

NURTURING CHILDREN UNDER FIVE: PRACTICAL GUIDELINES FOR DIVERSE CONTEXTS

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Abstract

By the time a child reaches five years old, 90% of their brain has already developed – which means the progression from birth to school is the most important time of a child's life. Thus, it is important to lay a strong emphasis on their care, health, nutrition, emotional wellbeing, playful and foundational learning which makes the best use of their brain's most rapid growth period that aids in their cognitive, social, and emotional development and also ensures lifelong learning success. Science and education research confirm that early years of a child's life are far more than a preparatory phase; they are the most critical period for lifelong development. Positive experiences and warm, responsive relationships in the first 5 years are critical for child development. This paper makes an attempt to focus on child care, education, and the healthy habits that should be nurtured during a child's early years. It covers four prime areas: Eating Habits, Study Habits, Play and Activity Habits, and Sleep Habits. It also covers Negative Behaviours in children that should be addressed by parents at home and teachers in preschool. This paper can be of immense use to parents and teachers in nurturing children with greater understanding and responsibility.

Keywords: *Children under Five, Nurturing, Eating Habits, Study Habits, Play and Activity Habits, Sleep Habits, Negative Behaviours*

Introduction

By the time a child reaches five years old, 90% of their brain has already developed – which means the progression from birth to school is the most important time of a child's life. Thus, it is important to lay a strong emphasis on their care, health, nutrition, emotional wellbeing, playful and foundational learning which makes the best use of their brain's most rapid growth period that aids in their cognitive, social, and emotional development and also ensures lifelong learning success.

The early years of a child's life are often seen as a time of play, curiosity, and rapid growth. But it is also a period of remarkable transformation, as they themselves and their families navigate through many developmental milestones. Science and education research confirm that these years are far more than a preparatory phase; they are the most critical period for lifelong development. Positive experiences and warm, responsive relationships in the first 5 years are critical for child development.

Nurturing Healthy Eating Habits

Childhood is a critical period for the development of eating habits that last into adulthood. They play a vital role in child's development and health, and prevent obesity and other lifelong, diet-related chronic diseases and disorders.

- Feed 2 to 5-year-olds 3 small meals and 2 healthy snacks daily, focusing on nutrient-dense foods like whole grains, lean proteins, and colorful produce.
- Prioritize water and whole milk over sugary juices. Limit milk to 2-3 cups a day so they arrive at meals hungry.
- Offer a variety of vegetables and fruits. Limit high fat, high salt and high sugar items.
- Use meal times to improve children's development. For example, they can learn new words and concepts, foods and colours. Talk about how the food tastes, name the utensils, foods and colours; Let them touch and pick up food themselves. It helps to develop their co-ordination.
- Nutritious snacks are useful to fill the energy gap. For example: Ripe banana, avocado, mango and other fruits; Yoghurt, milk, puddings made with milk; Bread or chapati with butter, ground nut paste or honey; cooked potatoes etc.
- Many children need time to adjust to new flavours. Introduce new foods with old favourites and serve them at the beginning of the meal when children are most hungry.
- Involve the children in preparing meals and snacks, then they are more likely to try different foods. If one has a garden, they can involve children in picking food from it.
- Give children choices over what they are eating. For example, ask which vegetable they would like for supper and follow through on their suggestions.
- Presenting food on colourful plates or in colourful ways can help make eating fun.
- It is best to offer small portions and encourage children to ask for second helpings, if desired. Due to growth spurts and competing interests, a child's appetite varies.
- The children should have a place at a table suitable for their size. Provide them with utensils that they can handle. They learn to eat with utensils correctly through praise and practice. Encourage them to cut up food into small pieces so that it is easier to eat.
- Strictly separate eating from active play. Always ask children to sit down to eat, never run, laugh, or walk while chewing. During eating, parents can have a pleasant conversation.

Nurturing Healthy Study Habits

Children under five are naturally curious, and traditional studying format isn't recommended. Instead, focus on building foundational cognitive skills through play and active engagement.

- Keep studying sessions short (20-30 minutes) and follow child's interests.

- Integrate play and math. Use everyday household objects for counting. Let them sort groceries by colour, or count steps as they walk up to apartment or house.
- Use colourful blocks for counting, point to pictures in storybooks, and let them explore textures.
- Use storytelling and rhymes. Read books together every day. Ask them questions about the pictures, or make up stories featuring their favourite local animals or characters.
- Encourage sensory learning. Let children engage in creative, open-ended play with safe materials like clay, water, or sand to promote fine motor skills.
- Parents need to emphasize the joy of learning over marks. Praise the effort, not the outcome.
- Children are inspired to study when parents can learn together with them. After joint learning session, both of them can quiz each other on what each of them have learnt. This will bring out child's competitive spirit, inspiring them to learn and study more.
- One should get down to a child's level physically when talking to them. This means that the child can see one's face. It also helps one to concentrate on what the child is saying.
- There should be a neat and dedicated distraction-free space for child's studies. Keep a water bottle, stationery items, notebook etc. within reach. This helps to develop child's focus.
- Celebrate and reward children for their achievements. They can be taken for a park, a movie, order their favourite food, buy them toys or any other they've wanted for so long. This will show child that his/her efforts mean a lot to family.
- Visual aids like charts, models and videos can be used to explain complex topics in an easier-to-understand format.
- Teach child to tackle assignments one piece at a time. Slightly reduce kids screen time until the homework is finished.

Nurturing Healthy Play and Activity Habits

Playgrounds and play equipment provide fun, fresh air and exercise. However faulty equipment, improper surfaces and careless behaviour are a few of the hazards of it. Parents can prevent playground accidents by ensuring that there is adult supervision, appropriate equipment etc.

- Prioritize open-ended toys. Blocks, boxes, and clay stimulate more imagination than electronic toys. Provide interlocking blocks, train tracks, and simple board games for constructive play.
- At times, involve kids in different creative activities such as asking what they like or what they don't want to do will feel respected.

- Praise children for their effort and creativity rather than a perfect end result.
- Step back. Give children space to solve minor frustrations, like fitting a puzzle piece, before intervening.
- Introduce dress-up clothes, dolls, and kitchen sets for complex storytelling.
- Offer chunky crayons, finger paints, safety scissors, and playdough for their artistic expression.
- Encourage children to play in groups. This helps them to share, develop patience and tolerate others.
- Keep only a few toys out at a time to prevent sensory overload and increase engagement.
- Activities like hide-and-seek or a scavenger hunt build observation and attention skills.
- Setting a time limit is important to handle kids. It helps them to avoid burnout or feeling overburdened. In this way, kids learn discipline, self-control, and respect for rules.
- To prevent choking during play, ensure toys are larger than a child's mouth. Regularly scan play areas for household items like coins, sharp items, batteries, or jewelry, and avoid latex balloons.
- Prepare children for changes by giving advance warnings (e.g., "Five more minutes of playtime, then we leave"). Ask the children to clean up the space after playing.

Nurturing Healthy Sleep Habits

Sleep is a vital pillar of children's health and development. Establishing healthy bedtime routines ensures adequate sleep and also fosters cognitive growth, emotional well-being, and physical health. Prioritizing sleep in the early years sets the stage for a lifetime of healthy sleep habits.

- Maintain a consistent sleep schedule by having a set bedtime and wake-up time. Consistency helps regulate the body's internal clock, making it easier for children to fall asleep and wake up naturally.
- Limit exposure to screens at least an hour before bedtime. The blue light emitted by screens can interrupt the production of a hormone- called melatonin that regulates sleep.
- Incorporate calming activities before bedtime, such as reading a book, taking a warm bath etc. These activities can help signal to the body that it's time to wind down.
- Encourage regular physical activity during the day, but avoid intense exercise close to bedtime.
- Physical activity helps regulate sleep patterns and promotes better sleep.

- Avoid heavy meals and sugary dinners, as they can disrupt sleep. Also avoid caffeinated beverages (like soda or hot chocolate) before bedtime. Give light, sleep-inducing snacks like warm milk if they are hungry.
- Plan for enough time in bed. While preschoolers often need 10 to 13 hours of total sleep (including naps), as they approach age 5, most of them gradually drop daytime naps entirely and may need about 9-12 hours of sleep. Unless child really needs to catch up on sleep (such as when recovering from illness or injury), it's best to avoid daytime naps. Napping during the day most likely will keep children awake at night because they probably won't feel very sleepy.
- Keep the bedroom cool, dark, and quiet. If there's noise and light that can't be avoided, try giving child earplugs and a sleep mask. Run an AC or a fan to keep the room cool (unless child sleeps better in a warm room). Use a soft nightlight if the child is scared of the dark.

Addressing Negative Behaviour

Prefer discipline rather than punishment while addressing negative behavior among children. When parents discipline, they should provide the child with praise and instruction in a firm tone. Punishment is negative; parents are dispensing an unpleasant consequence when their child does or doesn't do something. Setting limits is better than punishment, and most children respond to clear and calm limit-setting.

- Because parents and teachers shape children's behavior, it is important to create an environment where people speak with politeness, respect, and dedication. Replacing frustration and anxiety with these positive attitudes prevents their negative impacts.
- One of the best ways to teach children appropriate behaviour is to watch one's own temper. If parents express their anger in quiet, peaceful ways, child probably will follow their example.
- Parents should stay strong. If they must discipline their child, do not feel guilty about it and certainly don't apologize. If child senses their mixed feelings, they may decide that they were right all along, and parents are the "bad" one.
- Praising children when one "catch them being good" makes them likely to repeat that good behaviour in the future. Positive attention is also a good thing for the parent-child relationship, as it improves a child's self-esteem. Parents can choose different ways to praise children. Clapping in front of family, neighbours etc.; giving a treat, a toy, stationary materials etc. Provide specific labelled praise when they do what parents ask (e.g., "Good job sharing your toy!").
- Child needs to know what the consequences are for negative behaviours. Some common examples include reducing kids screen time until the homework is finished; asking them to apologise for bad behaviour.

- It is crucial for parents and teachers to listen carefully and react attentively to children by maintaining eye contact, avoiding interruptions, and validating their feelings throughout the conversation. This approach helps prevent frustration from escalating into tantrums.
- Parents should make time for their children, which is essential to understand their behavior and handle it properly. Ignore minor misbehaviour, since even negative attention like reprimanding or telling the child to stop can reinforce their actions.
- Parents should encourage children to mingle with other children. This helps them to widen their mental horizon, develop patience etc.
- Get down to child's eye level and use a calm, firm tone. State exactly what parents want them to do rather than what they don't want. Clear instructions like "Please pick up all of toys and put them in the box" set a clear expectation and increase the likelihood that they'll do what one is asking.
- Teach child to say "no" in a firm tone of voice, to turn their back, or to compromise instead of fighting with others. Through example, teach them that settling differences with words is more effective and civilized than using physical violence.
- Use healthy distractions. While teaching child appropriate ways to respond, ensure that they get involved in another activity when they start to get upset, which can help them calm down.
- Resist the temptation to end child's tantrum by giving them what they want when they explode. Giving in teaches them that tantrums work. Wait to talk until the meltdown is over. Don't try to reason with a child who is upset.
- Harsh responses tend to escalate a child's aggression, be it verbal or physical. By staying calm, parents are modelling for their child the type of behaviour they want to see in them.
- Manage environmental and emotional factors well. When it's homework time, for instance, establish an organized place for children to work, make sure to schedule some breaks, provide snacks etc.
- Prepare children for an upcoming transition. For example, give them a 10-minute warning when it is time to come to dinner or start homework. Then follow up when there are 2 minutes left.
- As children grow up, it's important they have a say in their own scheduling. Giving a structured choice - "Do you want to take a shower after dinner or before?" - can help them feel empowered and encourage them to become more self-regulating.
- Children are less likely to link their behaviour to a consequence if there is a lot of time between the two, which means delayed consequences are less likely to change a child's behaviour.

- When a child is slow to doing something, parents want them to do, like picking up their toys, many parents will become frustrated and just do it themselves. This reaction increases the likelihood that they will waste time on tasks again next time.
- Children need consistency. If parents react to child's behaviour in one way one day and a different way the next, it's confusing for them. It's also important that everyone close to child deals with their behaviour in the same way.
- Children learn by example so, if parents hit child, they are telling them that hitting is OK. Children who are treated aggressively by parents are more likely to be aggressive themselves.

Conclusion

Children develop holistically when they are exposed to both nurturing homes and stimulating learning spaces. Parents are the first teachers, laying the foundation for all future learning long before a child enters school. They should give their children a good start in life by nurturing, protecting, and guiding them. To do this, they should be aware of developmental milestones, including motor, cognitive, language, and social-emotional development. Also, they need the skills to foster healthy eating, study, physical activity, and sleep habits in children, and the ability to address negative behaviours.

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