



Your Child's Health: Good Habits

Why are healthy habits important?

Childhood is the best time to learn the healthy habits that can last a lifetime. The earlier in life your child builds good, healthy habits, the easier it is to keep them, for the best possible health.

Your child learns habits by watching you. If you have healthy habits, like eating a variety of healthy foods and being active, your children are more likely to build those habits into their own lives.

Healthy eating

Healthy eating can help your child feel good, stay at a healthy weight, and have lots of energy for school and play. Encourage your child to eat lots of:

- Fruits and vegetables.
- Lean meats.
- Nonfat and low-fat dairy products.
- Whole grains.

Limit these foods:

- Fat, sugar, and highly processed foods
- Sweet liquids, such as soda, fruit juices, and sports drinks
- Fast foods

MAKE SMALL CHANGES

Make healthy food choices for your family's meals. Children notice the choices you make and follow your example. Start with small, easy-to-achieve changes, such as offering more fruits and vegetables at meals and snacks.

- Set up a regular snack and meal schedule. Most children do well with three meals and two or three snacks a day.
- Eat as a family as often as possible. Keep family meals pleasant and positive. Avoid making comments about the amount or type of food your child eats. Pressure to eat actually reduces children's acceptance of new or different foods.
- Find at least one food from each food group that your child likes. Make sure it is readily available most of the time.
- Serve breakfast. Having breakfast with your child can help start a lifelong healthy habit.
- Let your child drink no more than 1 small cup of juice, sports drink, or soda a day. Encourage your child to drink water when he or she is thirsty.
- Don't buy junk food. Get healthy snacks that your child likes, and keep them within easy reach.

Healthy and kid-friendly snack ideas include:

- String cheese.
- Whole wheat crackers and peanut butter.
- Fruit and dried fruit.
- Baby carrots with hummus or bean dip.
- Low-fat yogurt with fresh fruit.

Healthy eating doesn't mean that your child has to give up all treats. Those types of foods can be okay now and then. Moderation is the goal.

SHARE THE RESPONSIBILITY

You decide when, where, and what the family eats. Your child chooses whether and how much to eat from the options you provide.

Young children are good at listening to their bodies. They eat when they're hungry and stop when they're full. When you try to control how much children eat, you interfere with this natural ability. Keeping this division of responsibility helps your child stay in touch with those internal cues.

Help your children learn to eat slowly and recognize when they are full. Don't let rules, pleading, or bargaining dictate your child's eating patterns.

Physical activity

One of the best things you can do for your child's health is to help make physical activity a habit. If physical activity is a habit for you, it will more likely become a habit for your children.

Find ways for your child to be active for at least 1 hour each day. Children can break up the time into several 10- to 15-minute periods of vigorous exercise throughout the day.

MAKE IT FUN

Don't force your children to exercise. Instead, find activities that they enjoy. Make physical activity part of daily routines.

- Jump rope, dance, skate, or play Frisbee with your child.
- Walk with your child to do errands, or walk to the bus stop or school, if possible.
- Have your child invite a friend over once a week for an activity, such as a bike ride, a water balloon fight, or building a snow fort.
- Let your child try different organized activities to see what he or she enjoys, such as tennis, T-ball, soccer, or martial arts.
- Let your child pick out a low-cost toy that promotes activity, such as a jump rope, Frisbee, or ball.

GET THE WHOLE FAMILY INVOLVED

When the whole family is involved in physical activities together, children learn that being active is fun and makes you feel good.

- Ride bikes, walk, fly a kite, or hike together.
- Give family members tasks such as sweeping, weeding, or washing the car.
- Take your family to the park or pool.
- Join other families for group activities like touch football, basketball, or hide-and-seek.

LIMIT SCREEN TIME

Limit TV, video games, or computer time. For children younger than 2, play or read together instead of letting your child watch TV, watch movies, or play games on a screen. When you play or read with your child, leave the TV off. Even a show playing in the background matters. It keeps your child—and you—from focusing on and learning the most from the activity you are sharing.

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