For IR Public Health column
February 2020
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More Expert Tips for Raising Healthy, Happy Children

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Last month in this space, I shared five tips for raising happy, healthy children – compiled at my request by the pregnancy and parenting experts here at Lewis and Clark Public Health. As promised, here are the rest of their top 10 recommendations:

Schedule Family Mealtimes
In the midst of a busy life, it can be hard to find time to eat together. But family mealtimes are important and can be a healthful part of our daily routine. Researchers have found that families who share meals together on a regular basis reap many benefits. These include:

- Better nutrition and less-picky eaters. One study found that families who eat together are twice as likely to eat five servings of fruits and vegetables a day as families who don’t.
- An opportunity to communicate and build stronger family ties, leading to higher self-esteem.
- A lower risk of obesity. Research shows that people tend to eat less during family meals because they eat more slowly and talk more. And home-cooked meals are likely to be healthier than restaurant meals.
- A lower risk that kids will have psychological problems or engage in high-risk behaviors, like using drugs or alcohol.
- Better grades. Researchers at Columbia University found that kids who eat with their families three times a week or more were twice as likely to report getting As and Bs in school.

If the idea of corralling everybody for a daily meal is too daunting, start small. Increase the number of family meals by one a week. Ask kids to help prepare food or set the table. And turn off those smartphones and TV!

Get Recommended Shots and Health Checks
Vaccinations are a simple, safe, and effective way of protecting your child from contagious, serious, and even deadly diseases, like measles, mumps, tetanus, and whooping cough.

Health-care experts recommend a specific schedule of vaccinations for children. Kids get most of these shots at well-child checkups before they turn 6. In many cases, schools and day cares won’t allow a child to attend without these vaccinations.

It’s important to make sure your child gets all of the recommended shots. To keep track of them, you can use a record available on the website of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at
The same site has a schedule of when vaccines are due. Some need to be given more than once or in combinations. If you get behind, your medical provider can help you catch up.

Scientists, doctors, and other health professionals have reviewed childhood vaccines rigorously to make sure they’re safe. Serious side effects, like allergic reactions, are very rare.

The bottom line is: The benefits of vaccinations far outweigh the possible side effects for almost all children. Many diseases, like polio, are not common in the U.S. today because of our high vaccination rate. The only way to keep these diseases at bay is to keep vaccinating.

**Encourage Active Play; Limit Screen Time**

Child’s play has changed a lot since I was young. Gone are the days of childhood freedom, when heading out the front door meant anything was possible if you used the right amount of imagination. Kids today are more likely to play indoors rather than out, and much of their play is sedentary and involves staring at a screen.

But studies have shown that a lack of outdoor playtime can actually harm a child’s growth. One author called this “nature deficit disorder.”

The World Health Organization has set guidelines for sedentary screen use by preschoolers: they recommend no screen time for infants and 1-year-olds and no more than an hour a day for 2- to 4-year-olds. “Less is better,” they advise.

There are both mental and physical advantages to playing outside. Researchers have found that children with more opportunities to get out and enjoy nature were less stressed by life. They had better motor coordination and concentration skills.

Active play can have long-lasting effects, too. Years down the road, an active child is more likely to be an active adult and less likely to be overweight.

**Use a Properly Installed Car Seat**

The number-one cause of death for Montana children and teens is motor vehicle crashes, according to the state Department of Public Health and Human Services. Car seats reduce the risk of injury by about 70-80 percent and the risk of death by almost 30 percent compared to children using seat belts alone. Booster seats reduce the risk of nonfatal injuries by 45 percent among 4- to 8-year-olds.

But just having a child restraint isn’t enough. It must be installed and used properly to give the full protective benefits. A 2011 study by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration found that 46 percent of car and booster seats were installed incorrectly.

A number of local organizations offer child safety-seat checks and information, including:
- Tri-County Buckle Up, [www.facebook.com/TriCountyBuckleUpMT/](http://www.facebook.com/TriCountyBuckleUpMT/)

**Talk and Read to Your Child**
Research has found that providing children with consistent, language-rich experiences during their first five years of life can improve their brain development and future success in school and life. So it’s important to talk, listen, read, sing, and play games with your child every day, starting from day one!

Recognizing the importance of this early-childhood interaction, the U.S. Department of Education founded the Talk, Read, and Sing Together Every Day! Program. It offers resources for families at [www.ed.gov/early-learning/talk-read-sing](http://www.ed.gov/early-learning/talk-read-sing).

But you don’t need special tools to chat with your child while changing a diaper or to read to him or her at bedtime. An added bonus: This is a chance to snuggle up and fortify the special bond you have with your little one.

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