

Back to school wellness for kids

Written by Nicole Winbush MD
Wednesday, 22 August 2012 00:00



Young people are headed back to school. We can support their school success by creating habits at home that will support both the health of their body and mind.

A good day starts with the night before

Children require more sleep than adults to be able to function their best during the day.

Elementary and middle school age children should be getting 10-12 hours of sleep per night and high school students 9-10 hours. In young people, the signs of poor sleep differ from adults and can often be characterized by 'hyperactive' behaviors. As caregivers, we must create an environment that allows children to rest. We can help our children establish consistent sleep routines by modeling these behaviors ourselves. For example, it is important to set limits on the use of technology (computers, cell phones, ipods) especially in the evening hours. It is also recommended that children not have televisions in their room.

Start the morning with breakfast (read on, not just any breakfast)

It matters what we have for breakfast. It is the most important meal of the day. Eating a breakfast that contains protein (e.g. a serving of healthy breakfast meat, eggs, peanut butter, yogurt, cheese) and complex carbohydrates (e.g. oatmeal, a slice of whole grain toast, brown rice) will allow your child to have a constant source of fuel that gets them through the morning. Studies have shown that children who skip breakfast perform less well in school.

Help your kids to stop drinking (their calories)

The average American consumes 150 pounds of sugar per year. For kids the number is even higher and most of his sugar intake comes in the form of high calorie sweetened beverages (soda, sweet teas, juice drinks). Increasing numbers of children and young people are dealing with very grown up health issues like being overweight, diabetes and heart disease. As a result, this may be the first generation where children may not live as long as their parents. The consumption of sugar and sweetened drinks is being shown to be very addicting. The same rules apply as to quitting any other addiction: enlist support, do not keep it in the house (stop buying soda and teas and juices) and plan and provide alternatives (water, milk and whole fruits). You may need to go slow. If you fall off the wagon start again. If your children have developed a (sugar) drinking habit, one of the best things you can do for their long-term health this school year is an intervention.

They have got to move it move it

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Kids (and adults) need to move to be healthy. The evidence shows that regular physical activity is associated with better school performance. School age children should get at least an hour of physical activity each day. How do we do this? Many of us have children. None of us have enough time. Offer to do childcare exchanges -- take your kids and your friend's kids to the park while they prepare dinner and they can do the same for you the next night. Make it a competition, have kids compete e.g. doing wind sprints or jumping jacks. If you really cannot get outside look at youtube for kids workouts, there are many.

Reading is Fundamental

As parents we all want our children to reach their full potential and be successful. Helping our children to establish a lifelong love for learning is crucial. So, even when the homework is done, make reading a priority. Assist your children in finding books and information that they will enjoy and that will expand their world. Before children are able to read, read to them. As they transition becoming independent readers, you can read with them and then discuss what you have read. Ask them their opinion about events in the world and listen carefully (you may be surprised). Encourage the use of community information resources - our local library system, local writers and free weekly community newspapers. Whatever our children's dreams and aspirations, being able to read information, comprehend it and apply it in their life is a skill that will ensure their health and success.

The information contained herein should NOT be used as a substitute for the advice of an appropriately qualified and licensed physician or other health care provider. The information provided here is for educational and informational purposes only. In no way should it be considered as offering medical advice. Please check with a healthcare provider if you suspect you are ill.

Dr. Winbush is a family physician practicing at NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center. She has a strong interest in wellness and patient education to help individuals feel empowered to optimize their health and functioning. For more information and additional resources as mentioned in the article visit www.functionwellmedicine.com.