

CHRIS MCANDREW FOR THE TIMES; WITH THANKS TO THE GYM WAY, BRYANSTON ST, W12

Hours spent in front of screens can take their toll on the teenage body.

Anna Maxted tried a drastic solution

My 14-year-old told me that he wanted to get fit. Initially, I was pleased, because, like many teenagers, Conrad does an awful lot of sitting.

A survey last year for Sport England shows that only 17.5 per cent of children in the UK are meeting the chief medical officer's guidelines of doing more than 60 minutes of activity each day. And 2018 statistics show that one in five children in England is obese by the age of 11.

It's not that Conrad is overweight — far from it. He plays cricket and tennis, does indoor rock climbing and recently enrolled at a junior boxing club. But sedentary time after school was boring him. Also, some of his friends had hit puberty and he wanted to keep up.

Children under 16 aren't allowed in most gyms, so his father, a convert to fitness, suggested that Conrad complete 25-minute sessions of high-intensity interval training (HIIT) at home, and downloaded a training app. "Ting!" it went, every 30 seconds. But observing my son's soft, rubbery form as he rushed ten planks before the bell, I worried that he would injure himself.

So, even though it seemed a drastic option ("Kids should just get fit climbing trees," one friend said), I approached Marc Dressen, 39, an elite personal trainer. Half of his clients are under 16, 70 per cent are boys, and the youngest is seven. Some of his clients' parents want their teens to excel at sport. (Even if their goal is Premier League glory, Dressen focuses on what the child enjoys.) Others approach him because their children have co-ordination issues.

In his native Germany Dressen co-founded Europe's largest indoor gym for extreme sports. Moving to the UK in 2012 he has trained more than 15,000 people — from children to celebrities and politicians. He offers bespoke physical-training plans for children who need to "move more". He also offers weight-loss programmes, though he stresses that this is only in tandem with a medical diagnosis of obesity.

Conrad doesn't need to lose weight, but has mentioned quitting carbs and grumbled about his waistline. I've reassured him, but sense that he needs guidance from an expert. Last year the youth network Shout Out UK reported that 80 per cent of teenage girls are unhappy with their body image and 45 per cent of adolescent boys want to change their weight or shape.

Dressen trains most of his young clients at their homes, but we meet him at the Gym Way, an unpretentious quality gym in central London, for a consultation. He is careful to ask Conrad why he wants to get fit. "Because I've never really been that fit, ever," he responds. Dressen also asks what being fit means to Conrad. He replies: "I do rock climbing. I'd probably be able to do harder and longer climbs."

I mention the no-carb business.



Anna Maxted and Conrad during a training session with Marc Dressen

Why I took my son to a personal trainer

Teens and fitness what they should (and shouldn't) be doing

They should ...

Do a range of sports and train regularly

Teens should exercise five or even six times weekly. As well as resistance-type exercises, such as push-ups and sit-ups, they should do a sport such as cricket, football, martial arts or dancing one to two times a week for one to one and a half hours, depending on the sport, as well as casual sport with friends or family (eg cycling, swimming, walking or running for 30 minutes to an hour).

Stretch

Dressen says: "Stretching is so important because flexibility is a skill you can keep developing, and if teens keep it up they'll be able to tie their own shoes at 80." Most teens have shortened adductors and hamstrings because of sitting and inactivity. Yoga or gymnastics is ideal.

Do pulling exercises

Teens have poor posture because they spend hours hunched at desks and screens. "Climbing is great for teens because there's a lot of pulling," Dressen says. But essentially any exercise that involves a

pulling motion (eg pull-ups or rowing) engages and helps to strengthen the back muscles.

They shouldn't ...

Train until it hurts

Dressen says: "On a scale of one to ten, their exertion level should be no more than seven. Young teens hear catchphrases such as 'no pain, no gain' and assume they need to go all-out."

Use weights until they are 16

Using weights overloads the muscles and risks injury. Dressen says: "The muscle groups around their joints aren't fully developed, and their tendon and bone structure aren't able to support the activity." He compares it to putting a Porsche engine in a small car. "The car itself is not built to run at 200mph."

Focus on single muscle groups

Teens should focus on exercises that use as many muscle groups as possible, rather than isolating muscles (eg biceps curls). A burpee or a squat is a complex full-body movement — great for teens because it improves co-ordination and strength.

Dressen tells Conrad that his shape is normal and that dieting at his age is "unacceptable". "It's totally normal having a bit of body fat at this age," Dressen says. "Boys often worry that they have a flabby chest. From 14 to 21, testosterone, the hormone mainly responsible for muscle-building, increases four to fivefold. That will get rid of what they think of as chubbiness."

Dressen teaches children martial arts and "strength training", which sounds strange, because most people understand that to mean lifting weights and building

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Half of his clients are under 16 years old and the youngest is seven

muscle mass. However, Dressen is adamant that under-16s (or teens who haven't yet started growing body hair) should absolutely not lift weights. Teenager can't work out like adults — not even on a scaled-down level.

"We need to stress that for children, strength training is not bodybuilding," he says. "Strength training before puberty relates to working on co-ordination, balance and building strength by using your body for resistance."

It helps them to get fit for sport, Dressen says. "Their bones, muscles and tendons are developing. Studies show that children involved in strength training from a young age have more muscle and supporting muscle than their peers, which prevents injuries."

The session starts with side shuffles

and jumping. There's hopping on each leg, then crawling like a crab. Conrad's co-ordination is haywire. Dressen says that it's normal because he's learning, but notes: "A study found that children today aged seven have less ability to stand on one leg than they did 100 years ago." Lack of muscle strength can contribute to co-ordination being underdeveloped.

Next come stretching exercises, and Conrad can't reach his toes. Then they sit, legs out in front of them. Dressen leans forwards from the hips with a straight back. Conrad can't manage it and hunches. Dressen discovers that Conrad doesn't stretch at boxing or anywhere else — which, along with lifestyle, contributes to his restricted range of movement. "We should be able to sit upright," says Dressen. "This hunchback position comes from video games, phones, laptops."

Climbing and pulling exercises can counteract this, he says, by strengthening the back muscles.

Then they do lunges, push-ups, sit-ups and leg raises. Dressen also demonstrates a "sprawl" — a scaled-down version of a burpee. Minus the push-up it's more doable for Conrad. The session ends with kickboxing.

Conrad leaves exhausted, but on a high. At £125 a session I don't feel that I can give my 14-year-old the gift of his own personal trainer. Yet our visit has been so valuable that I will treat Conrad to a couple more. Then, with the cricket season underway, we'll be on our own. But at least we'll know what to do, how to do it and Conrad will be fighting fit for it.

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