



Encouraging Healthy Habits in Your School-Aged Child

The health habits your child develops during the school-aged years—the wide span between ages five and 12—often become habits for life. Although nearly everything concerning health habits of five- and six-year-olds—from what they eat to how often they bathe—is controlled by their parents, as children get older they become more capable of managing these habits on their own. Therefore, it's crucial that you help your child develop healthy, lifelong practices as early as possible. This guide offers information and tips on encouraging healthy habits in your school-aged child. *Note*—This guide is intended to provide general information only. Speak to your health care professional for information about your child's individual needs.

Your School-Aged Child's Health

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends annual well-child examinations for children ages five to 12 years. As part of a complete physical checkup, the exams cover the following:

- Height and weight
- Blood pressure and vital functions
- Vision and hearing
- Immunization updates

At your well-child visits, your child's pediatrician will also ask about your child's sleep patterns, diet and exercise. This is also a good time to bring up any questions or concerns you may have about your child's health, development,

Marcia worries that her 10-year old son, Matthew, does not get enough sleep. She explains, "Mathew always puts up a fight at bedtime. At night he has trouble getting to sleep and in the morning when it's time for school, he has trouble getting out of bed and he often sleeps through his alarm. How can I get him into a better routine so I know he is getting the amount of sleep he needs?"

school experiences, relationships and daily stresses. Once your child gets older, usually around the time he or she is beginning puberty, you may want to ask your child if he or she prefers if you wait in the waiting room during the exam. This allows your child some privacy and gives him or her the opportunity to talk with the doctor about topics—such as the changes occurring in his or her body or questions about sex—that he or she may feel uncomfortable discussing in front of you.

When Does Puberty Begin?

The onset of puberty begins when a series of hormones are produced in the body that stimulate growth and release additional hormones that make reproduction possible. Puberty affects children at different times in their lives—it can be as early as eight to ten for some or in the late teens for others. For more information about puberty and how to prepare your child for the changes it brings, please refer to the guide *Puberty*.

Immunization Schedule for School-Aged Children

If your child is on a typical schedule for immunizations, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, you can expect him or her to receive the next scheduled dosages of the following vaccinations:

- Diphtheria, Tetanus, Pertussis (DtaP— A single shot/vaccination that combines all three). The final dose in the series is usually given between ages four and six. A Td (tetanus and diphtheria toxoids) booster is recommended between ages 11-12.
- Measles, Mumps, Rubella (MMR). The second dose is usually given between ages four and six.
- Polio (IPV—Inactivated polio vaccine) Ages four to six.
- Hepatitis B (HEP B) (Recommended for school-aged children who have not been previously vaccinated.)
- Varicella Zoster (Chickenpox) The second dose is recommended at 4-6 years.
- Human Papillomavirus (HPV) series (three doses) is recommended for girls 11 and 12 years of age.
- Pneumococcal (PPV), Hepatitis A (HepA), Meningococcal (MCV4), and influenza vaccinations may be recommended for certain high-risk groups and/or for children who live in certain geographic locations. Ask your pediatrician if your child should be vaccinated.

Note—These are suggested guidelines only. For more information about vaccinations and the appropriate schedule for your child, please contact your child’s pediatrician.

Recommended Dental Checkups for School-Aged Children

Around age six or seven, your child’s primary, or “baby” teeth begin to fall out and permanent teeth grow into place. Your child should now be able to brush unsupervised, although you still may need to remind him or her daily. In addition to brushing, help your child maintain healthy teeth by encouraging him or her to floss regularly and limit high-sugar and sticky sweets. If your child eats sweets between meals, teach him or her to rinse with water after eating if he or she is unable to brush.

It is recommended that children have dental checkups and cleanings twice a year beginning at age three. Regular checkups significantly decrease your child’s chances of needing major dental work later in life. At each checkup, the dentist will examine your child’s teeth and gums for signs of cavities or decay. In addition, the dentist may check the development or positioning of your child’s teeth or jaw. For example, the dentist will most likely be able to determine if your child will need future orthodontic work and may refer you to an orthodontist, if necessary.

As your child’s permanent teeth come in, your dentist may also recommend dental sealants. A sealant is clear material that is applied to the chewing surfaces of the back teeth to protect them from cavities. Fluoride, however, is the most effective agent in preventing tooth decay. Many communities have fluoridated drinking water, which is effective in providing fluoride protection. If your drinking water does not contain fluoride, ask the dentist about fluoride supplements for your child.

Active children require proper protection to prevent injuries to the mouth, face, tongue and lips—injuries that could include broken or knocked-out teeth, and even jaw fractures. Ask a dentist for advice on the proper mouth-guard for a child who plays a contact sport like football or basketball, or participates in activities such as bike riding or in-line skating. If an accident does happen, call your dentist immediately.

Your School-Aged Child's Eating Habits

Young school-aged children are gradually learning to make meal selections on their own, so it's important to teach your child the importance of good nutrition early. The following tips may help:

- **Teach your child what makes up reasonably healthy meal choices** (e.g., whole grains, lean proteins, fresh fruits and vegetables) even from fast food menus (i.e., eating fried foods in moderation, choosing a grilled chicken sandwich instead of a fried hamburger, including plenty of fruits and vegetables, etc.).
- **Involve your child in meal planning.** Ask him or her to make suggestions for the grocery list, help prepare meals and provide ideas for healthy snacks. Older children may have fun experimenting with ingredients in favorite family recipes to create healthier versions.
- **Take your child shopping with you.** Show him or her package labels and explain what they mean. Once your child can read well enough, make a game of selecting foods with the best nutritional values.
- **Don't encourage or force your child to "clean the plate."** Instead, teach him or her to listen to body signals. When your child feels full, he or she should know it's okay to stop eating, even when it means food remains on the plate.
- **Set a good example.** Children learn by example, so practice healthy eating habits yourself. Serve balanced meals (protein, vegetables and whole grains) and stock your kitchen with healthy snacks (e.g., raisins, pretzels, yogurt).
- **Make sure your child eats breakfast.** Many kids tend to skip breakfast in the rush to get ready for school in the morning. A healthy breakfast will provide your child with the energy he or she needs for an active day and may improve concentration.
- **Offer a variety of foods to provide your child with vital nutrients he or she needs.** The MyPyramid guide provides personalized guidelines on nutrition. It is available on the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) website. (For information on locating MyPyramid online, refer to the "Helpful Resources" section of this guide.)
- **Plan for snacks.** Kids need to snack during the day to keep their energy levels up, but snacks don't have to be unhealthy. In fact, they can be a great way to make sure your child gets all the nutrients he or she needs. When shopping, buy healthy foods that can be eaten on the go—apples with peanut butter, yogurt with granola, etc.
- **Limit junk food.** A little bit goes a long way when it comes to junk food—especially those with high saturated fat, salt and sugar. Teach your child to eat these types of foods in moderation and to balance them out with other, healthier foods.
- **Find out what your child eats at school.** If your child buys lunch, ask what he or she typically orders. If you're not satisfied, consider packing lunch and/or asking your child how he or she could make lunch more healthy.

Have your child eat at least the lowest number of servings from the USDA's five major food groups:

- ✓ Grains
- ✓ Fruits
- ✓ Vegetables
- ✓ Meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs and nuts
- ✓ Milk, yogurt and cheese

Your School-Aged Child's Fitness Habits

As a preschooler your child probably got plenty of exercise without any encouragement from you—they love dancing, running, skipping and jumping. School-aged children are likely to continue physical activities if you guide them toward age-appropriate choices. For example, by age six, children have developed greater physical coordination and balance, opening up interest in activities that depend on those skills, such as swimming, gymnastics, jumping rope and hopscotch. In a few more years, children begin to relate to team membership; consequently they look forward to the excitement and satisfaction team sports provide.

The following tips may help you encourage your child's interest in fitness:

- **Encourage your child to pursue activities he or she likes.** Children who enjoy an activity are likely to stick with it. The type of activity isn't important, as long as your child is doing something physical. Whether it's softball, swimming, martial arts or dance, your child will reap the fitness and self-discipline rewards.
 - **Check out local school-aged athletic leagues.** Most communities offer a variety of sports leagues for boys and girls such as baseball, softball, football, soccer, basketball and more.
 - **Avoid emphasis on competition.** If your child feels pressure to win, the activity may no longer be pleasurable. Children respond better when parents stay focused on the enjoyment of the sport or activity itself, not the result.
 - **Suggest walking, biking or roller-blading as a form of transportation.** You and your child can get exercise by doing errands, visiting friends or going to a nearby park without using the car.
- **Be a good role model.** Seeing you participate regularly in physical activities will motivate your child and help him or her develop a positive attitude toward life-long fitness.
 - **Limit television viewing and time spent on the Internet.** While these activities can provide some educational benefits, they may also take away from time spent playing outdoors or doing other athletic activities.

Your School-Aged Child's Sleep Habits

Sleep needs vary widely from child to child, but school-aged children typically need a lot of sleep to function well during the day and assure good health and growth. On average, a five-year-old needs approximately 11 hours of sleep per night. As your child ages, you can assume he or she will need about 15 minutes fewer for each year, so that by age 12, the average amount of sleep your child needs is about 9¼ hours. These are broad guidelines, so don't be alarmed if your child sleeps more or less. You'll be able to tell if your child is getting the proper amount of sleep by his or her alertness and energy level during the day.

Setting Bedtime

Many parents may allow their young children who nap regularly to stay up well after dinner. Because of their daytime sleep, children in this age group can handle a later bed hour. However, once children are in school and no longer napping, they need a full night's sleep that only an early bedtime can provide. Once your child reaches age eight, you may want to consider letting him or her stay up a little longer and increasing it by 30 minutes as he or she gets older. It may be difficult at first to get your child into an earlier bedtime habit, but stick with it. Your child needs sleep no matter how much he or she may protest.

Nightmares and Night Terrors

Some children are more likely to have nightmares than others, and while no one knows why, developmental studies show that virtually all children begin to have fewer nightmares as they reach ages nine and 10. In part, this may be the result of children being better able to determine what daytime activities tend to trigger bad dreams (for instance, scary books or videos) and avoid them.

Night terrors are distinguished from nightmares by their intensity, and the fact that the child typically doesn't remember their content. Night terrors generally appear in children around age four and peak by age five or six, although not all children experience them. If your child experiences night terrors, stay calm and comfort your child—trying not to wake him or her further—until sleep returns. This may take only a few minutes, and it's likely that your child won't even remember the event the next day.

Bedtime Routines

Bedtime can be one of the most difficult times of the day for children and parents. Although it may be hard to get your child to bed, it can also be a bonding experience. As bedtime approaches, plan to spend anywhere from 10 to 30 minutes with your child. Younger children may enjoy having you read a short book while they look at the illustrations, but as your child reaches first or second grade, he or she may prefer having you read a chapter from a bigger book each night. As children age, some prefer to read quietly to themselves. Even children who are able to go to bed on their own often still crave the parental closeness that a bedtime ritual provides. Sit by your child's bed and share a quiet talk or a few minutes of snuggling. If you are still having trouble getting your child to go to bed, try setting a period of quiet

time an hour before the desired bedtime. Encourage your child to wind down by reading, drawing, or listening to quiet music, but don't let this replace time spent with you.

Personal Hygiene and Your School-Aged Child

Mastering cleanliness and grooming are surprisingly difficult for most young children, and for some time you will probably need to supervise even the most basic hygiene practices. For instance, your five-year-old has no doubt been washing his or her hands without supervision for some time. However, you may have to remind him or her to wash before meals and after using the bathroom since it's unlikely he or she will remember to do this routinely until age nine or 10. Also, you'll probably have to remind your child to brush his or her teeth and floss daily.

The following suggestions may help your child become more aware of personal hygiene habits:

- **Provide your child with toiletries of his or her own.** Designating soap, shampoo, face cloths and towels exclusively for your child helps promote a sense of independence. Select a space for your child to store his or her supplies separately, and encourage him or her to put things away when finished.
- **Teach your child safety rules early.** Have your child observe you testing the bath water temperature to be sure it's cool enough. Point out potentially slippery situations and remind your child to gather everything he or she needs for a bath before getting in the tub to avoid having to get out to retrieve an item.
- **Don't expect or allow too much too soon.** It takes time to develop responsibility for personal hygiene. While respecting your child's privacy, continue to enforce safety measures until you're confident your child can handle the task. For example, ask your child periodically if he or she is remembering to wash hands and brush and floss teeth regularly.

- **Make hygiene habits fun.** For example, kids love to spend special one-on-one time with their parents. Dads may make a point of taking sons to the barber and then having ice cream. Moms may want to plan a “spa” night with their daughters for washing hair, polishing nails, giving each other facials, etc. While this may not help on a day-to-day basis, it may encourage your child to take more of an interest in personal hygiene.

Talking to Your School-Aged Child About Risky Behaviors

An important part of raising healthy children is speaking to them early about risky behaviors such as alcohol, tobacco and drug use; sexual relations; and violent behaviors (such as gangs, guns, etc.). Even young school-aged children may be exposed to or offered cigarettes, alcohol or drugs by friends, classmates or older children. As children near adolescence, there is an even greater chance that they may be pressured to experiment with harmful substances, have sexual relations, join gangs, or participate in violent or other risky behaviors. Have regular conversations with your children about the negative effects these behaviors can have on their health and wellness. For age-appropriate tips on talking to children about risky behaviors, ask your child’s pediatrician and refer to other guides in our educational series.

Helpful Resources

American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)

141 Northwest Point Boulevard
Elk Grove Village, IL 60007-1098
www.aap.org

The AAP dedicates resources to the mental and social health, safety and well-being of infants, children, adolescents and young adults. It provides parents with answers to medical and parenting concerns. The web site provides education, advocacy, and a list of resources covering a wide variety of child care issues. Parents can also call, write or e-mail the AAP for information on services or to order publications.

Bam! Body and Mind

www.bam.org

This web site for kids is sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It provides information, tips and quizzes for school-aged children on dealing with stress, eating healthy, getting in shape, and staying well.

U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857-0001
888-INFO-FDA (888-463-6332)
www.fda.gov
www.mypyramid.gov

The FDA provides information on food safety, nutrition, and also has a section exclusively for kids and teenagers. MyPyramid Guide provides guidelines on nutrition for children.

Nutrition Explorations

www.nutritionexplorations.org

This web site, sponsored by the National Dairy Council, provides nutrition tips for kids and parents. This interactive site also offers learning activities for kids and families and kid-friendly recipes, information on eating healthy at school, and more.

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