

Three family habits lead to healthier future for children

By: Donna L. Hollinger MS, RD, LD

Alarm clocks, back packs, car pools... September is a transitional month for many families as we get back into the swing of school. Routines shift to adjust for bus schedules, homework, and extracurricular activities. How might autumn routines affect your family's health and wellbeing?

A recent study by Anderson and Whitaker in the journal *Pediatrics* identified three family routines which promote health for children: eating dinner together most nights of the week, getting adequate sleep, and limiting screen time to two hours or less on weekdays. Each one of these habits was associated with a decreased obesity risk for children. Children in families who practiced all three had a 40% lower rate of obesity than children in families who practiced none of the habits. While the study's focus was younger children, research supports the benefits of these practices for older children and teens as well.

If you're interested in incorporating these health-promoting habits in your family, check out the following.

Turn mealtimes into a family affair. According to Ellyn Satter, author of "Child of Mine – Feeding with Love and Good Sense," children whose families routinely eat meals together feel better about themselves, eat more healthful diets, get higher grades, and are more likely to stay out of trouble. If you find the thought of initiating family meals a bit overwhelming, Satter suggests a first step might be simply gathering the family to eat together, regardless of the menu.

Start slow and enlist help. Think about how many meals your family currently eats together; then consider adding one more family meal a week. Engage family members in the process. The more involved each person is in preparing the meal the more likely he/she is to appreciate the food.

Get those ZZZZs. Growing evidence points to a link between sleep and weight, noting children who fail to get adequate sleep are at greater risk for excess weight. Lack of sleep is associated with increased ghrelin, an appetite-stimulating hormone, and decreased leptin, a hormone that signals fullness. Establishing a relaxing bedtime ritual – such as reading a story and going to bed at the same time each night -- can help meet these guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- 1-3 years of age need 12-14 hours of sleep
- 3-5 years of age need 11-13 hours of sleep
- 5-10 years of age need 10-11 hours of sleep
- 10-17 years of age need 8 1/2 to 9 1/2 hours of sleep

Monitor screen time. Time spent watching television/movies and playing video games has been shown to impact children's weight. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends limiting television, movies, and video games to no more than two hours a day. To reduce daily screen time, you might involve children in coming up with a screen time schedule that allows them to watch favorite shows. Keep TVs out of bedrooms and the family eating area. Plan fun family activities as alternatives to watching TV.

Habits developed in childhood impact health for years to come. What can you do to promote a healthy future for your children?

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