- Child development

# Healthy habits to help boost your child's happiness

## In the first of a two part series, mental-health expert DR ALEX GEORGE reveals how early habit formation can help give children a brighter start in life

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WHEN I was a boy at school, I struggled. I was never given a steer on how to build my mental fitness, and I didn't know what the idea of resilience was.




I didn't know that you could work on things that could make you feel happier and help you to deal with challenges. Thankfully, that is changing – and I'm over the moon to be part of the shift.

In 2025, we know so much more about mental health. And it begins when we're kids.

Everyone is dealt different cards – where you're born, the genetics you're given, whether there's anxiety or mental illness in your family.

When you're given those cards, though, now we know that you can deal them, there are things you can do to maximise your experience.

Studies show our children's mental health in general is suffering.

The biggest threat to children and their development now is just how fast the world is changing.

Every year the world changes faster in the same period of time. Social media, AI, the wheel is spinning more quickly. What we're seeing more and more is that kids are being sucked into technology earlier, whether that's on a phone, an iPad, games or YouTube. They're not, therefore, being connected to other people or nature.

It's time to break the cycle. I've created a toolkit for both children and parents, which is simple and action-able.

I'm here to tell you that it's all down to creating healthy habits that add up to one thing: happiness. This is the toolkit I wish I'd had when I was young. Read on...

No blue light before bed

We now understand that using a phone before bed affects your sleep cycle. Also, your phone's blue light affects dopamine production.

This is created overnight to spend in the day. When we use blue light before bed, it basically blocks dopamine. This is why when we have a scrolling session in bed, we are often lethargic in the morning. We

can't get up, we have no motivation. It's because you've blocked your dopamine production and are starting the next day with less than you need.

TRY: If your child has a phone, lock it away an hour before they go to sleep every night. Put yours away too as they wind down so you're doing it together.

Social media savvy

Under-25s spend an average of six hours a day on their phones, which is such a lot of time.

Children shouldn't be on social media until they're at least 13. But that doesn't mean we can't teach them some of the tools they'll need to protect themselves when they are, so when they arrive at an age to use it, it isn't a case of just "hey, here's a phone – off you go".

TRY: Talk to your child if they ask about social media, and be honest with them about the dangers. Implement phone-free time for the first and last hours of the day. Have parental controls on your child's phone or tablet. Have access to their social media.

Make time for movement

Exercise is so important for mental health as it releases feel-good endorphins. But often, children are just told to "run around" – we don't explain to them why it's so good for them. Arm them with this knowledge to encourage them outside.

Rather than say "go for a run round that field", teach them that by running their focus will be better, they'll have increased serotonin, they'll be stronger, and that their heart will beat faster and be healthier so they'll live longer.

TRY: Instead of driving to school, set off earlier and walk together.

The biggest threat to children's development is just how fast the world is changing Dr Alex George

Find joy in the little things

We often forget about joy, and the fact that it can come from the most mundane things.

Ask your child what makes them happy and do it with them. You'll be surprised at what they tell you brings them joy.

It probably won't be Disneyland (hopefully for your bank balance anyway!) but instead movie nights in a makeshift tent with you, or splashing in puddles.

Make time to do the things they tell you. Help them to fill their cup with joy from the little things.

TRY: Make time for joy, literally. Book in five minutes of joy time a day, setting your family agenda to do something that will make you all laugh or smile. Grab a load of kitchen utensils and sing.