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Connecting Big Plans' Parents to their Communities

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Healthy Brains for Learning

"Is my child ready for Kindergarten?" This is a question commonly asked by parents and caregivers. We all know that kindergarten readiness is more than shopping for school supplies and getting a new pair of shoes. You might think that it is most important that your child know their ABC's, numbers, shapes and colors so they can keep up with the curriculum.

While nobody would argue the value of reading with your child, practicing writing their name, teaching them to tie their shoes or to take turns, kindergarten readiness is not a matter of having one specific skill set. Over time, your child will learn many different skills in many different domains including physical, academic and social emotional. What is essential for your child is to create an enthusiasm for learning and a belief that they can learn. Helping your child understand the importance of their "brain" for learning and the life style choices that promote positive brain health will enable them to benefit from the rich experience of the kindergarten classroom and set the stage for a successful educational journey.

"What are the conditions necessary for healthy brain development and learning?"

Over 60 years ago, Abraham Maslow theorized that a specific set of needs must be met before any child could learn and current brain research confirms the theory. At the core of Maslow's theory are these critical human needs:

- Safety needs (Physical and Emotional)
- Emotional Needs (Love and Belonging)
- Physiological Needs (Sleep, Nutrition, Exercise)



A child who is hungry or tired cannot learn. A child who is stressed cannot learn. In other words, a child whose basic needs are not met and therefore unavailable for learning and are at-risk for long-lasting negative effects on their brain development.

**"A child who is hungry or tired cannot learn.
A child who is stressed cannot learn."**

Here are some basic information and tips on how you and your child can follow good brain health practices:

"How can I meet my child's Safety and Emotional Needs?" Alberta Health Services (healthyparents/healthychildren.ca) emphasize the importance of the following factors in Building Better Brains:

- Consistency in caregiving is important to the social, emotional and cognitive development of children.
- Regularity, predictability, routines, orderliness and setting and enforcing reasonable developmentally appropriate limits can contribute to a positive and consistent environment.
- Children need a balance of warmth and structure to feel they are capable, loved and that they belong.
- Repeated positive experiences in a consistent environment help strengthen the network of connections in the brain. These connections form the foundations for the development of trust in others, self-esteem behavioral regulation and many other abilities.

Effectively Managing Your Child's Stress

There are three different levels of stress that have different effects on the developing brain.

- **Positive Stress** – Short term, every day experiences that help enhance brain development like trying something new, being told "no" or going to a birthday party.

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- **Tolerable stress** – More challenging or long-term experiences like moving to a new home, changing child care providers, divorce, remarriage or birth of a sibling can be made “tolerable” by the presence of at least one supportive, nurturing adult who can help the child manage the stress.

It is important that your child experiences positive and tolerable stress. Michael Unger, professor at Dalhousie University of Social Work, cautions that when we “bubble wrap” our kids and create a “too safe” environment, we disadvantage our children. Children need to deal with tolerable amounts of stress and failure to learn from mistakes and adverse situations. It is better to help your child learn to navigate stressful situations than avoid them as this builds lifelong resilience. It is important, however, to avoid toxic stress in your child’s life. This severe and/or chronic stress, without the support of caring adults, can have a long-lasting, negative effect on brain development, particularly areas like memory and executive functioning if the environment does not change and help is not provided to the child.

Take Deep Breaths

When a child is showing signs of stress, have him or her take a moment to calm down with simple, kid-friendly breathing (tip: teach your child using bubble blowing activity on opposite page). Taking slow deep breaths can help lower a child’s anxiety and anger. Children with special needs; Autism, Aspergers, ADHD, SPD, PTSD can learn to bring their energy level down a notch and feel in charge of themselves. Children can use breathing when they feel over-stimulated or on a verge of a temper tantrum. Deep breathing slows down the heart rate, lowers blood pressure and provides a feeling of being in control.

“How can I meet my child’s physical needs to promote healthy brain development?”

A good night’s sleep is a vital part of brain health yet as a society we are sleeping less and less.

Statistics indicate that one quarter of Canadians are sleep-deprived and that 60 – 70% of Canadian students report feeling “very sleepy” during class. School-age children are experiencing delayed bedtimes and the absence of effective bedtime routines.



Sleep is the power source that keeps both you and your child’s mind alert and calm. Every night sleep recharges the brain’s battery. Sleep gives the brain time to remove the effects of stress that accumulate during the day. Sleeping well increases brain power, just as weight lifting builds stronger muscles, because sleeping will increase your child’s attention span and allow them to be physically relaxed and mentally alert at the same time. Then they can be at their personal best. Even repeatedly losing one hour of sleep per night can be harmful to your child’s functions. This is because nightly sleep loss “adds-up” and produces a “sleep debt”. Performance and function decreases with each added night of sleep debt.

“How much sleep does my child need?”

Preschool 10 – 12 hours

School-Age 10 – 11 hours

Adolescent 9 hours

Adults need 7 to 8 hours of sleep to perform at their best.

- Make sure your child’s bedroom is cool, dark and quiet
- Set your child’s bedtime and stick to it every night
- Establish a bedtime routine including relaxing

activities such as a warm bath, reading or listening to quiet music

- Feed your child a light, healthy snack such as yoghurt, fruit or a small bowl of cereal before bedtime. Avoid big meals. Ensure your child has engaged in physical activity during the day, but avoid vigorous physical activity three hours before bedtime
- Avoid letting your child consume caffeine-based products (i.e. energy drinks, pop)
- Don’t allow the use of electronics one hour prior to bedtime

At home Activity

Incorporate gross motor practice into the going to bed routine: Challenge your child to walk to his/her bedroom while practicing a different gross motor skill (i.e. walk sideways, walk up the stairs with alternating feet, walk 5 steps and squat, walk 5 steps, balance on one foot, repeat, etc.) Try a new “walk” each night.

Exercise

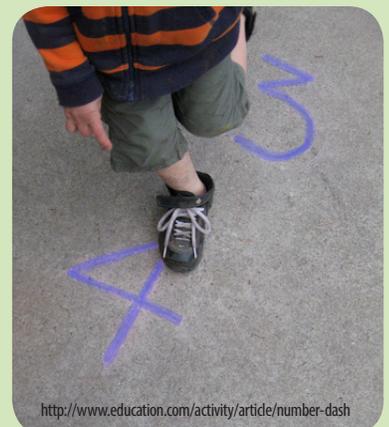
Physical exercise is not only important for your child’s body – it also helps their brain stay sharp. Physical exercise aides in the release of important hormones and chemicals that provide a nourishing environment for the brain and encourages the growth of new brain cells and neural connections that are important for memory and learning. Physical exercise helps increase dopamine (pleasure hormone) and decrease cortisol (stress hormone). Physical exercise helps increase your child’s energy that is needed for learning.

For kids, exercise means playing and being physically active in both formal (school, extracurricular) and informal (playground) environments.

RUN AROUND THE NUMBERS

Get ready to play with numbers outdoors! Your child will actively build a strong math foundation while playing outdoors. This game is also a great way to help kids learn how to effectively follow directions. Grab some chalk, do some preliminary stretches and start memorizing those numbers.

What You Do: Ask the players to spread out and assign them a number to write in chalk on the pavement. Make sure they make the numbers large enough so they can be seen from a distance and far enough away from one another that they don’t collide while running to their numbers! Explain that you will shout out a number randomly. When the players hear it, they need to dash to the number and stand on top of it. Tell them to stand on that number until you call out the next number. If players get to the number first, have them cheer on their friends until they find their own numbers. After the players get comfortable with the game, switch it up a bit and have one of the kids call out the numbers. Or, trade out the numbers for colors or shapes.



<http://www.education.com/activity/article/number-dash>

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that children and adolescents have 60 minutes or more of physical activity each day. This should include activities with high intensity (running, swimming) at least three days per week.

Nutrition

Food is the primary source of energy for the brain.

Foods that boost brain health include:

- Unprocessed meats, fish, nuts
- Whole grains
- A variety of fruits and vegetables
- Whole milk, cheese and yoghurt

Foods to avoid for good brain health include:

- Artificial sweeteners
- Sugary fruit drinks, pop, energy drinks
- Trans fats found in processed snack foods – like crackers, chips and luncheon meat.

The biggest problem is that this type of food often takes the place of brain boosting food.

We live in the real world where everyday life can be hectic and stressful. Eating whole, unprocessed, nutritious foods 80% of the time will protect our brain/body health for the 20% of the occasions where convenience, parties and indulgences take over.

Screen Time

Screen time means the time children spend interacting with electronics such as television, portable computer game systems, smart phones, the family computer and tablets. Over the course of childhood (K-12), current research indicates that a student will end up spending more time on entertainment based electronic devices than in school, as the average child is logging six to seven hours per day of screen time. While technology as a tool has tremendous educational value, too much screen time creates changes in brain chemistry particularly in the “reward circuits” that resembles the effects of substance dependence. Children who are heavy users of electronics may be adept at multitasking, but they lose the ability to focus on what is most important, which is a critical skill related to deep understanding and problemsolving. Screen time before bed results in a lack of restorative sleep because screens emit a blue light that tricks the body into believing it is daytime.

Too much screen time depletes your child’s energy. Why? While the brain is a small and valuable structure it is a very expensive organ for the body to support using over 20% of its overall energy. Within the brain itself, the visual is the highest energy consumer at a whopping 40%. Even if your child engaged in daily physical exercise, this does not take away the harmful effects of too much screen time. When parents use it properly, and encourage kids to use it properly, children can benefit from online content; particularly if it is educational. Develop a “healthy media diet” with your child by determining how much screen time is reasonable and making good choices about what media they take in.

- Assess how much screen time your child is currently using. Does your child’s technology use help or hinder participation in other activities? Technology use, like all other activities should have reasonable limits. Explain the reasons for setting limits and work with your child to determine screen time limits around other priorities like homework, physical activity, face to face socialization, and sleep.
- Encourage media free zones (bedroom) and times (dinner). Remember NO screen time one hour before bed time. Recharge devices overnight outside of your child’s bedroom.
- Quality is more important than the platform or time spent with media. Prioritize with your child how they will spend their media time.
- Try to avoid using screen time as a reward or punishment as this can make it seem more valuable in the child’s mind. Set a good example. Put down your device and communicate with your child face to face.
- Make time to play, engage in arts/crafts, Lego, model building, collecting, flying a kite or any fun alternative to screen time. Establish one day a week or month as screen free days where the whole family is “unplugged”.
- Don’t be afraid of having a bored child. Learning to cope with being bored leads to greater self-sufficiency and less risk later in life when children can become addicted to unhealthy activities to fill the gap.

Written by Deborah Hinds-Nunziata, Registered Psychologist - Golden Hills School Division No. 75

Bubble Blowing

A fun way to teach your younger child how to do calm breathing is the “bubble blowing” technique. The breathing required for blowing soap bubbles is the same as what is used for calm breathing. It is important to remind your child that he or she is doing this to learn how to breathe calmly when feeling worried or angry.



Here is a homemade bubble solution recipe to try at home. Slowly stir together:

- 6 cups water
- 1 cup liquid dish soap (Dawn or Joy work best. Try to find one that doesn’t say “ultra”)
- 1/4 cup corn syrup (or 1 Tbsp. glycerin)

Works best when it can sit overnight before using.

Experiment with homemade bubble wands: pipe cleaners bent into interesting shapes, cookie cutters, yoghurt lids with the centers cut out. **Dip in the solution and wave through the air.**



There are Bubbles Everywhere

Sing to the tune of “If you’re happy and you know it”

There are bubbles in the air
in the air

There are bubbles in my
hair, in my hair
There are bubbles in the air
There are bubbles in my hair
There are bubbles
everywhere, everywhere

By Jean Warren

http://www.familit.ca/resources/resources_p.shtml



Try Flit – Our Free Family Literacy App

Get it at the Apple App Store! Early interactions with your children, like sharing books, talking, singing, or playing, help lay the foundation for early language and literacy – essential skills for success. Flit is an app produced by the Centre for Family Literacy that helps families promote a healthy environment that fosters literacy by providing

activities and tips for encouraging literacy in their children. Parents will find specially tailored and curated activities ranging from reading, recipes, rhymes and games specifically designed to build strong reading, writing and literacy skills in their child, and have FUN doing it!

Saying Goodbye to Preschool and Hello to Kindergarten

Many preschoolers feel anxious about moving on to kindergarten. They worry that they won't have friends, won't like the teacher, will get lost, or won't be able to do what the teacher asks. Here are some tips to guide your child through the move from preschool to kindergarten.

To Help With End-of-the-Year Feelings

- Place a sticker or make a mark on each day of the calendar every day during the last month of school.
- Encourage children to talk about their feelings about preschool ending; talk about your feelings too.
- Draw pictures and/or write good-bye messages for your child's friends or teachers.
- Revisit the events of the past year with your child by looking at drawings, paintings, photos, and writing. Celebrate how much your child has learned this year.
- Offer stress-reducing activities at home such as water play, puppets, or playdough.
- Help the class plan an end-of-the-year family potluck.
- Plan ways to keep in touch with classmates or organize a regular play group.

To Ease the Move to Kindergarten

- Visit the new school before your child's first day. Point out ways the room is similar to his preschool room, but also discuss how it holds new materials to explore.
- Plan playdates with new classmates.
- Read books about starting school, such as *Look Out, Kindergarten, Here I Come!* by Nancy Carlson; *Will I Have a Friend?* by Miriam Cohen, illustrated by Ronald Himler; and *If You Take a Mouse to School*, by Laura Numeroff, illustrated by Felicia Bond.
- Describe the daily routines, including arrival, breakfast, snack, lunch, and bathroom practices.
- After your child is well settled into kindergarten, plan playdates with old friends.



Source: Adapted from the Message in a Backpack for Debora Jones, 2010, "Letting My Butterflies Go. Helping Children Move on to Kindergarten," *Teaching Young Children* 3 (4): 21-22.

© National Association for the Education of Young Children — Promoting excellence in early childhood education. See more at: <http://families.naeyc.org/learning-and-development/child-development/saying-goodbye-preschool-and-hello-kindergarten#sthash.HIDM2df3.dpuf>

SPLASH and SWIM

Splash and Swim is a program offered through Calgary Pools, where admission to the specific City of Calgary pools is only \$2 for adults and \$1 for children, on Sundays. Check the Parks and Recreation website for specifics on discounted swim times and participating pools.

Tips for Splash & Swim - come early to avoid disappointment and lines, remember money for lockers and consider having your children bring along a friend!

When: Sundays

Where: Select Calgary Parks and Recreation pools

Website: www.calgary.ca (search "Admission Specials")



calgary
reads

CBC Calgary Reads 14th Annual Big Book Sale

May 13 to May 15, 2016
at the Calgary Curling Club
720 - 3rd St. NW, Calgary:

The Big Book Sale is one of Calgary's most anticipated and attended events! Hundreds of thousands of previously-loved books will be ready to be purchased and find new homes. This is a signature fundraising event for Calgary Reads.

Friday, May 13th: 9am - 9pm
TGIBs (Thank Goodness It's Books)
Author Reading 7pm

Saturday, May 14th: 9am - 9pm
Back by popular demand! Jazz & Book Night! Shop to the musical sounds of Midnight Blue Jazz Society with cash wine bar 6-9pm.

Sunday, May 15th

9am - 1pm
Children's Story Tent with crafts and storytelling by Girl Guides (9am - noon).

