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## **Ring in the new: How to set New Year's resolutions with kids**

*By Sheila Nero*

When the ball drops in Times Square at midnight on New Year's Eve, it signals "ready, set, go!" for adults who have made New Year's resolutions.

But it's not that easy for kids, who need an in-home signal from their parents to start acting on New Year's resolutions. They need their parents to say "ready, set, go!" and in which direction.

And parents, the best experts on their kids, can always benefit from some coaching. To help Metroparent West readers, Lake Country parenting experts offer tips on how to work with kids to set realistic goals for 2015. Family goals could include eating dinner together twice a week, watching less TV and exercising more.

"New Year's is the perfect time to review the past year and say what's good and not-so-good, then say what can be changed by parents and kids for 2015," says Bill Mulcahy, parenting book author, Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) and supervisor of the Cooperative Parenting Center at Family Service of Waukesha.

He says, "The most important thing is to know your kids and know what will work. Frame it from the positive side. Focus on how much fun it is to walk the dog or go to the gym rather than on the TV show they missed."

A parent's attitude affects success, he adds, "Parents need to be gentle. To me, that comes across as encouragement, compliments, humor and motivating through mutual involvement."

Crystal Towler, administrator at Momentum Early Learning in Sussex, agrees that it's important for parents to team up with their kids to set New Year's resolutions. "The key is to involve kids in the process. Ask them for ideas and get them excited about it. Then it will be 'their' idea," she says.

Momentum serves children ages 6 weeks to 5 years during the day, and up to age 12 for before- and after-school care and summer camp, so Towler works with those age groups and their abilities. Mulcahy, who works with clients ages 12 and older, points out that New Year's resolutions need to be developmentally appropriate and age-appropriate for each child.

### **SETTING THE TABLE**

Be realistic about starting new habits; build up gradually. If it takes planning to unite the family around the dinner table on busy weeknights, start by scheduling a "slow food" dinner once or twice a week.

In addition to eating together, Towler says, consider “chefing” together. “If parents think about it, they have memories of cooking with their mom or dad or grandma. It’s the stuff of memories for many people. That’s because cooking together creates a relationship. Try it around holidays and make special dishes. If you want to make dinner together, let the child choose at least one dish. Let them cook within their abilities and safety range.’

Towler, who has a Bachelor of Science Degree in Recreation and Family Studies, says, “Even toddlers can stir three times or add ingredients and then pass the bowl to the next person. There will be more mess and it can be chaotic and slower, but you’re making memories. They’re far more invested when they can say, ‘I helped.’ ”

Older kids can do math while cooking, like estimating how many cookies they’ll bake and eat, she adds.

#### FUN FITNESS

If the goal is exercising more, making it fun can help. Towler says, “Let kids watch you jogging or doing Pilates and ask them, ‘Do you want to work out with me tonight?’ They might only do it for 10 minutes, but if the parent makes it seem fun, they’ll be back for more. This is another good way to build relationships.

“Kids are mirrors and are always mimicking their parents,” Towler adds. “You could capitalize on that and lead by example. They will follow.”

Mulcahy adds that older kids are savvy about health guidelines and how exercise helps their bodies, so parents could build on what their kids already know.

#### CHANGE IN PROGRAMMING

Maybe the goal is to watch less TV at home. “Try to substitute something beneficial,” Towler says. “Switch to educational apps and games. Or, substitute a fun book for a video game. Set a limit in advance, like watching one TV program after dinner, then stick to it.”

#### A NEW YEAR’S PLAN

First, Mulcahy advises, “Sit down and talk about why we need to change, to increase awareness.”

He advises putting goals in writing. Parents could give younger kids a cool handout, a piece of paper where they fill in the blank: “This year, I want to be better at \_\_\_\_\_. This year, I want to learn how to \_\_\_\_\_.”

He says older kids in middle school or high school could have a contract, a simple agreement of what they will do differently 70% of the time and what privilege or reward they will get as a result. Younger kids could write down their intention, put it in a jar and take it out later to review it.

After the intention is set, he advises, count down to the launch, saying: “We’ll start in two weeks” then “we’ll start in one week.”

Mulcahy and his wife, Melissa Mulcahy, are the parents of six children, two with special needs. Melissa, who teaches special education in the School District of Waukesha, suggests making resolutions with a technique called “Two Stars and a Wish.” For the stars, ask: What did we do really well last year in 2014? For the wish, ask: What’s the wish for 2015?

Mulcahy suggests reviewing results on a regular basis. “Maybe you don’t make it to the gym ten times a month. Maybe you get there eight times. That’s great. That’s progress. Check in and say, ‘How are we doing on this?’ Have a fun family meeting every month,” he says.

Echoing Towler’s point about fun fitness, he adds, “If it’s fun, you get a lot more done.”

That sounds like a family-friendly toast for the New Year. Cheers!

## **TIPS FOR PARENTS**

- Set clear, realistic expectations.
- Start gradually and increase frequency.
- Be prepared for more mess and more time as kids build new habits.
- Be patient. A new start can take more than one try.
- Make it fun. Don’t aim for perfection.
- Launch an effort strategically on a weekend when schedules are more flexible.
- Review results monthly.
- Resources for parents: For more information on Momentum Early Learning, see [www.momentumearlylearning.com](http://www.momentumearlylearning.com). For information on Mulcahy’s books for children, see [www.freespirit.com](http://www.freespirit.com).