

Building Healthy Brains

A Brief Tip Sheet for Parents and Schools

By David Rettew, MD

This guide offers tips for parents and schools on how to promote well-being and the development of healthy brains. The guide is organized along different health promotion domains and by developmental stage. While of course it is very difficult for any parent or school to meet all of these recommendations, we hope that the document can support the creation of healthy environments that allow all children to thrive.



Community

Stage		COMMUNITY
Infancy	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show your child love and kindness. • Let your child safely interact with others. • Be attentive to your child’s needs and it will help them learn to attend to the needs of others. • Spend time outside.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show diversity in the classroom decorations. • Encourage children to interact with people of different backgrounds. • Spend time outside. • Support families in finding community resources for basic needs.
Toddler/Preschool	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring your child to community and religious services that you attend. • Have developmentally appropriate conversations about gender, race and other important community topics, including issues of privilege. Look for small teachable moments in everyday life. • Expose your child to diversity when it comes to books and other forms of media. • Read books that address social and community themes. • Do simple chores together. • Look for opportunities to help your child foster friendships with people from different backgrounds. • Recognize and praise genuine acts of kindness and generosity. • Help your child donate books, toys, or other items to those in need. • Show empathy to your child and others. • Encourage your child to talk about and name feelings.

	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do projects that show kindness and caring to others (making cards, thank you letters, etc.). • Celebrate and discuss diversity. • Teach prosocial skills like sharing, helping, and cooperation. • Play games that enhance social and emotional learning. • Consider implementing an early social/emotional learning curriculum (see guide by CASEL in resources). • Support families in finding community resources for basic needs.
School Age	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educate children as developmentally appropriate about the world around them. • Encourage your child to develop particular “causes” to which they could contribute (environment, fairness and inclusion, animals, etc.). • Model kindness, generosity and volunteering. • If living in a community with more resources, let them see communities with greater need. • Recognize and praise genuine acts of kindness and generosity. • Look for opportunities to help your child foster friendships with people from different backgrounds. • Help them find a “pen pal” from another culture to communicate with via letters or social media. • Help your child donate books, toys, or other items to those in need. • Support them leading a small charitable or advocacy project (raising money, organizing a group, etc.). • Travel, if able, to expose children to different natural and cultural environments. • Supportively confront and address language by your child that is intentionally or unintentionally disrespectful of others.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach prosocial skills through social/emotional learning (SEL) curriculums (see guide by CASEL in resources). • Organize and support charitable projects and events. • Teach about racism, social justice, and discrimination. • Develop non-punitive responses and interventions for students who break rules and hurt others. • Support families in finding community resources for basic needs. • Have an anti-bullying program.
Adolescent	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss current events and listen to their developing views on social and political topics. • Encourage regular involvement in community, religious, and/or advocacy groups. • If coming from a community with more resources, expose your adolescent to communities with greater need. • Consider special contributions at holidays (providing free meals, giving gifts to charity groups, etc.). • Support them leading a small charitable or advocacy project (raising money, organizing a group, etc.).

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportively confront and address language by child that is intentionally or unintentionally disrespectful of others. • Discuss racism and discrimination.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create opportunities to give back to community organizations and other causes. • Have community oriented clubs. • Teach about racism, social justice, and discrimination. • Have an anti-bullying program. • Develop non-punitive responses and interventions for students who break rules and hurt others. • Create safe spaces for students to discuss challenging topics. • Support families in finding community resources for basic needs.

Nutrition

Stage		NUTRITION
Infancy	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidelines from the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend exclusive breastfeeding, if possible, for the first 6 months of life. • For formula feeding babies, read up on how to provide the best nutrition for your baby and starting solid foods (see resources).
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate breastfeeding for mothers who chose to do so.
Toddler/ Preschool	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimize sugar intake, including in juices. • Slowly introduce new foods and present them repeatedly. • Make meal times important family time, if possible, with electronics off and attention paid to each other. • Consider limiting snacking, especially if there is poor intake at meals. • Have your child help in a family garden indoors or out. • Encourage drinking water when thirsty.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a school garden. • Have healthy snacks. • Provide basic nutrition education.
School Age	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work toward following nutritional recommendations (see resources). • Ensure your child gets a healthy breakfast in the morning. • Involve your child in the selection and preparation of food. • Encourage child to recognize internal cues of hunger and feeling full. • Minimize sugar intake, including in juices. • Keep healthy snacks within easy reach (and easier to reach than unhealthy ones). • Teach your child about reading food labels. • Slowly introduce new foods and present them repeatedly. • Make meal times important family time, if possible, with electronics off and attention paid to each other. • Consider limiting snacking if there is poor intake at meals.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach your child how to prepare some simple foods. • Have your child help in a family garden, inside or out. • Avoid critical comments about your child's body. • Encourage drinking water when thirsty.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach nutrition. • Provide and promote healthy lunch options. • Help families in need with meals during weekends, vacations, and summer. • Look for ways to make more nutritious foods more attractive.
Adolescent	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work towards following nutritional recommendations (see resources). • Teach your teen how to cook healthy meals. • Keep healthy snacks within easy reach (and easier to reach than unhealthy ones). • Make meal times important family time, if possible, with electronics off and attention paid to each other. • Expand food choices and explore diverse cuisines. • Ensure your adolescent gets a healthy breakfast in the morning. • Avoid critical comments about your child's body. • Encourage drinking water when thirsty.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach nutrition on its own or embed in subjects like chemistry and biology. • Help families in need with meals during weekends, vacations and summer. • Make healthy snacks readily available

Reading

Stage		READING
Infancy	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read to your child every day.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read to children every day.
Toddler/ Preschool	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read to your child every day. • Model good reading by doing it yourself. • Have child begin to do some reading to you. • Have diversity in your reading materials.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin reading books with groups. • Begin fundamentals of reading.
School Age	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage children to read independently every day. • Model good reading by doing it yourself. • If child reluctant to read, consider evaluation for reading problems or disabilities. • If child reluctant to read, consider incentivizing it for preferred activities.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If child reluctant to read, show some flexibility regarding type of book or topics.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make independent reading part of daily expectations. • Encourage reading on digital platforms.
Adolescent	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage independent reading in their areas of developing interest. • Model good reading by doing it yourself. • Encourage reading as major way of learning new information on topics of interest. • If adolescent reluctant to read, show some flexibility regarding type of book or topics.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider broader range of assigned material to appeal to reluctant readers.

Sleep

Stage		SLEEP
Infancy	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sleep requirement around 12 to 15 hours per day and more for newborns (see resources). • Have a consistent and calming bedtime ritual (bath, book, etc.). • Have infants sleep in the same room as the parents but not in the same bed (see resources). • After age 6 months, consider sleep training techniques if frequent and persistent awakenings at night requiring parental intervention. • Avoid using crib bumpers and keep blankets, pillows, and keep stuffed animals out of the crib until at least 12 months old. • Put babies to sleep on their backs.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to keep sleep times consistent with non-childcare days. • Avoid using crib bumpers and keep blankets, pillows, and stuffed animals out of the crib until at least 12 months old. • Put babies to sleep on their backs.
Toddler/ Preschool	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sleep requirement around 10 to 14 hours per day, including naps (see resources). • Have a consistent and calming bedtime ritual (bath, book, etc.). • Consider sleep training techniques if frequent and persistent awakenings at night requiring parental intervention. • Ensure child gets enough physical activity during day to encourage sleep (see exercise section). • Keep electronics out of bedroom.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow children who need naps to do so. • Keep the day physically active to encourage good sleep.
School Age	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sleep requirement around 9 to 11 hours per day (see resources). • Ensure child gets enough physical activity during day to encourage sleep (see exercise section). • Keep electronics out of bedroom. • Prevent or minimize caffeine intake.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider getting evaluation for specific sleep problem (such as obstructive sleep apnea) as possible source if child seems excessively tired or inattentive during the day.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teach about sleep and why it is important. Recognize and question children who may be sleep deprived. Consider creating a school health advisory council.
Adolescent	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sleep requirement around 8 to 10 hours per day (see resources). Show some flexibility for adolescents who may be developing a change in their natural sleep cycle. Especially for younger adolescents, collect phones before bed. Encourage your teen to have a relaxing bedtime routine to foster a more reasonable bedtime. Ensure child gets enough physical activity during day to encourage sleep (see exercise section). Prevent late night video game play. Limit strenuous exercise right before bed. Limit caffeine intake. Consider getting evaluation for specific sleep problem (such as obstructive sleep apnea) as possible source if child seems excessively tired or inattentive during the day.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teach about sleep and why it is important. Recognize and question children who may be sleep deprived. Consider more active classes and activities earlier in the morning. Consider altering school hours to align more with adolescent regular sleep/wake cycles. Keep length of homework assignments reasonable to allow for sufficient sleep. Consider creating a school health advisory council.

Exercise

Stage		EXERCISE
Infancy	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Infants will start moving and crawling when they are ready so no need to push. Maintain safe surroundings as infants begin to move.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain safe surroundings as infants begin to move.
Toddler/ Preschool	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce different types of sports and physical activities and do them with your child. Get regular exercise yourself for your own health and as a model to your child. If able, begin more formal lessons or teams in a small number of areas.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have range of sports and physical activity materials available and demonstrate use. Help parents be aware of local resources and activities.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus more on learning and enjoyment than competition during physical activities. • Have water easily available.
School Age	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strive for your child do at least an hour of physical activity each day. • Keep it fun and don't put too much pressure on winning/losing. • Don't micromanage your child's coaches. • Model good physical activity in yourself. • Teach your kids the sports and physical activities you know. • Encourage and teach your child to be a good sport, win or lose. • Stay on top of deadlines for enrolling your child into various sports leagues and groups. • Some children find the ability to measure their steps or physical activity time rewarding with electronic trackers. Support that if you can. • If getting a child to be physically active is difficult, consider incentivizing with preferred activities. • Assess how competition affects your child participation in physical activities. Some children find it motivating and others prefer non-competitive forms of exercise. Adjust accordingly.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expose children to wide range of sports and physical activities. • Don't use recess as a punishment for misbehavior. • Help parents be aware of local resources, teams, and activities and facilitate participation. • Have water easily available. • Consider participation in national programs such as Fuel Up to Play 60 (see resources). • Make extra efforts to provide structured activities and teams for students who are not high-level athletes able to compete on school teams. These are the kids who stop exercising.
Adolescent	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strive for adolescents to do at least an hour of physical activity each day. • Model good physical activity in yourself. • Continue to look for physical things to do together as a family. • Adolescents typically will narrow their repertoire of physical activities and may need to find new ones. This is okay as long as they find something to do regularly.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make extra efforts to provide structured activities and teams for students who are not high-level athletes. These are the kids who stop exercising. • Educate and intervene about harassment and hazing on teams.

Parenting

Stage		PARENTING
Infancy	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be <i>sensitive</i> and <i>responsive</i> to your infant's needs. • If there is a coparent(s), start having discussions about parenting practices to help plan for the future. • Screen time not recommended up to age 18 months, except video calls. • Take care of your own health – let people help you to take breaks and get help if needed to support your own mental health. • Take space and ask for help if you are getting angry around your baby.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support parenting practices at home as much as possible. • Consider offering specific parenting instruction and groups at your site. • Give employees who are new parents the flexibility to take time with their new baby without penalty.
Toddler/ Preschool	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take time to think about your own parenting style. • Take care of yourself and get help if needed to support your own mental health. • Assign your child some basic chores and do them with your child at first. • Limit screen time to no more than 2 hours/day and teach good computer and media habits (see resources). • Don't overexpose to news and media but do begin developmentally appropriate conversations about important social and political topics. • Actively listen when your child is speaking. • Praise good work and effort. • Avoid physical punishment, harsh criticism and belittling comments. • Tell your child you love them and show affection.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate policies around behavior and discipline and encourage discussion with parents, especially when rules between home and school are different. • Praise good work and effort. • Avoid physical punishment, harsh criticism and belittling comments. • Consider school-wide evidence-based approaches to promote social/emotional learning. • Consider offering specific parenting instruction and groups at your site.
School Age	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For most children, an Authoritative parenting style works best that includes the combination of lot of warmth and support and reasonable limit setting and structure. • Encourage children to do things for themselves. • Start to bring up challenging topics like substance use, sex, etc. as developmentally appropriate • Do activities with your child

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take care of yourself and get help if needed to support your own mental health. • Limit screen time and keep phones/devices out of bedrooms at night. • Have as many meals together as a family as possible with no electronics. • Actively listen when your child is speaking. • Praise good work and effort. • Avoid physical punishment, harsh criticism and belittling comments. • Tell your child you love them and show affection.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate policies around behavior and discipline and encourage discussion with parents, especially when rules between home and school are different. • Praise good work and effort. • Avoid harsh criticism and belittling comments. • Help students identify at least one trusted and supportive adult at school who can serve during times of stress and conflict. • Consider offering specific parenting instruction and groups at your site.
Adolescent	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For most children, and Authoritative parenting style works best that includes the combination of lot of warmth and support and reasonable limit setting and structure. • Encourage adolescents to do things for themselves like cooking, laundry after teaching them how to do it. • Do activities with your child • Have those difficult discussions about drugs, alcohol, sex and encourage open dialogue. • Take care of yourself and get help if needed to support your own mental health. • Continue to have meals together as much as possible without distractions. • Actively listen when your child is speaking. • Praise good work and effort. • Avoid harsh criticism and belittling comments. • Tell your teen you love them and show affection.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help students identify at least one trusted and supportive adult at school who can serve during times of stress and conflict. • Consider modules or courses to students about parenting and parenting science. • Consider offering specific parenting instruction and groups at your site.

Mindfulness

Stage		MINDFULNESS
Infancy	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have your own meditation practice. • Consider light and gentle massage techniques for your baby.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create an environment that is not overstimulating with quiet spaces for those who need it.
Toddler/ Preschool	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn basic mindfulness games and practices like balancing a feather or balloon blowing.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start the morning with an age appropriate mindfulness practice. • Teach basic mindfulness games and practices like balancing a feather or balloon blowing.
School Age	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do gratitude exercises or keep a gratitude journal or jar. • Explore various mindfulness practices in books, apps, or online and find ones that appeal to your child. • Structure regular mindfulness practices each day. • Consider regular mindfulness exercise before bed.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start the day with a morning mindfulness practice. • Do exercises that promote being thankful. • Teach concepts of resilience, gratitude, and optimism.
Adolescent	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure regular mindfulness practices each day. • Expand and explore longer and other types of mindfulness practices. • Do gratitude exercises or keep a gratitude journal.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start the day with a morning mindfulness practice. • Teach concepts of resilience, gratitude, and optimism.

Music/Arts

Stage		MUSIC/ARTS
Infancy	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sing to your child. • Play music (not too loud) at times while doing other things.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have occasional background music of various types.
Toddler/ Preschool	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore play instruments. • Help build basic instruments from household items. • Teach basic rhythms. • Encourage dance and movement. • Encourage drawing, painting, and building with whatever resources you have. • Begin short music and/or art lessons, if possible, for students who are ready. • Consider learning a new instrument or art form yourself while you encourage your child.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce children to different instruments. • Encourage drawing and other art forms.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin short lessons for music and the arts for students who are ready. • Encourage dance and movements in regular activities.
School Age	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin lessons, if possible, and encourage practicing. • Help build basic instruments from household items. • Encourage participation in music and art groups at school (chorus, bands). • Give child a journal to encourage creative writing and expression. • Encourage children to develop their own songs, stories or short books, art projects. • Play music with your child. • Learn a new music instrument or art form yourself.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow opportunities for student to begin learning other instruments. • Teach various art mediums and techniques. • Have as many co-curricular options for music and art groups as possible.
Adolescent	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about the importance of art and music with your adolescent and ask questions about their preferences. • Encourage journaling as way to promote writing and process emotions. • Encourage emotional expression through creative composition of music, art, writing, etc. • Continue regular music and art lessons, if able, and encourage practice. • Participate in music and art groups (clubs, chorus, band, etc.) • Play music or do other art forms together with your adolescent.
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep music as an active part of school curriculum. • Provide many opportunities for student expression (concerts, art shows, poetry slams, etc.).

Resources

Community

- Socially themed books: <https://mashable.com/2015/04/02/childrens-books-social-good/>
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL): <https://casel.org/>
- Edutopia: <https://edutopia.org>

Nutrition

- USDA ChooseMyPlate: <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/>
- American Academy of Pediatrics: <https://www.healthychildren.org/>
- Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: <https://www.eatright.org/for-kids>

Reading

- PBS Kids Read: <https://www.pbs.org/parents/read>

Sleep

- National Sleep Foundation: <https://www.sleepfoundation.org/>
- American Academy of Pediatrics Safe Sleep guidelines: <https://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/safe-sleep/Pages/Safe-Sleep-Recommendations.aspx>

Exercise

- Fuel Up to Play 60: <https://www.fueluptoplay60.com/>

Parenting

- Zero to Three: <https://zerotothree.org>
- Common Sense Media: <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/>
- Parenting Videos from CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/parents/essentials/videos/index.html>

Mindfulness

- Vermont Center for Children, Youth, and Families: <http://www.med.uvm.edu/vccyf/home>

Music/Arts

- Let's Play Music: <https://www.letsplaykidsmusic.com/>
- New York Philharmonic Kid Zone: <https://www.nyphilkids.org/>
- Harmony project: <https://www.harmony-project.org/>
- Brainvoltz: <https://brainvolts.northwestern.edu/>

Overall wellness and health promotion

- Vermont Center for Children, Youth, and Families: <http://www.med.uvm.edu/vccyf/home>
- Facts for Families: American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/Layout/FFF_Guide-01.aspx?hkey=c2dc89fb-aac1-4308-9297-eedfe7755b92
- The Clay Center for Health, Young Minds: <https://www.mghclaycenter.org/>
- Child Mind Institute: <https://childmind.org/>
- Positive Psychology Center – University of Pennsylvania: <https://ppc.sas.upenn.edu/>

**Written by David Rettew, MD with guidance from members of the Vermont Center for Children, Youth, and Families and based upon the principles of the Vermont Family Based Approach, developed by Jim Hudziak, MD. Guidance also comes from the AACAP Prevention and Health Promotion Committee, and other AACAP members.*

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