Our Experts’ Top Tips for Raising Healthy, Happy Children

By Gayle Shirley
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My son celebrated his 31st birthday recently. For the past several years, I’ve spent this annual occasion marveling at what a decent and competent adult he’s become -- despite my bumbling job of parenting.

Back in the 1980s, when I got pregnant, I knew next to nothing about child-rearing. Like many people, I leaped into parenthood with fingers crossed, hoping I’d figure it out along the way.

I was never sure how best to cope with tantrums, picky eating, nap refusal, potty training, sibling rivalry, and all the other delightful issues that come with having children. I devoured parenting books and magazines, looking for a fail-proof “recipe,” a to-do list for how to raise a healthy and happy human being.

Mostly, I winged it. So I’m not sure I can take much credit for the awesome man my son has become.

But over birthday cake recently, I realized that I now have access to a whole team of pregnancy and parenting experts among my colleagues at Lewis and Clark Public (LCPH). They work with families daily through our home visiting and WIC supplemental nutrition programs and through parenting classes we offer.

So I asked my colleagues – social workers, nurses, dietitians, certified lactation specialists, home visitors, and counselors – to come up with a list of their top 10 recommendations for raising happy, healthy kids. Too late for me, of course, but I figured today’s new parents (and other caregivers) might appreciate the benefit of their expertise.

But first some caveats: Nothing we do or don’t do is guaranteed to be reflected in the adults our children become. And there’s no such thing as perfect parents. These tips are simply meant to help set you on the road to raising kids you can be proud of.

Here, in no particular order, are the first five tips. We’ll share the rest in our February Public Health column.

Take Care of Yourself.
To be a calm, loving, and understanding parent, you need to take time to recharge your own emotional and physical batteries. Losing your cool is a sign that you’re too stressed and need a
break. This is less likely to happen if you take regular time away to nurture your own needs. It’s not always easy, but make it a priority.

**Show Affection Often.**
Numerous studies have shown that you can’t “spoil” your baby. Lots of warmth and affection are critical for a child’s brain development. Babies and toddlers need a strong sense of attachment to their parents/caregivers if they’re to develop the skills that help them grow into independent, confident children. So go ahead, hold your baby. Offer consistent attention and tender care. Respond promptly to signs of distress, like crying, whining, or “acting out.”

**Adopt Safe Sleep Practices.**
Safe sleep practices can help protect your baby from dangers like choking, suffocation, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Always put your baby to sleep on his back on a flat, firm surface, like in a crib or bassinet. It’s OK to share a room with your baby, but don’t share a bed. Keep sleep positioners (like nests or anti-roll pillows), crib bumpers, loose blankets and other bedding, toys, and other soft objects out of your baby’s crib. For more information on safe sleep, visit the Healthy Mothers Healthy Babies website at [www.hmhb-mt.org](http://www.hmhb-mt.org).

**Breastfeed.**
Breastmilk is the perfect food for your baby. It contains just the right amount of nutrients and is gentle on your baby's developing stomach, intestines, and other body systems.

Breastfeeding has been linked to lots of health benefits for both babies and moms. Experts recommend breastfeeding for the first year of a baby’s life. If breastfeeding isn’t an option, the best substitute is iron-fortified formula.

If you have questions about breastfeeding, LCPH offers free Basics for Moms classes on the first Friday of every month, from noon to 1 p.m. at our office, 1930 Ninth Ave. Feel free to drop in and visit with our friendly certified lactation consultant!

**Keep Your Home Smoke- and Drug-Free.**
The dangers of secondhand cigarette smoke are well-documented. The best thing you can do for your child is to avoid all tobacco products and ban them from your home and car. If you need help quitting, talk to your doctor or call the Montana Tobacco Quit Line, 1-800-QUIT-NOW. LCPH also offers a tobacco cessation program just for pregnant women. Call 457-8900 to learn more.

Like tobacco, illegal drugs aren't good for anyone. When parents use drugs, they’re less able to think clearly and make good decisions. They might do dumb or dangerous things that could hurt them — or their kids. According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, children with a parent who has a substance abuse disorder are more likely to live on a lower income and have trouble in school and social settings. Parental abuse or neglect are also more common.

Look for this column in February to get more top tips for parenting from our pros. You can also learn more by contacting the resources listed with this column.

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Parenting Resources

- **Parenting Montana.** This website, developed by the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, provides tools to build parenting skills to support the success of children from kindergarten to the teen years. It covers topics like bullying, lying, meltdowns, homework, and more. [www.parentingmontana.org](http://www.parentingmontana.org)

- **Lewis and Clark Public Health.** We offer family support and education, child health and developmental screenings, home visiting, pregnancy testing, breastfeeding support, and parenting classes and support groups. [www.lccountymt.gov/health/health-promotion/pregnancy-parenting](http://www.lccountymt.gov/health/health-promotion/pregnancy-parenting), 457-8912.

- **Montana Child and Family Ombudsman.** The ombudsman can direct you to resources in our area. 1-844-252-4453.

- **Healthy Mothers Healthy Babies.** This statewide nonprofit organization offers programs that promote safe sleep, provide car seats to families in need, and support those experiencing mood or substance-use disorders during pregnancy. [www.hmhb-mt.org](http://www.hmhb-mt.org)