



By Dan Williams PT, CSCS, BCN

Building Healthy Habits

For many parents, the primary purpose of parenting is to raise fully functional and independent adults who can take care of themselves, be happy, and make a positive contribution to society. Therefore, as children grow and mature, they should learn to take more and more control of their own health and work toward being good managers of their own bodies and minds. We can do this by modeling and teaching good habits.

Any action that you perform regularly as part of your routine can be called a habit. If you look at your current health and overall wellbeing, it is the result of your past and present habits. Any one single choice may have little or no effect, but when we add them up they can snowball and make all of the difference.

Many factors can influence a child, including friends, teachers and things they see on electronic devices and social media. As a parent, you know that your everyday behavior plays a big part in shaping your child's behavior, too. Studies show that children develop lifelong habits at an early age. For example, household routines, such as do-

ing chores and being responsible for one's own belongings, are set by age 9. Financial habits are formed even earlier as a child's basic beliefs and attitudes about money are formed by age 7. Dietary habits begin to take root from a child's first meal, and the dietary patterns that can predict future obesity are established as early as 1 year old.

With your help, your children can learn healthy habits which optimize their body and mind's ability to function and last throughout their lives, including:

Habits of healthy eating and hydration:

What you eat directly affects the structure and function of your brain and, ultimately, your mood. Multiple studies have found a correlation between a diet high in refined sugars and impaired brain function — and even a worsening of symptoms of mood disorders, such as depression. Balanced nutrition is especially important in school-age children, which is a period of vigorous growth, increased activity, and the development of physical and cognitive functions. From a clinical point of view, food quality and good nutrition are related to brain

development and cognitive function, which are important in childhood for health and well-being. Adequate nutrition is essential for healthy brain functioning, optimal learning, and academic performance.

The suggested healthy, balanced diet for children includes 25% protein, 25% whole grains (not ultra-refined starches), 25-50% vegetables, 0-25% fruit and two to three cups of non-fat or low-fat dairy. Everything you eat and drink over time matters, so choose foods and beverages with less saturated fat, sodium, and added sugars. ChooseMyPlate.gov is a helpful reference for this.

Eating a healthy breakfast is associated with improved cognitive function (especially memory), reduced absenteeism, and improved mood. Adequate hydration may also improve cognitive function in children and adolescents, which is important for learning. Since kids tend to eat whatever is convenient, have several nutritious snack foods readily available and if there are foods that you do not want your child to eat, avoid bringing them into the home. Generate interest in health, cooking, or nutrition by providing child-oriented magazines or »

books with food articles and by encouraging and supporting them. Lead by example as healthy eating and hydration will benefit you as well. Healthy nutrition is easier when the whole family tries to eat healthy together.

Habits of healthy weight management:

According to the CDC, nearly 1 in 3 children in the United States today are overweight or obese. That statistic has alarmingly more than tripled in the last three decades. In addition, being overweight as an adolescent places a lot of stress on joints, muscles, bones and the heart and is strongly correlated with obesity as an adult, where risk factors for type 2 diabetes, cancer, and heart disease are likely to be more severe. It is, therefore, important to take action early if a child is having difficulty maintaining a healthy weight. Consuming a healthy diet and physical activity will help children grow as well as maintain a healthy weight throughout childhood. The key to preventing excess weight gain is to balance calories consumed from foods and beverages with the energy burned through activity or mo-

tion - and to limit sedentary behaviors such as watching television or other screen devices.

Regarding calories, portion sizes have become out of control, as have the size, number, and quantity of pre-packaged foods. Hundreds of sugary, caffeinated, and colorful drinks make ordinary water seem bland. Restaurant servings are as much as eight times bigger than they used to be. Many of us were taught as children to eat everything on our plate and that can be a difficult habit for us to break to this day, but from a parenting standpoint we need to ask ourselves if that is something we want to instill in our children. Researchers found that forcing children to eat all of the food on their plates may inadvertently teach them to ignore internal hunger cues, which could lead to children eating more food than they really need, a behavior that continues well into adulthood. The final result: obesity.

The flip-side of this is obsessing about gaining weight and battling negative body image, causing over-restriction of food intake and becoming dangerously malnourished, underweight and unhealthy in body and mind.

Habits of healthy motion:

In addition to good nutrition, physical activity is essential for children to build strong bones and muscles and feel good about themselves. Research studies suggest that physical activity helps improve an individual's cognitive and mental functions, academic performance and memory as well as reduced symptoms of depression. Increased motion is also associated with reduced adiposity, or body fat.

The U.S. Department of Health recommends children and adolescents ages 6-17 years, do 60 minutes or more of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity daily, such as outdoor play that requires frequent running or jumping.

Habits of healthy sleep:

The importance of quality sleep is often underestimated for both mental and physical benefits. It is your body's way of restoring organ function, stabilizing chemical imbalance, refreshing areas of the brain that control mood and behavior, and improving performance. It is the human equivalent of charging your smartphone. Chronic lack of sleep can adversely impact learning and memory, create ADHD-

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like symptoms, affect one's mood and ability to think, compromise the immune system, increase inflammation, and affect the ability to maintain a healthy weight.

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends that children 6-12 years get 9 to 12 hours of quality sleep per 24 hours and children 13-18 years get 8-10 hours. Having a consistent bedtime and routine, avoiding screen time and heavy exercise right before going to bed, avoiding caffeine too close to bedtime, and having a quiet, dark room all help promote better sleep.

Habits of a healthy mind:

There are so many areas where we can teach a child self-awareness and mindfulness to support their health:

- **Reading:** one of the most important habits for children to develop and value is reading
- **Good manners:** respect, honesty, gratefulness all make for successful adults
- **Hygiene:** dental care, showering/bathing, washing hands regularly throughout the day to keep from catching/spreading infections

• **Positivity:** practicing seeing the positive side of things increases happiness

• **Stress management:** talking to a trusted friend or adult, writing in a journal, practicing deep breathing, Biofeedback/Neurofeedback training, imagining a happy memory, exercising, engaging in an enjoyable activity

• **Limiting screen time:** designating media-free times and/or locations, avoiding commercials and advertisements, no TVs in children's bedrooms, avoiding snacking while watching TV

• **Avoiding risky behaviors:** practicing skills in "saying no" to situations such as texting while driving, cigarette smoking, drinking alcohol or taking non-prescribed drugs make it more likely to have the skills to keep saying no when older

Habits of healthy surroundings:

Children learn a great deal by observing others so role models are important. A longitudinal Harvard study by Nicholas Christakis showed the direct impact that an individual's total social network has on health, weight, fitness, happiness and

overall wellbeing. Other opportunities to create a healthy environment include:

- Surrounding your family with people that also want to create health in their lives
- Encouraging relationships that are positive and reconsidering those that tend to be negative
- Family time, traditions and providing structure and consistency in the home
- Teaching and modeling, cleanliness and organization

Parents always hope to be a role models to their adult children, adolescence is the last opportunity to influence the development of life-long healthy habits that benefit them into adulthood. Lead by example, be consistent, start young and know it's never too early – or too late – to instill good habits in your kids and never too late to cultivate new habits of your own.

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