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Staying Fit in Mind and Body

Teaching your child how to maintain the right balance of diet, exercise, and relaxation is the key to her well-being — for life.

Learning Benefits

Hover over each Learning Benefit below for a detailed explanation.

Decision Making
Responsibility
Self Control
Independent Thinking

Learning to maintain health (both physical and mental) is one of the most important things you can teach your child. What's more, many studies suggest a link between a child's mental and physical health with successful learning. Overall fitness affects everything from a child's behavior to his ability to focus on tasks.

Children take great satisfaction in caring for themselves: feeding themselves, brushing their own hair, and even brushing their teeth. Even your child's play with dolls, for example, reflects how caring for one's self and others are valued instinctively, absorbing themes that are important to her psychological and social development. Caring for one's body, respecting it, and knowing how all the parts work together are fundamental to living — and learning — well.

By focusing on a few main areas — proper nutrition, exercise, rest and stress-reduction — you can help your child create a balance that will ensure a fit mind and body.

Mealtimes are just one of the many opportunities we have each day to raise our children's awareness of what constitutes a healthy lifestyle. According to David Ludwig, M.D., Ph.D., director of the Optimal Weight for Life program at Children's Hospital Boston, "If you start early and use this time to teach good habits, you can help prevent future problems. Young children learn about a healthful diet and lifestyle from the people who love them and who have their best interests at heart. Children imitate adult behavior. Parents, in particular, should not only be supportive but should also live a healthful lifestyle that includes eating nutritious foods and getting plenty of exercise, as well as rest and relaxation."

As you set the rhythm of each day — we get up, we use the bathroom, we eat breakfast, we play quietly, we go outside for fresh air, we nap — you are naturally providing a pleasant, life-affirming environment that promotes cleanliness, good nutrition, and a balance between exercise and rest. The most powerful messages you can send to your child come from modeling good habits (make [healthy food choices](#), brush teeth after eating); showing an interest in your child's physical development (display a [growth chart](#) in a visible area); and supporting your child in her self-care efforts (supply a step stool for the bathroom sink).

Learning to Eat Right

Children are totally dependent on you for food, which makes the early years an excellent time to establish good eating habits and to teach your child about making healthy choices. As your child grows, he will not always have you there as a guide, so talking openly about what makes a food healthy or not is critical.

Teaching children about making healthy choices is not an easy task for parents today, who are competing with powerful media messages aimed at children that don't promote healthful eating. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, more than one in five children in the United States are overweight. At the same time, type 2 diabetes — once called adult-onset diabetes — is affecting children as young as 4, while attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is also on the rise. Are the problems [linked](#)? Dr. Ludwig lays the blame squarely on diets heavy in processed and fast food, a situation made worse by the constant barrage of TV commercials that make bad foods look so good to kids. The key, he says, is to send your own messages about smart eating by modeling healthy choices and good habits as a parent. The following activities will help get your child interested in healthy eating habits:

- **Prepare kid-friendly fare:** smoothies, fruit salads, kabobs, bite-size raw veggies with yogurt dips, salads, and soups (bean, vegetable, potato, chili) all tend to be favorites.
- **Emphasize food quality.** Take your child grocery shopping and encourage him to help with the selections. Teach him how to read the nutrition labels on food packaging. If possible, [grow some vegetables](#) or herbs — whether it's indoors or outdoors.
- **Try out some kid-friendly cookbooks.** This will help expose your child to a wide range of foods and diverse tastes. We love these two: *Fairy Tale Feasts: A Literary Cookbook for Young Readers and Eaters* by Jane Yolen and Heidi Stemple, and *There's a Chef in My World* by [Emeril Lagasse](#).

Let's Get Moving

There is much in the news about kids not getting enough physical activity. In fact, studies show that American children become less active with each year of age. Sadly, inactivity among children is linked to future sedentary habits as adults. Exercise is critical for your child's healthy development. Physical activities not only build motor skills and confidence, but also brainpower! An active body sends messages to the brain that stimulate synaptic growth.

Physical play offers opportunities for social and emotional growth as well. Children develop confidence as they witness their own physical skills blossoming. If you want to be sure your child is getting enough physical activity, The National Association for Sport and Physical Education offers fitness guidelines by age. The guidelines range from 30 minutes of structured play for toddlers to 60 minutes of unstructured play for toddlers and preschoolers.

It's important to note that physical activity can be cumulative. In other words, you can help your child get the recommended amount of activity over the course of the day; it doesn't have to happen all at one time. And the best way to get your child up and moving is to do it with him:

- **Play outside together.** Encourage your child to participate in simple activities with you. Take a walk after dinner, or skip or run together on your way to school. Balance on a line of tape stuck to the floor. Hop or jump up and down steps, and hide behind trees and mailboxes.
- **Offer props.** Crepe paper streamers and ribbon sticks inspire children to "run like the wind," while handfuls of silky scarves become leaves to fling and wave.
- **Give your child an "art workout."** Tape some large mural paper to your wall or to the sidewalk so that your child can use big arm movements when he creates. Clay and play dough are good for pounding and pushing.
- **Use music to inspire movement.** Make Friday night "Dance Night." Start with 30 to 45 minutes of music, varying the styles. You can use salsa, hip-hop, rock 'n' roll, or another favorite.
- **Make "Move those muscles!" your family slogan.** Try firmly [limiting screen time](#) with television, computers, and games - even educational games. Encourage your kids to carry groceries bags, push shopping carts, take the stairs whenever possible, and assume some other age-appropriate physical [chores](#).

Peace, Relaxation, and Sleep

Like food and shelter, a child's need for sleep is basic. The healthiest, happiest kids are the best rested. A child's ability to learn, imagine, create, and socialize are all linked to getting a sound night's sleep, as rest gives a growing body and brain a chance to consolidate experiences, archive the day's memories, and process emotions.

Unfortunately, chronic sleep deprivation is affecting kids today. In her latest book, *Sleepless in America: Practical Strategies to Help Your Family Get the Sleep It Deserves*, child development expert [Mary Sheedy Kurcinka](#), MA, discusses how lack of sleep affects everything from your child's learning and growth, to his behavior. In fact, according to Kurcinka, a young child who is sleep-deprived can have trouble managing his emotions. He might have an explosive temper, easily hurt feelings, or be impatient. An overtired older child may have trouble focusing in class.

Luckily, there are concrete steps you can take to help your child become a better sleeper — it just takes some creativity, commitment, and patience. Here are some strategies:

- **Set a regular bedtime** for weeknights and weekends. Keeping your child's daily schedule consistent, with fairly predictable meal and sleep times, helps regulate his body's inner clock.
- **Design a pre-bedtime ritual** that helps your child unwind. This routine should take about 20 minutes or so and can include activities like reading a story, singing songs, or listening to music. A well-structured bedtime will help him come to expect and look forward to settling into sleep.

Attaining a calm mind and learning to manage stress also leads to more peaceful, centered, and therefore, healthy living. Everyone, at every age, experiences stress. It's a natural reaction to everyday challenges. Sometimes it's helpful — a brief episode may push a child to achieve a goal. But when a child experiences stress for an extended period, it can become problematic and lead to difficulties with family, peers, and learning. Kids who develop good coping skills are better able to respond to and recover from stressful situations. The following relaxation strategies can be incorporated into your child's daily life:

- **Stretch gently.** Together, do a morning stretch, and 10 jumping jacks. Yoga moves at the end of a busy day are a great way for everyone to calm down and tone the body. Try the tree, cat-cow,

and warrior poses, which kids love.

- **Observe.** For older children, spend some time snuggling with a favorite blanket or animal. Take time to gaze at things. Notice the clouds moving overhead, the stars and moon at night, a breeze on the face, birds, or the smells of different foods.

Through your efforts to focus on the well-being of yourself and your family, your child will enjoy the experience of learning about and caring for his own body. The early childhood experiences he has in keeping his body safe, fit, peaceful, and healthy will set the foundation for building positive attitudes that will last a lifetime.

Recommended Products for Your Child Ages 6-7

Scholastic Reader Level 1 Ages: 4-7 \$3.19	Hippopotamus At the Teac Ages: 5-8 \$2.99	The Magic School Bus: The Ages: 5-8 \$39.95	Scholastic Reader Level 3 Ages: 6-9 \$3.19	My Daddy Snores (Enrich) Ages: 5-8 \$5.99	Fly Guy#10: Fly Guy Vs. Ages: 4-8 \$5.56	Fly Guy#2: Super Fly Guy Ages: 4-8 \$4.79	The Magic School Bus: Get Ages: 6-9 \$2.39	There Was An Old Lady Who Ages: 4-8 \$4.79	The Lad Age \$4.7
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