detached from their day-to-day lives and gives them the ability to feel control and see progress can do wonders for mental health. It has also [been shown](#) that physical exercise can lead to higher levels of self-confidence. This, coupled with a sense of control over their workouts, can be awesome for a teen's self-esteem and ability to handle the obstacles that come up in his or her life.

Physical Capability. This is an obvious consequence of fitness: The more fit you get, the more capable you generally are. Imagine your teenage son starts running. At first he could barely make it around the block, but now he can run 10 miles. This means you can now send him to the store to get groceries, and he doesn't even need a drivers license. #Awesome! In all seriousness, capability is an amazing gift. Being able to help people in need by mowing their yard or moving their couch is an expression of capability. The more capable your teen becomes, the greater impact they may be able to have on the lives of others. And because it was earned through hard work, they're less likely to take it for granted.

A Better Understanding of Grace. Everything we are able to do and achieve physically, mentally, and spiritually is a direct result of the grace of God. Pastor Parnell, whom we quoted earlier, gives us [three prayers](#) that help us focus on the grace that God has given us through the use of our physical bodies:

- *First, thank you, God, for my body that, though imperfect, works now and will be resurrected one day.*
- *Second, thank you for the common grace behind such a facility like this that understands the importance of the body.*
- *Third, thank you for grace even when things are hard, and help me, in the toughest moments of this workout, to wrestle gravity in the strength you supply.*

These prayers help us focus on what really matters, and allows us to use fitness as a means to understand God and appreciate His grace just a little better.

— How can exercise be dangerous or negative?

It can be addictive. There really is no way around this. Exercise releases a whole bunch of “feel good” chemicals in our brains (called [endorphins](#)), which do exactly that: make us feel good (which is where the term “runner’s high” comes from). On top of just feeling good, watching our bodies adapt to the physical stimulus and change in ways we like can be highly motivating to continue. Before we know it, we have to be active all the time or else we feel bad about ourselves, essentially turning fitness into an idol or into part of our identity. Helping our teens recognize that they must find a balance between exercise, rest, and their day-to-day lives and responsibilities is crucial.

It can lead to guilt and/or extra pressure. Any good exercise program requires a person to be consistent and disciplined in order to see any results. These are great things that our teens can learn from sticking to a routine, but there will undoubtedly be times when they cannot follow it as closely as they’d like or as needed due to things like extenuating family circumstances or perhaps a really tough week at school. When this happens, it’s easy to feel guilty, like they’ve failed, or that they’re losing all their hard-earned #gainz. But none of that is helpful or true. Help your teen understand that even the best plans need some wiggle room and that it’s okay to miss some workouts. Remind them that their worth, value, identity, and acceptance are not derived from their abilities or lack thereof, appearance, strength, perfection, imperfections, etc.

Comparisons. It’s almost impossible not to compare ourselves to others, but this is especially true in the fitness world. Fitness is marked by accomplishments, and accomplishments generally end in comparisons. Unfortunately, with the popularity of #fitspiration on social media, it’s easy for teens to fall prey to comparing themselves to others and to feel like they are worthless if they don’t look like the people on the other side of the screen. This is true for both guys and girls (see our [Parent’s Guide to Body Positivity](#)).

Girls are told that they are never skinny enough, don’t have enough muscle in the right places, or have too much muscle in the wrong places. Guys are never big enough, ripped enough, strong enough, fast enough—you name it. Just look at Jeff Seid, a young fitness influencer with 3.6 million followers on Instagram. His physique is impressive, something he

has clearly put a lot of work into. However, there's a major problem with our teenage boys looking at influencers like him as a standard, beyond just the obvious vanity that present in the physique/aesthetic culture. Most people simply aren't genetically capable of building a body like his, let alone have the time or resources necessary to realize their genetic potential.

The same goes for our teenage daughters. The vast majority of us are not capable of looking like a Kardashian, no matter how many weights we lift or how much dieting we do...or how much we spend on plastic surgery. Comparing ourselves to people who have different genetics and resources can be very destructive. Talking with your teen about how these influencers do not represent reality can have a profound impact on their understanding of what's normal and healthy. It also might be worth helping them find influencers who have a healthier approach, are more transparent, and don't uphold ridiculous standards to follow. If you follow them too, you will be aware of what your kids are seeing and hearing and can have conversations with them about things you see that are both good and bad. (Granted, many of these influencers probably have different standards of modesty, so that may be worth some conversations too.)

— Should I encourage my teen to exercise then?

The short answer is yes! With the [obesity epidemic](#) sweeping the nation, teaching and encouraging our teens to make healthy choices is more important than ever. In fact, some level of exercise and movement should be part of all of our lives, especially since it's not built into our daily lives like it was for most of history. We know that a sedentary life is both [unhealthy](#) and dishonoring to the bodies that God gave us. But it's especially important for teenagers to exercise because they will form habits, disciplines, and perspectives that will impact them for the rest of their lives.

However, the long answer is a bit more involved and really hinges on the next few questions.

What does fitness mean to my teen? Both fitness and exercise are such broad terms that it can be hard to know what someone means when they use them. Do they mean that they're training for their first ultramarathon? Or are they aspiring to be a bodybuilder and prepping for a glorified beauty pageant? Or perhaps they're a competitive eater getting ready for the next Nathan's Hot Dog Eating Contest (yes, it's a thing)? Obviously, there's a large difference between strength training for football in the off season and getting ready to compete in a bodybuilding competition. Knowing what they mean can help us guide them into healthy relationships with fitness, appearance, and eating.

What's their motive? As with most things in life, here's where the rubber meets the road. Why does your teen want to be active? Do they want to increase their physical capability in order to see how good they can be at their favorite sport, or do they need to be the best at that sport in order to feel like they're worth something? Do they want to lose a little weight in order to breathe easier and feel better, or to look like all the fitness models on Instagram and get people to notice them? Wanting to get fit and challenge their bodies in order to increase capability and overall health is vastly different from wanting to impress others to gain their approval. And looking good isn't a bad thing! *But turning it into an idol and a*

metric of self worth is.

If a teen starts from a place of insecurity, focusing on how they look will only exacerbate the problem. It's all too easy to become obsessed or to spend more time exercising than on school, friendships, reading God's Word, family, etc. Discussing why they like working out (or whatever kind of exercise they are into), and helping to steer them in a direction where their fitness isn't a metric to measure their self worth will help them develop a healthy relationship with their bodies.

However, ascertaining your teen's motivations isn't always easy, especially if he or she knows that admitting it's for the wrong reasons will not be to their advantage. And like all of us, they may oscillate between having good motives and poor ones, on a daily or even hourly basis. In an image-obsessed culture, it can be a real struggle for *anyone* to fight off the temptation to nitpick one's appearance, let alone a teenager who is trying to find his/her identity and place in the world. So be prepared and willing to walk through this with them, helping them honestly wade through their motivations without condemnation and showing them how to combat temptations.

What exactly do they want to do? Understanding the type of exercise that a teen wants to participate in helps both you and them understand the long-term impact it will have on their bodies. For example, if a 14-year-old wants to be on the cross country team and run 100 miles a week for practice, what sort of impact will this have on their knees and other joints as they grow older? Or, say they want to start taking anabolic steroids in order to grow lean muscle quickly. Do they understand that it's banned in most sports and can have very serious and negative effects on their health if not used properly? Or, if they want to join Crossfit because their friends do it, do they understand proper movement patterns and form to protect them from injury? Do they know what happens if they ignore good form?

Could fitness be a source of bonding between me and my teen? Perhaps your teen's interest in fitness could be an easy way to actively participate in his/her life. If your son is into weightlifting, perhaps going to the gym with him a couple days a week could be a great thing for your relationship. If your daughter is into running, maybe a run or two a week could do you both good! This will not only model good stewardship of the body that God gave us, it could potentially become a time when they're more willing to talk with and listen to you.

If you're already into your own fitness pursuit, it's especially important that you don't force your child into doing what you love and that you're willing to step out of your comfort zone and into theirs. Perhaps you're a runner with a son who wants to lift weights. Rather than pushing him toward running, showing him that you are legitimately interested in weightlifting with him could communicate your love and care much more than forcing him to run with you ever will. Though fitness can be self-serving, using it with your teen as a tool for personal and spiritual growth can make a lasting impact in both of your lives.

— How do I best encourage it without making it an idol?

It can be tough to figure out how to encourage a healthy lifestyle that's honoring to God

while also avoiding the pitfalls associated with the fitness industry. As is true with so many aspects of parenting, modeling a healthy, balanced lifestyle ourselves will do more to exemplify how we want our kids to approach fitness than just giving them the answers ever will. If we demonstrate what good eating looks like, then our kids will have a baseline to measure their own eating against. The same goes for exercise. If we demonstrate how to honor our bodies and keep them healthy, we will be able to have meaningful conversations with our kids and help them do the same.

We must also demonstrate how diet and fitness are part of our lives, not *the point of them*. When it becomes a higher priority than our relationships, work, growth, or God, something is messed up. (Even if they pursue a career in fitness, this is still true; though fitness will become a bigger part of their lives, they're still called by God to love Him and His people above all else.) Having conversations with our teens about how health and fitness should be part of our day-to-day lives but *not* at the expense or exclusion of other things will go a long way for setting a wholesome and realistic framework for them to carry through the rest of their lives.

In addition, having ongoing, frequent conversations about balance, what's healthy, and being able to prioritize will be helpful. Simply telling a child he or she is getting a little pudgy is less than helpful; in fact, this could lead to years of an unhealthy relationship with food, exercise, and their bodies. (The reverse is also true; praising your child for how good they look after they lose weight or gain muscle can also be detrimental. Instead, focus on praising them for their effort, dedication, perseverance, and hard work.) Helping them see that different foods aren't good or bad, but instead can be used to help us reach goals and enjoy life is a much more rounded approach to diet than demonizing pizza, [the gluten](#), or anything that even looked at sugar.

Checking in with our teens who are interested in their diet to see how they approach their food can give us great conversation starters as well. What happens if they miss their macro count for the day? Do they get discouraged or beat themselves up over it? How is it impacting them mentally? It's *so* easy to get obsessed with our foods and how they can help us achieve specific goals, but we can help our teens see that flexibility is important and that things will happen that will derail their short-term diet and fitness plans. The important thing for them to realize is that being consistent over years and decades is what matters.

In fact, fitness and exercise should never be about an end-goal (e.g. losing weight, having big biceps, having a certain waist measurement, or even being able to run a certain distance) but about the process it takes to achieve those goals. When we focus on the experience and the process, we're less likely to feel like failures if we don't achieve a certain goal by certain time and more likely to simply roll with whatever life throws at us.

—— What if my teen hates being active?

If your teenager is more into Netflix, video games, or their phone, you might be worried you'll have to roll them to school, much like the hapless Violet was rolled to the juicer after blowing up into a giant blueberry in [Charlie and the Chocolate Factory](#). Just like too much emphasis on physical fitness can be destructive, so can not enough. So what can you do?

Maybe they just haven't found something they enjoy.

Let's face it, most of us don't really enjoy fitness-related activities. We participate out of a sense of obligation—or because we get to eat more after—than out of actual enjoyment. Helping our teens find something they actually enjoy, or at least don't hate, could help them learn how to respect and honor their bodies. Encourage them to try lots of different things—sports, mountain biking, spin class, hiking, Zumba, dance, swimming, weight lifting (yes, even for girls!)—and see if something sticks.

Maybe it's because we've allowed them to be that way.

Our teens may not want to take care of their bodies because they haven't ever had to. Rather than allowing poor habits to continue, we should encourage healthier choices. If we don't allow our teens to sit on the couch watching Netflix and playing video games for endless hours, they won't. Encouraging them to take up a sport, go explore the outdoors through hiking or mountain biking, or offering to work out with them are good places to start. But it's important to remember to never come from a place of judgment or condemnation and to always explain why physical activity is part of how we worship God. And remember, our kids learn more from what they see us do than what we tell them to do. So if they've never seen you prioritize better eating and/or exercise, they're not likely to, either.

Recap

- Our physical ability is a main component of our experience on earth.
- God created our mind, spirit, and body. Each is important in our relationship with Him.
- Physical fitness can be used to develop other areas of our lives, such as discipline and persistence.
- “Fitness” can mean different things to different people. Finding out what it means to your teen is important.
- The motive is important. Does your teen want to be a healthier, more capable person, or simply impress their friends with their looks?
- Fitness pursuits can give your teen a community to belong to, teach them the value of perseverance, and provide them with an emotional outlet.
- It can also be addictive, lead to guilt and extra pressure, and make it easy to compare oneself to others.
- Encouraging physical fitness can be a great thing, especially if it becomes a source of bonding between you and your teen.
- If your teen doesn't enjoy being active, encouraging them to find something they enjoy and not allowing for lazy behavior can help them learn how to be better stewards of the bodies they've been given.

Conclusion

Health and fitness can be a great thing in your teen's life. Though physical stewardship is often considered second tier to more “spiritual” means of growth in Christian circles, we often forget that God created our minds, spirits, and bodies and that they're intertwined:

What we do in one affects the others. So if our children are interested in fitness and exercise, we can commend and support their desire to steward the bodies they've been given. With our guidance, they can learn how to grow closer to—and glorify—Him using their mind, body, and spirit without falling prey to the temptations and pitfalls of the modern fitness industry.

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- [A Parent's Guide to Sleep](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Sabbath & Rest](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Eating Disorders](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Body Positivity](#)

— Additional Resources

- "[Strengthen Your Faith through Physical Exercise](#)," Desiring God
- "[10 Reasons Why Teens Should Do Crossfit](#)," Box Rox
- "[5 Ways to Know if a Fitness Guru Is Full of It](#)," Muscle for Life (language)
- "[Hedonism](#)," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
- "[Asceticism vs Self-Denial](#)," Institute for Faith, Work, & Economics
- "[Cult of the Body: Is Working Out Compatible with Christian Modesty?](#)" St. Paul Street Evangelization

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