

# Developing Healthy Habits for Kids

BY JENNIFER L.W. FINK | DECEMBER 2012



Want your kids to live a healthy, wealthy life? Start now.

The habits you instill in your children will have a lifelong effect on both their health and their wallets. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “risk factors for chronic diseases such as heart disease, high blood pressure, type II diabetes mellitus and osteoporosis can develop early in life,” and those diseases exact a tremendous social, emotional and financial cost.

Unfortunately, most American children are learning habits that put them squarely at risk for chronic diseases. Screen time is up, physical activity is down and childhood obesity has tripled over the last 30 years. And obese teenagers are 16 times more likely to become severely obese in adulthood than teens who are near normal weight.

The good news is that parents can be very influential in the development of healthy habits. “Children of those who exercise are far more likely to exercise, just as 90% of kids whose parents smoke will start smoking

as teens, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2012)” says Deborah Gilboa, MD, a family physician better known as Dr. G. “Basically, anything we want our kids to do, we have to plant the seeds of action while they are children.”

Below are several ideas to help parents put their children on a healthy track for the future.

**1. Proper Nutrition.** You won’t have much luck getting your kids to eat hummus if you’re munching on potato chips. So begin by modeling healthy eating habits. Involve your kids in meal planning and cooking. Talk to them about what foods are healthy and why, and let them make choices based on nutritional goals. Dr. G challenges her children to plan meals around the USDA’s MyPlate guidelines which helps people plan balanced and healthy meals.

Lloyd N. Werk, MD, a pediatrician at Nemours Children’s Hospital recommends the Nemours 5-2-1-Almost None formula. “Kids should eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, limit screen time to no more than two hours a day, get at least one hour of physical activity a day and drink almost no sugary beverages,” Dr. Werk says.

**2. Physical Activity.** The National Association for Sport and Physical Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommend that children participate in at least 60 minutes of physical activity per day. You may want to consider exercising with your kids. “They can ride a bike while you run. They can do an exercise video with you. They can even use an electric treadmill, if you show them how,” Dr. G says. Signing them up for sport instruction may

also be helpful. Research has shown that kids who have quality physical education and instruction are more likely to be involved in physical activities in the future.

### 3. Stress & Anger Management.

Stress and anger both decrease immune response and increase susceptibility to acute and chronic illnesses. According to the Mayo Clinic, stress increases the risk of obesity, heart disease, sleep problems, digestive problems, depression and memory impairment. Teaching your children how to manage their anger and stress can keep them healthy, both now and into adulthood. Begin by brainstorming some stress management techniques. “Help your kids develop long lists of things they can do to feel better when they’re upset,” Dr. G says. Aim for healthy activities. Walking, biking, running, reading, and talking with friends are all good choices.

**4. Good Sleep Habits.** Lack of sleep increases the risk of obesity, heart disease and behavioral and learning problems. Between ages one and 10, most kids need between 10-14 hours of sleep a night and teens need 8.5-9.5 hours. Help your children recognize – and respond – to their own sleep cues. Encourage them to shut down all electronic devices at least one hour before bedtime as glowing screens can fool the brain into thinking it’s time to be awake. Also, help your children link their daytime mood and energy level to their nighttime rest – when kids realize they’re more alert and happy after a good night’s sleep, they’re more likely to prioritize adequate shuteye.

What do you think?



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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