

## Helping Kids Thrive

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I would like to share with you some thoughts about how to keep your children healthy and how to help them **thrive**. I have two children and a wonderful, supportive wife. When you're raising kids, you have these great experiences of what works and what doesn't. Over the years, I have also learned a lot from parents who have taught me their secrets.

### Nutrition

We have all heard so much about children being overweight. In the San Francisco, South San Francisco, and Daly City areas, it is estimated that approximately 18 to 26 percent of kids are overweight. I really want to encourage everyone to be sure that our children eat healthy foods. Kids eating fast food two or three times a week, such as burgers, fries, chicken nuggets, Sloppy Joes, and pizza, are at risk for gaining lots of weight. Eating loads of junk food, including potato chips, candy, cookies, sodas, and ice cream, is not helpful either. Cereals full of sugar are also a problem. If, when you read the box label, one of the first ingredients is some form of sugar, think twice before you buy.

It is currently recommended that children eat five helpings of fruits and vegetables each day. That may sound hard, but it's actually very easy. One helping of fruit is a single fruit, while one helping of vegetables is only half a cup. In my home, we always buy entire trays of seasonal fruits from warehouse clubs to have fruit available for meals or a quick snack. Canned fruits can also be a reasonable substitute. We just rinse off the syrup before eating. Also, for older children (who won't choke on icy fruit), consider frozen fruit (mango chunks, blueberries, etc.) as a treat. We let the fruit chunks thaw a little, and my kids love them.

Vegetables for snacks can be as simple as blanched baby carrots, broccoli, cauliflower, celery sticks, or spinach and lettuce salads. Vegetables for meals are great if sautéed in vegetable oil or extra virgin olive oil (EVOO) with a tablespoon of dry cooking sherry, a teaspoon of sugar, and salt and pepper to taste. (Notably, kosher salt tastes better when used for cooking than plain table salt.) If ginger or garlic are family favorites, you may add lightly browned minced ginger or garlic to the EVOO before adding the vegetables. Remember to add some water or broth to complete the cooking and avoid burning the vegetables.

Breakfasts are a very important meal. Many children either skip breakfast or don't eat as much as they need. As a result, they get hungry by 10:00 or 11:00 in the morning and frequently get tired or have trouble concentrating on their work. We have a list posted on our refrigerator of possible breakfast menus. Included are cereals, eggs and toast, macaroni and cheese, pot stickers, buttermilk pancakes or waffles (I make them from scratch), fried rice (made with rice from the night before), cheese quesadillas, frittata, Chinese rice porridge (congee), chicken noodle or vegetable soup, and tomatoes and mushrooms.

Lunch ideas are also on our list. If I'm making lunch for myself already, why not go ahead and make lunch for the kids? Sit down with your kids and make up a list of what they will eat if you pack it in their lunch bags. Our list has peanut butter and jelly and other sandwiches (such as sliced lean turkey, ham, bologna, egg salad, chicken salad, or salmon salad), noodles or pastas, cheese sandwiches, brie cheese with tomato pesto on a baguette, a croissant with sautéed mushrooms and caramelized onions, and vegetable sticks with ranch dressing. Juice and fresh fruit are also part of the lunch combo. Ultimately, you know what's in your child's lunch, and you save money too!

## **Exercise**

Exercise is another key factor in keeping our children healthy. We advise 30 to 60 minutes a day of vigorous exercise. This is in addition to the physical education at school, which in many settings is not very rigorous. Many of my patients are very active in sports, such as karate, baseball, football, soccer, basketball, and running. But exercise doesn't have to involve competitive teams. Children just need to get out and be active. Swimming is another great exercise. In San Francisco and on the Peninsula, there are many excellent swimming schools and swim teams. There are even lots of indoor swimming venues. My kids love swimming. They practice on the team several times a week and have a great time!

My sons know I place a high value on exercise. I would rather have them active than sitting and watching television for hours (more on that later). If I return home from work and they have a soccer ball or bicycles ready, I will take them to play at the park or playground until it gets dark. Only then will I sit down to have dinner. Also, my older son is now in middle school. He really wants to win the President's Physical Fitness Award. I've been taking him out regularly to run 880 yards and the mile, to do sit ups and pull ups, and to practice the broad jump. I do the exercises too, so maybe I'll get fit at the same time!

## **Television, Computers, and Video Games**

There are many children who watch television more than three to four hours a day. They also play lots of video games. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no more than one hour of television and computer/video games a day. I personally think up to two hours a day works out fine. Computer use for homework, of course, is okay. If your children are watching television, you want to monitor the content of what they are viewing for appropriateness.

If kids aren't watching TV, then what can they do? Often, my wife or I will play games with them: cards (war, crazy eights, old maid, 21), checkers, chess, Chinese checkers, board games, and magnetic darts. Often, my kids will go off and play with their toys (mostly those that require building and creativity). They will also play sports, and I highly recommend **reading**.

Household chores are another way to use time otherwise spent on the TV or computer. Our children understand that it is their responsibility to help around the house. Chores can start at an early age. They can be as simple as putting away toys or helping with recycling. Children can also wipe and set the dinner table, bring dishes to the sink, help wash dishes, fold laundry, make their beds, and sweep the floor. It gives them a sense of accomplishment, and it does make housework easier for us as parents.

Finally, activities fill up our kids' schedules. There are piano practice and lessons, Chinese school, trombone practice, soccer, and swim team. Our children are very busy, so there is little time for TV or the computer. Computer and TV games are limited to only two hours on the weekend.

## **Safety**

Properly fitted car seats or booster seats are crucial for your child's safety. Car seats should be in back, facing backward, until your child is one year old and weighs at least 20 pounds. Infants who weigh 20 pounds before the age of one year should still face backward until they are walking. You can buy car seats for children weighing 20 to 40 pounds that allow both rear- and front-facing positions. There are several specialty toy stores and children's shops that can help you select the right seat. Booster seats are used until your child is six years old or 60

pounds (specified in the California State vehicle code). I find that most six-year-olds weigh less than 60 pounds, so an additional gauge to use before discarding the booster seat is to see where the seatbelt crosses. If the seatbelt crosses your child's neck, a booster is still advised. If the seatbelt is crossing the shoulder, then you can discontinue using the booster seat.

Safety-proof your home as well as you can. Make sure all poisons and medicines are out of reach or in cabinets that are locked. Check old safety locks to ensure they haven't broken or become loose. Older siblings should put away all small toys. Check the floors for dropped items that infants and toddlers can try to eat. Consider taking a CPR course.

Bike helmets are a must for bike riding (it's a state law). I advise parents to set an example for their kids and wear a helmet when they themselves ride a bicycle. I would also strongly recommend helmets for scooters, skateboards, and roller blades. Once my seven-year-old was riding fast on his bike, and I warned him to slow down or he would fall. Of course, he fell and cracked his helmet. "If it wasn't for the helmet," I said, "it would have been your head." He took the broken helmet to school the next day for "share time" so his classmates would be safe too.

### **Education and Development**

Children learn so much at an early age. My wife and I have read every night to our children since they were five or six months old. Today, at ages eleven and seven years, they are both avid readers. You can start with picture books with lots of color illustrations. Then you can move on to books with thick cardboard pages that children love to turn. As children get older, go to the library and check out books about things they like. My older son, by the time he was four, knew more about dinosaurs than the average adult because we had checked out lots of dinosaur books from the children's and adult sections at the library. My younger son can tell you all about race cars and Lamborghinis because of all of his car books. Children can learn a myriad of facts and details if given the opportunity. Read to them and take them to the library. It helps them develop a passion for reading. The dividends will be handsome.

We all want our kids to be geniuses and get A's in school. We all recognize that everyone can't get great grades. So what do we strive for? My advice is to encourage kids to do the best they can. If they are doing their best, that is all we should expect from them. Parents need to be active in their children's education. This includes teaching them at home, helping with homework, and letting them know you care about their success in school. Also, parents should consider volunteering at their children's school. Schools that have a lot of parent participation are usually some of the best.

### **Career Choices, Teens, and School**

I meet so many teens who really don't care about or are not interested in doing well in school. They are more interested in playing TV and computer games, hanging out with friends at the mall, or just goofing around. These kids have so much talent and so much to offer that it's sad to see that energy go underused.

I would encourage teenagers to do volunteer work. This would be a great opportunity for them to help others, build a positive self-image, and perhaps redirect their energy toward school. Choices could include tutoring younger students, helping at food banks or soup kitchens, volunteering at the San Francisco Zoo, coaching sports, and participating in walks to benefit AIDS, cancer, or charitable organizations. Teens get new perspectives from helping others in need. Volunteering may also provide your teen with a career direction. Once teens have a career

or profession in mind, many begin focusing on school again to attain their goals.

Another way to motivate teenagers is to get them to start thinking about the “real world.” I want teenagers to realize that without a good job, it’s not easy to live in the Bay Area or have money to enjoy nice things. I suggest giving them a project: Have them choose a house they like from the real estate section in the \$600,000 to \$800,000 range, assume a 20 percent down payment, and calculate the expenses for a 30-year fixed mortgage at today’s interest rates. Then have them add up the property taxes, homeowner’s insurance, and water, phone, and PG&E bills. Most will discover they would need a job paying over \$100,000 a year to afford all this! Maybe knowing that will wake them up.

### **Teenagers**

Talk to your teens about drugs, drinking, smoking, and alcohol. Sex and AIDS should also be points for discussion. I am always happy to talk with your teenagers about any of these topics, and I have handouts for them if you like. Also, we have pediatricians who specialize in seeing teens. We are available to help your teenager in many ways.