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A Parent's Guide to

HealthCentral

Healthy Kids



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WELCOME to HealthCentral's guide to **Healthy Kids**. In these pages, you'll read about the latest research, the importance of good nutrition, what to expect at your child's next checkup, and more.

For additional tips and info, go to [HealthCentral.com/HealthyKidsGuide](https://www.healthcentral.com/HealthyKidsGuide).



LET NATURE NURTURE

YOU'VE PROBABLY NOTICED that spending time outdoors and in nature is good for your child's body and mind. Now there's strong scientific evidence to back that up.

In a recent review published in the journal *Pediatrics*, researchers examined 296 studies that looked at the impact of nature exposure in children 18 years of age and younger. Residential and school green spaces (including parks and gardens, among other green spaces) were the most common areas studied. The researchers found strong evidence that exposure to nature is associated with increased physical activity and improved cognitive, behavioral, and mental health in childhood.

It's easy to see why having somewhere to play and run about boosts physical health, but it's not clear yet why access to nature improves mental well-being, too, says the study's lead author, Amber Fyfe-Johnson, N.D., Ph.D., a naturopathic doctor and epidemiologist at Washington State University. "All children should have access to natural spaces," says Dr. Fyfe-Johnson, noting that many do not, particularly those in urban areas. Policy makers must address that problem, she says, but parents should also make sure their kids get outside every day, rain or shine. Citing a Scandinavian proverb, Dr. Fyfe-Johnson adds, "There's no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing."

69

Percentage of U.S. 12-year-olds who have their own smartphone

GET INTO A ROUTINE

Sticking to a daily routine could help protect kids from stress-related psychological problems, according to a study in the journal *PLOS ONE*. "We know that a lack of predictability is strongly linked to youth mental health problems," says the study's lead author, Maya L. Rosen, Ph.D., a developmental cognitive neuroscientist at Harvard University.

The COVID-19 pandemic upended the routines of many kids, since they couldn't go to school or spend time with friends. Dr. Rosen and her colleagues looked at mental health changes in 224 youths (ages 7 to 15), asking the kids questions at two points during the pandemic. They had asked similar questions pre-pandemic, as well.

The researchers found that the portion of kids with mood and behavioral problems increased significantly in the early stages of the pandemic, but kids whose families imposed a set structure on daily life were less vulnerable. Limiting use of social media and exposure to coronavirus news seemed protective, too.



PETS ON THE BED: OK?

SHOULD YOU LET Fido or Fifi curl up with your kid at night? Health professionals often discourage sharing sleep space with dogs, cats, and other pets, believing that their presence interferes with sound slumber. But a study in *Sleep Health* may put that theory to bed.

In what was described as the first study of its kind, researchers recruited 188 youths (ages 11 to 17) and their parents to participate. Over a two-week period, the children wore wrist devices that measured their activity and sleep. Each morning, the kids recorded how long they slept, rated their sleep quality, and noted whether a pet had snoozed with them during the night. They also recorded how often they woke

up and estimated how long they remained awake. In addition, parents answered questions about their kids' typical sleep patterns.

Overall, the study found that about one-third of the children slept with pets either frequently or sometimes. The remaining participants never slept with pets. Yet, across all three groups, there was no difference in how much or how well kids slept, nor how often or for how long they were awake during the night. In fact, kids who frequently shared beds with pets self-reported better sleep quality than others. The study didn't discuss whether kids with allergies should avoid sleeping with pets.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT



Eating right is critical for physical health, but could a better diet make your kid happier and more focused, as well? That's the hope offered by a new study in *BMJ Nutrition, Prevention &*

Health. Researchers in the United Kingdom asked youths at more than 50 schools across all grades to describe their diets in detail. They also had the subjects rank their levels of optimism, cheerfulness, relaxation, confidence, and other mental attributes on a scale. These ratings were used to create a composite score reflecting each child's mental well-being.

Kids with healthy diet habits consistently scored higher than their peers. For instance, those who consumed the recommended five or more servings of

fruits and vegetables a day had well-being scores significantly higher, on average, than youths who ate none. Also, kids who ate a healthy breakfast and lunch scored higher than those who skipped the meals. Mental well-being is influenced by many factors, but the authors point out that a healthy diet is critical for normal brain development and function. Missing essential nutrients can lead to chronic inflammation, which has been linked to depression. And besides, who isn't cranky when their belly is growling?

4+

Average number of hours tweens spend on screens daily, outside of schoolwork

—by Tim Gower

Healthy Meals Kids Will Love

The right nutrition can make all the difference in children's development. Here's how to be sure they're getting what they need.

by Carmen Roberts
M.S., R.D., L.D.N.

If you've got tweens or young teens in the house, you've probably already witnessed a slew of changes as their bodies develop from tots to something resembling adults. Good nutrition is crucial for development during this time, and so is passing on healthy eating habits that kids can take with them as they start making food choices for themselves. So what exactly does your child need? Let's take a closer look at the building blocks for good nutrition at this stage.

Double Down on Protein

Protein is essential for building and repairing muscles and producing enzymes and hormones related to growth and sexual development in 10- to 14-year-olds. While the exact amount is based on weight and gender, kids ages 10 to 13 need approximately 34 g (grams) of protein each day, while those ages 14 to 18 need about 50 g per day. Examples include low-fat milk and

yogurt (8 g of protein per cup); meat, chicken, and fish (which all contain about 21 g for a 3-ounce serving); eggs (about 7 g of protein per egg); and plant-based sources like nuts, seeds, and beans (most supply at least 7 g per 1-ounce serving).

Bone Up on Calcium

Calcium is a mineral that increases the size, density, and strength of bones, and during these years of rapid growth, children need more calcium than at any other stage in life. (Girls establish 90% of their adult bone mass by the age of 18 and boys by the age of 20, according to the National Institutes of Health.) "Encouraging calcium intake during the early teen years will promote peak bone mass and reduce the incidence of osteoporosis later in life," says Jennifer Meyer, M.D., a physician with Westmed Medical Group in Scarsdale, New York. Include dairy products, milk-alternative beverages

(such as soy and almond milk), fortified juices and cereals, tofu, and dark green leafy vegetables in your child's meals for a total of 1,300 mg (milligrams) of calcium daily. (There are about 300 mg of calcium in 1 cup of milk.)

Don't Forget Vitamin D

Calcium alone isn't enough, though. To transport calcium from food into the bones for absorption, kids need vitamin D—specifically, 600 IU (International Units) of D daily for kids ages 10 to 14. The catch: It's tough to get D from food alone, but many calcium-containing foods are fortified with this vitamin. Another source is sunlight, which naturally causes the body to produce vitamin D. Encourage your child to be active outdoors. Bonus: Physical activities, like walking and running, also help strengthen bones.

Beef Up the Iron

Dietary iron is used to make hemoglobin, a protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen to all parts of the body, including muscles. Getting adequate iron is especially important for adolescent girls, who need more than boys once they begin to menstruate (iron can be lost through menstrual blood). Before menstruation, girls ages 10 to 13 need at least 8 mg of iron each day—as do boys in that age group. Once their periods begin, teen girls need 15 mg each day (boys 14 and up need 11 mg). A lack of dietary iron can result in iron deficiency anemia, which can lead to fatigue, weakness, and problems with concentration and memory. You can give iron levels a boost with foods like lean red meat, spinach, beans, eggs, and iron-fortified cereals.

Seek Out Quality Carbs

When it comes to kids, carbs are king, says Julia Oliver, a registered dietitian and owner of Rooted Recovery in Rockville, Maryland. "I typically recommend that *over half* the food they eat in the day be a carb of some sort," she says. That's because carbs



BE A NUTRITION ROLE MODEL

ONE OF THE best ways to get your kids to eat healthily is to do so yourself. A 2021 review in the journal *Nutrients* found that parents who modeled healthy eating were likely to have kids with healthier eating behaviors as well. Start with these tips:

- ▶ Make nutritious foods like veggies, fruits, dairy products, whole grains, and lean sources of protein staples of your diet.
- ▶ Prioritize coming together every night for family mealtime.
- ▶ Encourage your child to help with meal planning, grocery shopping, and cooking. (Yes, even tweens can learn to cook!)

Setting up healthy food habits now can help prevent chronic diseases related to poor nutrition in adulthood.

are the primary and preferred source of energy for the body, Oliver explains, and if your kid is like most, all that running around means energy needs are at an all-time high. Plus, "the human brain primarily relies on carbohydrate fuel for functioning," she says. Aim for most of your child's carbohydrates (about 130 g daily) to come from whole grains, which take longer to digest, so they provide a more stable source of energy than simple carbohydrates (like white bread and soda). ■



For more info, go to [HealthCentral.com/HealthyKidsGuide](https://www.healthcentral.com/healthykidsguide).

PLAN AHEAD

Wondering how all of this works together in a daily meal plan your kid will love? Take a look at some easy options for the week ahead. (Serving sizes will vary by age and gender.)

MONDAY

Breakfast: Whole grain cereal with milk and piece of fruit
Lunch: Turkey and cheese sandwich made with whole grain bread; whole grain chips; fruit
Snack: Parfait of plain (unflavored) Greek yogurt; nuts; and dried fruit
Dinner: Salmon, broccoli, and brown rice

TUESDAY

Breakfast: Scrambled eggs with whole grain toast and piece of fruit
Lunch: Tuna salad on whole wheat bagel
Snack: Apple slices with peanut butter
Dinner: Penne pasta with grilled chicken and green beans

WEDNESDAY

Breakfast: Plain (unflavored) yogurt topped with fresh fruit and granola
Lunch: Avocado (sliced or mashed) on whole grain toast, plus piece of fruit
Snack: Cheese and whole grain crackers
Dinner: Spaghetti with meat sauce and mixed greens salad

THURSDAY

Breakfast: Whole grain waffles topped with berries
Lunch: Ham and cheese on whole wheat roll, plus baby carrots and hummus
Snack: Yogurt topped with sliced fruit and nuts
Dinner: Turkey burger, black beans and rice, tomato-basil salad

FRIDAY

Breakfast: Omelet (made with cheese and veggies) and whole grain English muffin
Lunch: Grilled cheese, baked chips, fruit
Snack: One cup of trail mix made with cereal, nuts, and dried fruit
Dinner: Shrimp scampi pasta, grilled vegetables, whole grain garlic toast

Milk (or a calcium-fortified milk alternative) should be served with all meals and snacks to help your child meet their daily calcium needs.

Doctor Discussion Guide

Questions to Ask Your Child's Pediatrician



If you are a parent of a child nearing the teenage years, you may feel like you're entering uncharted territory. Between the ages of 10 and 12, young people go through myriad changes, both physically and mentally, that can test them and their parents in ways they have not experienced yet. To help you navigate this time and the challenges that come with it, here are some questions to lead you in a productive and helpful conversation with your child's pediatrician about everything from exercise to screen time and sleeping habits.

How do I know if my child is getting enough exercise, and is there a certain amount of activity they should get per day?

What kinds of foods and eating habits are best for my child at this age?

What are the ideal sleep environment and the recommended amount of sleep for my child?

What are the warning signs that my child is being bullied or needs to speak to a counselor about how they are feeling?

What is too much screen time for my child, and how can I limit it in a healthy way?

How can I support my child while they are developing mentally, socially, and sexually at this age?

How do you feel your child is doing in each of these areas?

Rate from 1 (poorly) to 5 (really well)



SLEEP



EXERCISE



SOCIAL
BEHAVIOR



MENTAL
HEALTH



DIET



7 Ways to Get Kids Moving

Exercise is everything for kids at this age. Here's how to make sure your child is getting plenty (no skills required!).

by Patty Onderko

When they're little, children get tons of physical activity, running around the house, climbing on furniture, and generally driving you crazy. But as they transition into tween- and early teenhood, it becomes harder to get those same kids moving. To complicate matters, "puberty makes some kids feel self-conscious or embarrassed to move their bodies in front of other people," says Rachana Shah, M.D., medical director of the Healthy Weight Program and assistant professor of pediatrics at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

But exercise is essential for kids. "Inactivity at this age can lead to health problems in the future, including obesity, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and more," says Alison Brooks, M.D.,

associate professor of pediatric sports medicine at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Equally important, says Dr. Brooks, is your child's emotional well-being. "Exercise has been shown to reduce stress, promote better sleep, improve concentration, build confidence, and boost mood," she says.

Your kid doesn't have to be a budding NBA superstar to tap into the perks of being active—with some creativity, you can help not-so-sporty children find activities they love. "Work with your child to figure out what feels good," says Dr. Shah. "You don't want to force them into something where they feel uncomfortable and start to associate exercise with bad feelings." Check out these fun activities that will get kids moving and teach them life skills, too.

ISTOCK

1 Create a Step-It-Up Competition

If your kid has a fitness tracking device such as FitBit or a smartphone with a fitness tracker, set up a friendly family competition to see who can walk the most steps each day. Rather than shoot for a specific number, kids and parents should aim for more steps than they took the day before. Come up with a fun prize for whoever gets the most steps in a month: a trip to the local amusement park, a week off from dish duty, or a new pair of rightfully earned sneakers.

■ **Physical benefits:** A gateway to other forms of exercise, walking increases endurance and burns energy (i.e., calories). Once kids see themselves getting fitter from simply walking, they'll be motivated to try more activities. Walking can also give busy children a chance to quiet and center their minds.

■ **What they'll learn:** Tracking each step offers proof that everything—climbing stairs instead of taking the elevator, or walking during recess instead of sitting—adds up. Kids will also see that as a parent, you are literally walking the talk about exercise.

2 Start a Scavenger Hunt

Create your own hunt or use an app like GooseChase to get youngsters running around the neighborhood. Give each child a list of items to find—a photo of a blue house, a pine cone from a pine tree, five acorns, a giant leaf—and let them compete against each other. Set a time limit so they have to hustle.

Rainy day? Plan a scavenger hunt in your house that has kids rushing from the basement to the attic and back.

■ **Physical benefits:** Kids always want to be first, so you can bet they'll be sprinting to hunt down their items, building cardiovascular endurance and strengthening their quads and calves as they go.

■ **What they'll learn:** Scavenger hunts require planning ahead (what's the shortest route from the backyard pine tree to the blue house on the

corner?). They also help your child see their world in a new way: Did they ever notice that oak tree before? Did they ever think about which type of tree has pine cones?

3 Hike, Creatively

You don't have to head to the Rockies—many walks in nature provide opportunities for scrambling on rocks and jumping over creeks. Use your imagination to tailor the hike to your child's interests: If they love art, collect material (leaves, pine cones, moss) for a project. If they're into anime, pretend you're exploring Naruto's Hidden Leaf Village.

■ **Physical benefits:** Walking and climbing over uneven terrain is a whole-body workout that engages every muscle group while stimulating the mind to be alert constantly.

■ **What they'll learn:** Budding scientists will discover fun facts about plants, bugs, and weather, while someday-explorers will build map-reading and navigational skills.

4 Turn Biking Into a Game

Biking doesn't have to be merely a point A to B activity. Meet "bike tag," a game played in a field where the person who is "it" carries a soft foam ball to toss at—tag!—other bikers. Just make sure the kids are wearing helmets!

■ **Physical benefits:** Cycling provides a master class in coordination, balance, and cardiovascular exercise.

■ **What they'll learn:** Becoming comfortable on a bike now can set your child up for a lifelong hobby.

5 Go Virtual

Harness kids' screen enthusiasm with Wii's more than 40 movement-based titles, including ExerBeat and Dance Dance Revolution, or Nintendo Switch's popular Ring Fit Adventure game. Or try an immersive virtual reality (VR) experience, such as Oculus Quest. This VR headset allows

kids to play games that make them feel like they're actually sparring in the ring or slaloming down ski slopes.

■ **Physical benefits:** At more than 30 minutes per session, these games can help your child build stamina for longer workouts.

■ **What they'll learn:** These activities will have your kid sporting some sweet dance moves and activity-specific skills, like swinging a racket or handling skis.

6 Dance, Dance, Dance

Get your kids' morning off on the right foot by pumping up the volume and busting out some dance moves that get the blood moving and body going while your youngster is getting dressed. Older kids will dig an after-school dance party with friends: Dim the lights, cue the TikTok, and add a disco ball!

■ **Physical benefits:** Three-and-a-half-minute dance sessions (the average length of a song) a few times a day can help kids meet the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity while providing some stress relief.

■ **What they'll learn:** Dance is all about coordination, flexibility, and moving to a beat.

7 Build an Obstacle Course

Are your kids outgrowing the playground? Reimagine it as an obstacle course. Time your child as they traverse the monkey bars, climb the jungle gym, then "walk the plank" on a park bench. No playground? Create obstacle courses in your backyard or basement with whatever you have on hand, like cushions, chairs, and Hula-Hoops.

■ **Physical benefits:** A form of "functional fitness," obstacle courses teach kids fast reflexes and nimble footwork.

■ **What they'll learn:** Exercise is everywhere—it's all in how you look at it. These obstacle courses show kids how to use their imagination to put the fun in fitness. ■



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Sleep: What's Really Enough?

A solid night of sleep is critical to cognitive, physical, and emotional development. Learn more about how much kids need—and how to make sure they get it.

by Linda Rodgers

If your middle-schooler is like many kids their age, they're not getting enough sleep. Children under 13 need roughly nine to 12 hours of zzz's a night, but six out of 10 kids in middle school are getting far fewer, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That's a lot of sleep-deprived kids.

It matters. During sleep, the brain releases hormones that regulate growth, stabilize moods, and may even prune and organize what kids learned that day, explains Lynelle Schneeberg, Psy.D., a pediatric sleep psychologist at Yale Medicine in New Haven, Connecticut, and the author of *Become Your Child's Sleep Coach*.

To do these tasks, your kiddo's brain needs both non-rapid eye movement (NREM) sleep (the deep, dreamless kind) and rapid eye

movement (REM) sleep (the lighter, dream-filled type) at the right times. "With healthy sleep, the beginning of the night has a large amount of slow-wave sleep that reduces throughout the night with a greater amount of REM sleep in the later hours," notes Anne Marie Morse, D.O., a pediatric neurologist and associate professor at Geisinger Commonwealth School of Medicine in Danville, Pennsylvania. Taken together, says Dr. Morse, the right amounts of REM and NREM sleep boost your child's physical, cognitive, and emotional health and development in surprising ways.

Your Child's Brain on Sleep

Kids who sleep better also tend to do better at school—in part because sleep improves memory and concentration. "They're going to absorb

what's being presented better," says Dr. Schneeberg. And while kids this age can occasionally make questionable choices (as luck would have it, the decision-making part of the brain is the last to develop), they tend to have better judgment and are less likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors such as drinking if they're not sleep-deprived, Dr. Morse says.

How Sleep Affects Mood

Bad nights play havoc on emotional behavior, too, say experts. "Aggressiveness, impulsivity, hyperactivity—all those things happen much less with a child who has slept well," says Dr. Schneeberg. When kids get enough rest, they tend to have fewer meltdowns and are better able to tolerate frustration, she adds. Poor sleep can also up the risk for anxiety and depression, Dr. Morse notes.

Your Child's Body on Zzz's

The health perks of solid slumber are many, including a boost to your child's immune system and support

for growth spurts. "During slow-wave sleep, a lot of growth hormone is produced," says Dr. Morse, which may explain why kids spend more time in NREM sleep than adults do.

Sleep also improves speed, agility, and reaction time—one reason why pro sports teams have sleep doctors on hand. "Good sleep can be the difference between stellar performance and not leaving the bench," says Dr. Morse. And kids who don't get enough of it are more likely to get injured playing sports, adds Heidi V. Connolly, M.D., a pediatric sleep specialist at the University of Rochester Medical Center's Sleep and Wellness Center in Rochester, New York.

So, How Much Is Enough?

What's stopping tweens from getting the sleep they need? Schoolwork, social lives, and sports, for starters, says Dr. Connolly. "This is the age when sleep stops being a priority,"

she adds. Then there's puberty, which begins between the ages of 8 and 13 for girls and 9 and 14 for boys, according to the National Institutes of Health. Puberty resets kids' internal clocks so they stay awake longer at night and sleep later in the morning, notes Dr. Connolly. Pair that with early-morning school start times, and you've got a recipe for too little shut-eye.

A clue your child is getting the zzz's they need? They'll wake up naturally around the same time, weekdays and weekends. If that's not the case, there are tweaks you can make to get things back on track (see sidebar). Meanwhile, whatever you do, avoid having kids "catch up" on sleep over the weekends, as it just causes more difficulties waking up on time during the week. Try the "school plus two" rule, advises Dr. Schneeberg: "Whatever your child's bedtime and rise time are for a school night, try not to shift it more than two hours on a weekend." ■



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TIPS FOR MORE (AND BETTER) SLEEP

THESE DOC-APPROVED TIPS will help you get your youngster's sleep schedule on track.

■ **JOIN FORCES:** "Trying to dictate your tween's sleeping pattern will get you nowhere," says Dr. Morse. Instead, ask your child, "Do you think you're getting enough sleep?" If the answer is yes, ask how sports practice went or if they feel tired. Helping kids

see sleep as a tool for being a better student or athlete, rather than an obstacle to fun, may get them on board with getting more of it.

■ **GET BORING:** Keeping bedtime routines consistent may make it easier for kids to fall asleep. Dr. Schneeberg suggests sleep prep in this order: Have a snack, wash up, brush teeth, hit the bathroom, and read a little.

■ **DIM DEVICES:** Electronics emit blue light that stops the brain from producing melatonin, the slumber-inducing hormone. If your child is doing homework right up

until bedtime, consider getting a blue-light filter for the computer screen, Dr. Connolly advises. Also, you might try a policy of turning the TV off 60 minutes before bed to make sleep easier.

■ **SERVE UP SNACKS:** A small snack of a little nut butter on toast can stave off midnight hunger pangs, says Dr. Schneeberg.

■ **OFFER DISTRACTIONS:** Kids need a way to wind down before sleeping, whether that's reading, drawing, or doing puzzles. E-readers are fine as long as they're the just-for-reading type (but if

that thriller is keeping your kid awake, swap in a boring book, suggests Dr. Morse).

■ **FLOOD THEM WITH A.M. LIGHT:** Alarm clocks that light up the room gradually don't produce enough light to decrease melatonin production in the morning, say experts. Instead, turn on the lights as soon as your child wakes up or get them near a sunny window.

■ **GO TO THE PROS:** If your tween's sleep habits mean it's a fight to get them up, grades are slipping, or they're snoozing at school—then seek help from a sleep specialist, Dr. Schneeberg suggests.



The Doctor Is In

Knowing what to expect at your child's checkup this year will help make the visit go smoothly.

by Lambeth Hochwald

While most kids don't exactly look forward to going to the doctor, if your child is between the ages of 10 and 12 years old, annual checkups at the pediatrician's office should be routine by now.

During these appointments, a long list of familiar procedures will take place. The pediatrician will check your child's vital signs—including blood pressure, pulse, temperature, and respiration—and perform a brief hearing and vision check. Additionally, your child's height and weight will be measured to find their body mass index (BMI). BMI, which calculates weight compared to height, is used to screen for healthy weight status.

Next will be a full physical exam. The pediatrician will listen to the heart and lungs, examine the skin for any irregular moles or changes, and check the back for scoliosis. Blood may be drawn to see if your child has high cholesterol or deficiencies in iron or other nutrients.

It's also important for the pediatrician to take the time to talk with your child about oral health and lifestyle issues, including diet and exercise, limiting screen time, and getting into good sleep habits.

Beyond the Physical

While the tests, exams, and questions may be familiar, there's likely to be something more to this appointment because your child is now old enough to be considered an early adolescent and may be starting to show signs of puberty.

"In the tween/early teenage years, we start to talk about mental health, especially as it relates to the pandemic and the mental health issues we've been seeing in the months since the COVID-19 pandemic began," says Meredith Grossman, M.D., associate professor of pediatrics at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City. "We also will take the time to talk about how school is going, including

SO WHAT'S 'AVERAGE' GROWTH ANYWAY?

DO PEDIATRIC GROWTH charts make you anxious that your child doesn't measure up? Some parents worry when their child's height (or weight) doesn't fall in line with the percentiles on the growth curve for their age. But there's usually no need for concern: The percentiles are simply indicators of where a child's measurement falls in relation to data collected for children in the same age group.

"What we typically look for at a checkup, instead, is forward progression," says Jill Cioffi, M.D., assistant professor of clinical pediatrics at Renaissance School of Medicine at Stony Brook University and medical director of ambulatory primary

care pediatrics at Stony Brook Children's Hospital in Stony Brook, New York.

So if you and your partner are tall, does that mean your child will be, too? Several familial patterns need to be in place to draw that conclusion. "We can calculate height using something called 'mid-parental height' to estimate a child's final stature," says Dr. Cioffi. This formula may help predict a child's adult height based upon the parents' heights.

"There's also a familial growth pattern called 'constitutional growth delay,'" she says. "This means a parent reports being short until mid to late high school before reaching average to above-average adult height."

If you're still concerned that your child is growing too slowly, the doctor may order a wrist x-ray to determine what's known as your child's "bone age." In the case of short stature, this can help determine if your child is a late bloomer, on track, or if a further workup is needed.

If necessary, the doctor will check for other medical conditions such as hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid) and growth hormone deficiency (failure of the pituitary gland to produce enough of the hormone that stimulates the body to grow). "Luckily these conditions are rare and can easily be detected with follow-up testing," says Dr. Cioffi.

While your child's height isn't likely to indicate a health



problem, their weight might be a reason for concern. Weighing in at an amount above or below what's expected for the child's height might indicate a medical condition such as obesity or inadequate caloric intake. So it's important to look at how a child is gaining weight at each visit, notes Dr. Cioffi.

whether the patient is dealing with bullying. We'll talk about how to handle this if it's taking place. We'll want to screen each child for depression and any other issue that is troubling them."

The pediatrician may also request time during the checkup to speak privately with your child. "Halfway through these appointments, we ask the parent to step out into the hall or return to the waiting room," says Dr. Grossman. "That's when we will ask your child some personal questions. We will talk about things like gender and sexuality and online safety, and ask if they've tried any alcohol, cigarettes, vapes, or drugs."

It Takes Teamwork

Let's face it: This time in a kid's life is considered a very awkward stage for some. So if you're the parent of a 10- to 12-year old, you can be a big help to your child's healthcare provider by prepping your child before these appointments.

"I always recommend talking to your child about the visit," says Dr. Grossman. "Be open about what to expect, and explain even the smallest details. It also helps if you remind your child that he or she will have to remove clothing and put on a gown. Validate that this can be awkward and that he or she may feel cold while waiting in the exam room. All of this can really allay any anxieties ahead of time."

Another detail to remind your child about is that the doctor may draw blood. And you may want to emphasize how important it is for your child to ask questions and share concerns with the doctor.

Kids should also know about their health history, including any medications they may be taking. "For example, if a kid has a history of asthma, he should know the names of the medications he's

taking so he can feel that ownership," explains Emily Wisniewski, M.D., pediatric attending physician at Mercy Family Care Physicians in Baltimore, Maryland. "It's also important for him to know where his inhaler is at all times, especially in case of an emergency."

Also, tell your child ahead of time about the private conversation with the pediatrician that may occur at some point during the appointment. They may already have a clue about this from a previous visit.

"Usually, at the end of a child's visit, I'll remind him or her and say, 'When you come in to see me next year, I'm going to kick the grown-up out of the room and embarrass you, so you have a full year to be warned,'" Dr. Grossman says. "It's my silly, joke-y way of preparing them and helping them know what to expect." ■



For more info, go to [HealthCentral.com/HealthyKidsGuide](https://www.healthcentral.com/healthykidsguide).

by Stacey Colino

Q&A

How can I tell if my child is growing at a typical rate?

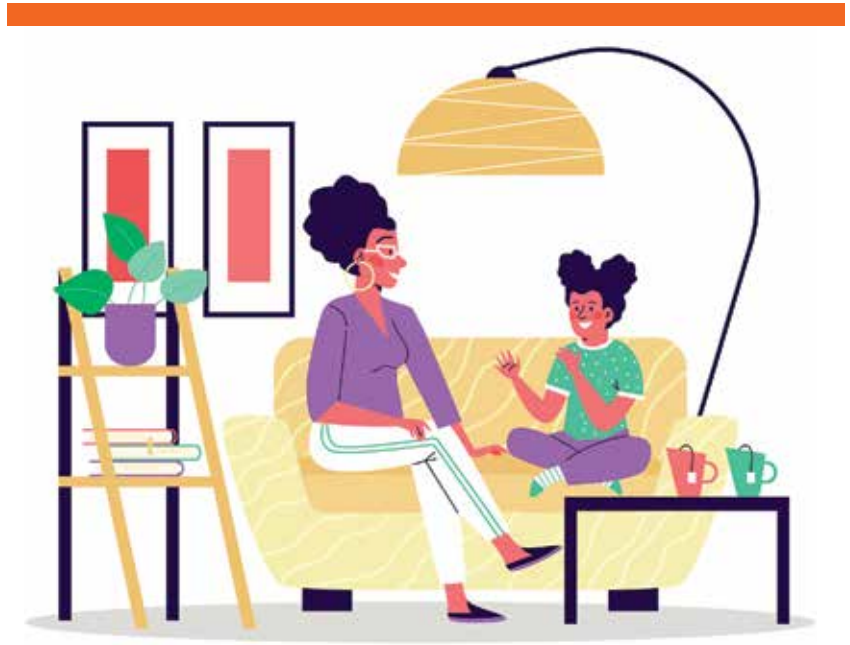
After your child is measured and weighed, review the standard growth chart with your pediatrician. The specific percentile [your child falls into] is not what matters—that often depends on genetic factors. We are looking at the consistency of your child’s rate of growth from year to year. Typically, kids ages 10 to 12 grow a little over 2 inches and gain 4 to 7 pounds in a year.

■ How do I encourage my child to make healthy lifestyle choices as they become more independent?

Try to build a foundation of healthy choices at home—offering lots of fruits and vegetables and foods rich in calcium—without letting food become a point of contention. When kids eat out with their friends, they’re making their own choices—and you have to allow that, within reason. At home, make choosing foods a fun experience and not a chore: Get kids involved in planning and preparing meals. Also, if your child isn’t currently active, start slowly with 20 minutes of exercise daily and build up from there. Parents can model physical activity by participating in sports or going for bike rides with their kids or walking the dog with them.

■ How can I improve communication with my child?

At this age, kids are becoming more independent, but they still rely on their parents for information and still look up to their parents. Keep the lines of communication open by



talking *with* them and not *at* them. Listen to what their concerns are and what they’re feeling without jumping in and trying to solve their conflicts or problems. Try to help them develop conflict-resolution skills.

■ What are the best ways to prepare my child for bodily changes during puberty?

The ages of 10 to 12 are a rapidly changing period for kids. Talk to them about the many changes taking place in their body as they transition from having a child’s body to an adult body. Point out that everyone has a different pace for these changes—such as breast growth in girls, testicular enlargement in boys, and pubic and underarm hair growth in both—and a lot of it is genetic. There is a wide range for when body changes or puberty begins to happen. For girls, it can range from age 8 to 13, for boys from age 9 to 15. Be sure to tell them they should expect some highs and lows in mood, too. They might feel sad or upset or angry and not know why—changing hormones can cause some of these mood swings. Help them find safe ways to deal with frustration.

■ What can I do to help my child’s social and emotional well-being at this age?

Trust and communication over time are key. Engage in active listening, and try to understand the emotions behind what they are saying. Be sure to ask about their friends and what their hobbies and interests are. Start having conversations about protecting themselves from harmful behaviors like vaping, smoking, or consuming alcohol. As a parent, you want to try not to make certain judgments or jump to conclusions. Kids, like adults, make mistakes and they are learning to navigate different feelings, behaviors, and social situations. Try to take what they tell you and help them build on it to make better decisions in the future. ■



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Experts discuss smart ways to pry your kids away from their digital devices. by Beth Howard



Screen Time-Out

SHOULD YOU WORRY about the time your child spends playing computer games or looking at TikTok videos? Research shows that greater levels of screen time are linked to higher body fat levels, mental health and behavioral problems, decreased academic performance, and poorer sleep. Two specialists suggest ways to reduce your child's recreational use of digital devices.

■ **Set limits.** "I often encourage parents to either set time limits for screen time or to only allow devices during a certain time period, such as after homework has been completed," says Nicole Lacherza-Drew, Psy.D., a psychologist in Allendale, New Jersey, and an adjunct lecturer in psychology at Saint Elizabeth

University in Morristown, New Jersey.

■ **Talk to your child about why limiting screen time is important.** "Once I explain to my preteen patients that there is a reason for screen limits and that it's not just because adults are trying to make their lives miserable, they are more receptive," says Dr. Lacherza-Drew. She tells them about research showing that lots of screen use can have a negative impact on sleep, which can hurt their grades and athletic performance.

■ **Have kids do school-work on their computer in a common room.** Parents can better manage how long youngsters sit in front of their screens and what they're doing when they are in a family room, says

Ashley Hudson, L.M.F.T., a marriage and family therapist practicing in Yorba Linda, California.

■ **Have your child earn screen time.** "Many parents use [removing] devices as a means of punishment," says Dr. Lacherza-Drew. "But that's not always effective in changing behavior. Instead, use positive reinforcement, as with the 'when/then' rule. For example, when you finish your homework, then you can have the tablet."

■ **Model what you are expecting from your child.** Kids are more likely to listen when they see that the adults are also following the rules. "If the rule is no phones during meals, make

sure your phone is off, too," says Dr. Lacherza-Drew.

■ **Take advantage of parental controls and apps.** Many phones have parental features that can be used to set limits and encourage appropriate screen time, says Dr. Lacherza-Drew.

■ **Keep phones out of the bedroom.** They're just too great of a temptation. Have your kids give you their phones before bed. "Use an actual alarm clock in each of their rooms if they need it to wake up," says Hudson.

■ **Get outside as a family.** Ditch the electronics and go on family walks or hikes, Hudson suggests. It will enhance family bonds—and get kids moving! ■



For more info, go to [HealthCentral.com/HealthyKidsGuide](https://www.healthcentral.com/healthykidsguide).

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