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## Raising active and healthy kids

While parents influence a child's home environment and daily routines, a supportive surrounding plays an important role too.

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PARENTS and caregivers influence a child's home environment and daily routines around mealtimes, sleep, active and screen use. But if the surrounding environment does not support these healthy routines, even the best-intentioned parent, caregiver, or motivated child or adolescent faces an uphill battle.



For example, it's much easier to raise a healthy, active child when neighbourhoods offer plenty of safe places for children to play and walk to school and where families can find nutritious food they can afford near home.

Ideally, school cafeteria standards support healthy nutrition, and media and screen use is in healthy balance and monitored by adults. In a more perfect world, later school start times would support better sleep.

And children, adolescents, and their families would not experience racism, toxic stress, housing or food insecurity, safety risks or other social determinants of health that harm health and well-being.

Most of us don't live in ideal places like this and need support from schools, health care systems and the wider community to create healthier lives for our kids.

The American Academy of Pediatrics offers tools and resources to help optimise health regardless of a child's weight. The guidance is based on the best science on strategies that can also help prevent obesity at every stage, from infancy through adolescence. It turns out, it is about much more than nutrition and physical activity, though they are key factors that govern a child's health and weight.

### Practical suggestions

Here are some practical tips for parents to tackle issues that are within your control:

- Learning about good nutrition can be a family affair. Start with the easy-to-use tools at [Myplate.gov](https://www.myplate.gov), a great way to get kids involved in choosing foods they enjoy that are good for them. The ideas and suggestions on this website take into account a family's culture and traditions too, giving examples of healthy meals that include familiar foods. Pair this knowledge with a team approach to choosing, planning and making food to give kids a more active role in what they eat.
- Make water your drink of choice. The healthiest beverage is plain water. Limit access to sweet drinks including 100% fruit juice, sodas, sports drinks and fruit drinks as much as possible. Ideally, aim for one drink or fewer per week (and not at all for infants and toddlers). Bonus: Drinking plenty of water cleanses your child's teeth and gums, preventing cavities now while setting the stage for lifelong dental health.
- Limit ultra-processed foods. It may not be realistic to avoid them altogether. But try to limit their access when possible and help children and adolescents learn the benefits of eating whole foods like fruits and vegetables. You can also talk with them about the health risks of too much "junk food," which generally are loaded in sugar and salt, do not increase feelings of fullness, and prompt overeating.
- Adopt a family media plan. Children and adults will benefit from sensible screen time limits that make room for other healthy activities. You can engage your kids in creating a plan for the whole family to follow.
- Build movement into your daily life. In an age when we spend far too much time sitting, it can be challenging to get up and move more. But when parents make it a priority to work movement into family routines, kids will benefit.

Organised sports aren't the only option, though they're an excellent way to build health and fitness. Families can also enjoy walking, biking, swimming, physical chores and active vacations that include hiking, water sports and more. Indoors, you can try active gaming or online fitness classes to strengthen muscles, build coordination and release tension.

- Make stress management a family priority. Just like exercise, kids will follow the example that parents set for them. If your work, school and social schedules are jammed with so many commitments that there's no room for healthy downtime, consider what you can let go. Rest and relaxation rebuild the body's systems after the challenges of a tough day or week, so reserve time for them (and encourage children to do the same).
- Talk with your paediatrician about ways to support an active, healthy lifestyle that helps children thrive. – American Academy of Pediatrics/tribune News Service

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