

# Eight ways to raise happier, healthier kids, according to experts

April 1 2024, by Amy Rosenberg

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If you're raising kids, your goal is probably simple: You want happy and healthy young people who are ultimately equipped to navigate life on their own.

But the path to that goal often involves a lot of twists and turns. Sometimes it's even downright rocky.

Luckily, Tufts experts in a variety of fields have spent years identifying strategies that may help smooth the way. Here are a few of their tips.

## **1. Eat real food, together**

Decades of research show that sharing regular meals with family and consuming less overprocessed food lead to improved outcomes for kids.

Eating meals together as a family can reduce the probability that adolescents will smoke, drink, and use drugs, as well as lower the incidence of risky sexual behaviors, said Margie R. Skeer, Weiner Hailey Family Professor at Tufts University School of Medicine.

It's probably what happens at family meals that fosters this protective effect, rather than the meals themselves, she said. Ideally, frequent, consistent mealtimes serve as a conduit for open communication, building trust and providing a foundation for more sensitive conversations.

To get the most benefit, don't allow distractions like [phone calls](#), texting, or doing homework at the table. And if schedules make a family dinner impossible on some days, find another 30 minutes to talk with your kids, even if it's in the car on the way to and from activities.

What kids eat also matters. In particular, it's beneficial for children to reduce their consumption of overprocessed foods, such as packaged snacks, sugary breakfast cereals, and fast food. These foods are problematic, say researchers at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, because they often are high in added sugar, sodium, and carbohydrates, and low in fiber, protein, vitamins, and minerals.

You can steer your kids toward healthier choices by role modeling healthy eating and "providing clear, consistent rules and limits, meal and snack routines, and access to healthy options," said Erin Hennessy, an associate professor at the Friedman School.

## **2. Consider getting that dog**

Many families who have pets view them as beloved family members, and for good reason. Pets can be a source of emotional support and companionship—or of just plain joy—for a family. For children, they can provide opportunities to practice positive social interactions and develop empathy and compassion. Recent research indicates that living with dogs, in particular, is associated with better social and emotional skills for kids.

Megan Mueller, A08, AG10, AG13, an associate professor at Cummings School and Tisch College of Civic Life, found that teenagers with high levels of attachment to their pets were likely to have higher levels of social skills and empathy toward others than those without such attachments.

"Our findings suggest that it may not be whether an animal is present in an individual's life that is most significant but rather the quality of that relationship," emphasized Mueller, who is co-director of the Tufts Initiative for Human-Animal Interaction and leads the Tufts Pets and Well-Being Lab.

In a study she conducted, young adults who cared for animals reported engaging in more "contribution" activities, such as community service or helping friends or family, than those who did not. The more actively they participated in the pet's care, the higher the contribution scores. The study also found that high levels of attachment to an animal in late adolescence and young adulthood were positively associated with feeling

connected with other people, having empathy, and feeling confident.

### **3. Start visiting the dentist early**

About one in five children in the U.S. between the ages of 2 and 5 will develop at least one cavity, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—and the rate of tooth decay only becomes higher as children get older. The results are far more than cosmetic: poor oral health affects children's nutrition, speech, and ability to learn, among other things.

The good news is that dental decay is preventable, and there is much you can do as a parent to help ensure a lifetime of happy and healthy smiles, said Cheen Loo, professor and chair of pediatric dentistry at Tufts University School of Dental Medicine. The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommends a child's first dental appointment should be after that first pearly little tooth appears, or at least by a child's first birthday. Here's why:

- **The parent as patient:** As a parent, you'll be learning how to take care of your child's teeth and what you can anticipate—when the various types of teeth come in; what situations require a call to the dentist; and how bottles, sippy cups, and pacifiers, for instance, affect oral development, Loo said.
- **Toothbrush tutorial:** Your family dentist will show you how even the newest baby tooth should be cleaned with a toothbrush and a tiny drop of fluoridated toothpaste, the size of a grain of rice, Loo said. The tradition of using a washcloth to clean little teeth simply isn't as effective, she explained.
- **Emergency preparedness:** Getting to know a dentist is also good preparation in case your child falls or bangs into something,

injuring their teeth or gums. If that happens, you'll be glad to know whom to call, and a dentist who already knows your child may be able to decide whether the youngster needs to be seen immediately, or offer advice over the phone.

## 4. Help kids cope with stress

Kids face stressors daily, whether it's pressure to succeed, social anxiety, or uncertainty about the future. While you can't clear all that stress away, you can help your child learn coping mechanisms.

One helpful strategy is to offer opportunities to build positive connections, advised child psychiatrist Neha Sharma, assistant professor at the School of Medicine and director of the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Clinic at Tufts Medical Center. Community, family support, and a sense of belonging—whether through a sport, faith community, school, or other group—help protect young people's mental health.

In demanding moments, such as before exams or championship games, help your child put sleep, nutrition, and movement first, said clinical psychologist Alice Connors-Kellgren, assistant professor at Tufts University School of Medicine and director of the pediatric trauma clinic at Tufts Medical Center. She also recommends that parents and kids try anxiety-reducing strategies such as using relaxation techniques, actively challenging automatic thoughts, and reducing negativity in [self-talk](#).

For some causes of stress, like bullying, you may need to manage the source of the problem by talking with school staff, Connors-Kellgren said. You may also need to put limits on your child's social media use to reduce their exposure to harmful interactions.

But in many cases, children just need the reassurance a caring adult can



provide. "Extend an invitation to talk and then pause to allow them to process that before they come back," Sharma said. "If they don't take our offer right away, we tend to assume they don't want to talk. But parents need to keep coming back, not in a nagging way, but in an 'I'm still here and listening' kind of way."

## **5. Keep screen time creative and safe**

As digital natives, your kids may know more than you when it comes to the latest platforms, programs, apps, and social media channels. So how do you keep them safe?

According to Julie Dobrow, senior lecturer in the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study and Human Development, Film and Media Studies Program faculty member, and senior lecturer at Tisch College of Civic Life, the most important step is to model good behavior. "Think about how you want your kids to use their phones and social media, and follow those guidelines yourself," she advised.

In addition, parents should be careful and critical consumers, Dobrow said. "Before sharing an application on a smartphone with a child, look at it and play with it," she suggested. Determine whether it has value—and whether it's consonant with your values.

Another rule of thumb: Keep up. New apps and platforms emerge constantly, Dobrow said, and it's important to learn about them and find out what parental controls exist.

It's also important to help kids use their [screen time](#) creatively. Having them design, program, draw, record, or edit when they're on screens—rather than play simple games, watch valueless videos, or scroll through social media—can provide kids with stimulating, educational experiences.

And if those experiences can happen with a parent present, all the better, said Dobrow. "The strongest learning happens when a parent can be there and talk about something"—especially with younger kids. "Even the really high-quality shows like Sesame Street or Between the Lions are helped when you have a parent or caregiver there who can comment on what's happening and say things like, 'Why is Cookie Monster so upset?'"

## **6. Make time to play outdoors**

Brian Gravel doesn't believe in homework. "The educational community has consistently shown that the positive impacts of homework—in its present forms—are minimal at best," said the associate professor of education in the School of Arts and Sciences.

While homework might help your older teen score higher on achievement tests, noted Gravel, E01, EG04, AG11, "we can't find evidence that it supports elementary school learning, and we have ample evidence of its harmful impact, like contributing to children's exhaustion, reducing time for play, and contributing to overall disinterest in school."

What might be better than homework? Giving your kids time to explore outdoors, even if the "wilderness" available to you is an urban pocket park. W. George Scarlett, distinguished senior lecturer in child development in the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study and Human Development, said that allowing kids to play in nature gives them a chance "to see the world as a source of wonder and web of life" and develop an interest in Earth stewardship.

In addition, kids can benefit from structured youth development programs, like Boys & Girls Clubs, 4-H, and Scouts, which often encourage outdoor activity. And these programs may reduce poor

outcomes that sometimes emerge when children participate in sports without engaging in other activities, according to research by Richard Lerner, Bergstrom Chair in Applied Developmental Science in the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study and Human Development.

Kids who combine sports and youth development activities score highest in positive development and contribution and lowest in risk and problem behavior, according to Lerner's research.

## **7. Prioritize sleep for teens**

You might think you're done with sleep issues once your baby stops waking you up in the night, but as kids get older, they face different challenges. Most teens need eight to 10 hours of sleep per night but get far less. Not sleeping enough can threaten their mental well-being, academic performance, and physical health.

Aarti Grover, a clinical assistant professor at Tufts University School of Medicine and medical director of the Center for Sleep Medicine at Tufts Medical Center, and Alison Kole, M04, host of a podcast called Sleep is My Waking Passion, have some advice.

Grover and Kole—and the American Academy of Pediatrics—think schools for adolescents should start later than they do, ideally after 8:30 a.m. That's because teens' circadian rhythms keep them from getting sleepy before midnight. Kole encourages parents to contact school administrators about shifting start times.

In addition, help your teen maintain consistent sleep and wake times each day. If sleeping in on the weekends seems necessary, Kole suggests considering a compromise where your teen gets just one additional hour.

To make time for winding down after extracurriculars and homework in



the evenings, you may need to scale back on some activities. Ideally, teens should have time to relax for at least an hour before bed, Grover said. Kole recommends turning off smartphones and laptops an hour before bedtime, and keeping electronic devices out of the bedroom altogether. In addition, she recommends that teens do homework in a dedicated space other than on their bed.

Tired teens may be more likely to rely on coffee and energy drinks, but using caffeine in the afternoon can further delay teens' desire to sleep. Kole recommends avoiding caffeine after 2 p.m.

Getting your teen to follow these recommendations is likely to be a tall order, though. So you may also want to focus on something over which you probably have more control: Getting enough rest yourself.

In fact, one key to helping your teens is following good sleep habits and "leading by example," Kole said. "You have much more of an impact on your children than you realize."

## **8. Keep talking—and listening**

Sometimes talking with your child about topics like bullying or sex can seem like one of the hardest assignments of parenting.

But Robyn Silverman, AG04, an expert in child development and communicating with children, offers tools to help you ace the challenge. Her recent book, *How to Talk to Kids about Anything: Tips, Scripts, Stories, and Steps to Make Even the Toughest Conversations Easier*, lays out research-based approaches to the kinds of discussions parents and others often feel ill-equipped to handle.

First, Silverman said, drop your own agenda and just listen. Know generally what topics you want to broach and follow your child's lead,

discussing the topics when you see an opening.

In addition, consider what approach will appeal to your child. For one kid, you might want to tell a story, while another might respond better to statistics.

Keep in mind that it's more effective to have many small conversations over a long stretch of time rather than just one big one. For example, she said, if you teach your kids the correct names for body parts when they're young and over time discuss topics like consent, love, and respect, you can clear the path to later talks about sex.

Each conversation may not go perfectly, but don't fear awkwardness or mistakes, Silverman advised. "You can always return to a conversation, acknowledge what went wrong, and start over."

For example, she said, "You can go to your child later and say, "You asked me a question the other day, and I shut it down. I was feeling awkward, but I want you to have the right information." Or "When I responded to your question the other day, I wish I'd asked you your opinion, because it sounded like you were trying to tell me something, and I wasn't really listening. Can we try that again?"

Ultimately, she emphasized, it's connection that matters. "The studies keep telling us that when we discuss tough topics with kids, they are much less likely to engage in risky behavior," she explained. "And they want to talk to us—even about the really difficult things."

Provided by Tufts University

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