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Administration for Children and Families
Office of Family Assistance



National
Responsible
Fatherhood Clearinghouse

Healthy Fathers, Healthy Families

Developed by Child Trends on behalf of the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance.

Overview

Fathers can influence their children's health behaviors more than they may realize. This research brief provides information and resources to help fathers improve their own health and well-being, and the health and well-being of their children. Specifically, the brief focuses on healthy eating and sleeping habits, and provides tips for healthy physical activity. These healthy lifestyle habits can lower fathers' and children's risk of becoming overweight or obese and reduce the risk of developing other diseases such as high blood pressure, diabetes, or cancer.^[7, 8] Other benefits include improved mental health and mood and increased chances for living longer.^[9] This brief also highlights how fathers can take advantage of the preventive services provided in the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) to promote their health and the health of their children.



Healthy Eating Habits

Parents play a key role in their children's eating habits. Fathers can positively influence their children's eating habits starting when they eat solid food. For example, fathers can pay attention to the types of food they offer their children, how often they eat, how much food they are given, and where and when they eat.^[11]

To promote healthier eating for themselves and their children, fathers and families are encouraged to have regular meals together. Families who eat together at home generally eat healthier, which includes eating more vegetables and fruits and drinking fewer soft drinks.^[12-14] Eating together as a family also provides an opportunity for family members to connect emotionally.^[15] Research has shown that parents who have frequent family

Did you know that dads can help their children eat better?

Research shows that...

- Children eat like their fathers. When dads drink a lot of sugary beverages, or eat fruits and vegetables, their children do too.^[2, 6]
- Children who share activities, like going to the movies or working together on a project, with their dads (even if they don't live with them) are more likely to eat three meals a day and more likely to eat vegetables.^[10]

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meals together with their children are less likely to engage in unhealthy eating habits. This includes eating fast food (for fathers) or binge eating (for mothers).^[14] These positive aspects of family meals can serve as protective factors against obesity and are linked with healthier weights for children, adolescents, and fathers.^[12, 16]

Resources to Eat Healthy

Although it is tempting and easy to buy fast or pre-made food at the grocery store, preparing meals at home is often healthier and less expensive. Healthy meals at home are possible and can be planned, purchased, and prepared on a budget.

The following resources provide more information on how to do this.

- [ChooseMyPlate.gov](#) provides tips and materials to make budget-friendly healthy food choices. Users can find tips for creating grocery plans, shopping smart by understanding prices, and preparing healthy meals.
- [Eating on a Budget- The 3 P's](#) provides reminders to help you stay within your food budget.
- [Smart Shopping for Veggies and Fruits](#) provides tips on purchasing healthy foods like vegetables and fruits without spending a lot of money.
- [Sample 7 Day Menu](#) is a sample weekly menu that meets all nutritional needs at a cost below current average food costs.
- [What's Cooking?](#) is a website that provides recipes for nutritious meals. Users can also save recipes to create personal cookbooks.
- [The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#) offers nutrition assistance to eligible, low-income individuals and families so healthy food can be purchased within a limited budget.

Physical Activity

Another way fathers and families can adopt healthy habits is by including physical activity in their lifestyles. Fathers can serve as role models to influence their children's physical activity and overall health. Fathers and children benefit from doing physical activities together, which can help with weight loss. Activities can include rough and tumble play or fun and active household and backyard games.^[17] Although fathers and children who do not live together may have fewer opportunities to do these types of activities, they can still enjoy them when they are together.

Families can be active together both outdoors and indoors. Indoor activities—like dancing, indoor hopscotch, hide and seek—are great for bad weather days or if parents have safety concerns about nearby outdoor community spaces. Indoor activities can be done at home, a community church, or a local community organization, like a Boys & Girls Club.

Did you know that dads can influence their children's physical activity?

- By playing with their children, dads can increase children's physical activity.^[2, 4]
- Daughters particularly benefit from playing sports or getting moving with their dads.^[2, 4]

Let's Move Campaign Resources to Get Active

- [Active Families](#) provides ideas for indoor and outdoor activities, along with steps that parents and their families can take to get started with a healthier lifestyle.
- [Let's Move Outside](#) provides tips and information on how to be active outside for free.
- [Parents Take Action: 5 Simple Steps to Success](#) provides healthy lifestyle tips for parents and their families.

Sleeping Habits

Sleep, like eating habits and physical activity, is important for the health and well-being of parents and their children. When children don't get enough sleep it can negatively affect other areas of life, such as behavior in school, grades, or

relationships with parents.^[21] Although sleep needs vary from person to person, most adults need between seven and eight hours of sleep a day and children, depending on their age, need nine to 12 hours.^[18] Unfortunately, parents and children often do not get enough sleep.^[19]

The home environment plays an important role in children’s sleep habits. Some children do not have the best sleep environments, which may keep them from getting enough sleep. For example, children may sleep in places that are “too loud,” “too bright,” or “too cold.”^[20] At times, they may have to share a bedroom with people who sleep or wake up at different times. Having a television or computer in their bedroom can also lead to irregular sleep.^[24]

What Parents can do to Help Their Children Sleep Better

- **Set screen times.** Too much time spent in front of the computer, television, or smart phone can cause poor sleep habits. Parents can set screen time rules and control how much screen time their children have, particularly close to bedtime, to help their children get a better night’s sleep.^[23,24]
- **Set a bedtime routine and follow it regularly.** Children who have regular or early bedtimes are more likely to get enough sleep than children who stay up late or go to bed at different times in the week.^[25] Sticking to a routine isn’t always easy; parents may work long or nonstandard hours (for example, night shifts) and it may be difficult to follow a bedtime schedule.^[26] However, to the extent that family schedules allow, parents can help their children, particularly their young children, sleep better by using language-based routines, such as singing, reading, and storytelling at bedtime. These bedtime routines can increase the amount of sleep children get, which can in turn improve verbal test scores and reduce behavioral problems.^[27]
- **Reduce household noise at night.** Children can have difficulty sleeping when it is “too loud” or “too bright,” which can happen when television is on in the home or when guests are over. By preventing these distractions, fathers can help children fall asleep easier at bedtime and get the amount of sleep they need.

Did you know that children’s sleep habits are like their fathers’?

- Research shows that daily sleep habits of parents and their adolescent children are similar, including bedtimes and length of sleep.^[3]

Fathers who do not live with their children can use these same tips when their children stay overnight. Whether or not they have a designated room for their children to sleep in, fathers can help their children get a good night’s sleep by reducing household noise and following their children’s regular bedtime routines. Additionally, fathers can try to provide a regular sleeping space, such as the same room, sofa bed, and even blankets or pillows that their children can use every time they sleep over.

Resources for Fathers and their Children’s Sleep Quality

- [Sleep for Kids](#) is a website for children where they can learn about what happens while their sleep, play fun games, and keep track of their own sleep.
- [Sleep and Sleep Disorders](#) is a website that provides users with information about sleep disorders, how it affects your health, tips for better sleep, and what to do if you cannot sleep.

Fathers’ Health and the Affordable Care Act

In addition to healthy eating and sleeping habits and increased physical activity, fathers can be proactive about maintaining good health for themselves. A first step fathers can take is to get health insurance coverage. Getting health insurance coverage and staying covered is important for men’s health, but is also important for maintaining children’s insurance coverage.^[1,5]

A number of preventive services are covered through health insurance at no cost to the individual, including a yearly physical, diet counseling, obesity screening, and obesity counseling. Similarly, children are covered for preventive services, including several immunization vaccines and infectious disease screenings, as well as chronic disease screening and services, which include obesity screening and counseling. Learn more about preventive care benefits for fathers and their families at healthcare.gov. Individuals and families, who do not have health insurance coverage, can sign-up at <https://www.healthcare.gov/get-coverage/>.

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