

Chapter Eight

Building Inner Capacity: Environmental and Physical Factors

Before I launch into tips for increasing your child's inner capacity, I want to offer one caveat. That is, while you can do a lot to help your child better manage stress, you and your child only have so much control over biology and life experiences. Let's say you have a history of depression and your child begins to show signs of depression. Or let's say that, as a young child, something frightful happened to her, causing her to develop an anxiety disorder. Her symptoms do signify failure on the part of either of you. Your efforts to enhance her inner capacity can do much good. But if they aren't enough to alleviate her symptoms, you shouldn't blame yourself or her.

The goal is to improve the things that are easily changed and get help for those things too big for you and your child to manage. In other words, anytime your child has significant psychiatric symptoms, you should enlist the help of a mental health professional. That's the reason those people spend all that time in training – to help.

Awareness and Inner Capacity

The first step toward making any positive change is *awareness*. A child can't fix a problem if she can't see she has one. Awareness also allows her to make the transition from you, the parent, being in charge of her needs to taking the reins into her own hands.

Sadly, societal myopia hampers our children's acquisition of awareness. The pace of life has so accelerated that perception, failing to keep up, has dimmed. It's like speeding so fast along a forest road you can't make out the individual trees through your car window. The world outside becomes a blur. We have so many distractions and so little free time that it's hard for us (and for our kids) to pay attention to our inner lives – our thoughts and feelings. Frequent exposure to media violence numbs our sensitivity so much we lose track of how disturbing it is.

We're also not connected with nature. Clocks and artificial schedules dictate kids' days – when they eat, when they go to bed, when they go to school. Perhaps we should encourage our children to spend more time lying

on the ground, looking at the sky, and thinking great thoughts. Perhaps we should join them. Because when we're whirling through our lives and not managing our stress very admirably, we don't model for our children how to be aware of the present moment.

And if we lose awareness, we don't always respond appropriately to a given situation. This ability to adapt effectively is called *self-regulation*. A self-regulating child will notice he's feeling tired (awareness) and go to bed early. If he feels frazzled at the end of the school day, he will realize that he needs to go run with the dog before he can unwind and recharge enough to tackle homework. If a bully's taunts upset him, he'll seek out a friend for emotional support. If his grandfather dies, he can acknowledge and accept his sadness. Any factor that enhances a child's ability to self-regulate also boosts inner capacity.

One thing you can do to aid your child's development of awareness is to help him slow down. If he has time to think, he'll be able to draw his own conclusions. Sometimes noticing aloud what you perceive about him (as long as your statement doesn't insult him) also helps. "I notice that when you come home from baseball practice you seem irritable," or "I notice you've been having trouble getting up in the morning." You can also discuss your own reaction to a situation. For instance, you might say, "When I watch that TV program, the violence in it makes me feel edgy and unhappy. I think I'll read a book instead. Want to read together?"

However you go about helping your child make positive changes, your goal is not to browbeat your child into following a healthy lifestyle while she's living at home. Rather, your goal should be to help your child internalize these good habits. That way, when she moves out of the house, she'll likely continue to eat well, exercise, get enough sleep, balance work and play, and treat other humans, animals, and the earth with compassion and respect.

Self-esteem and *Inner Capacity*

Self-esteem is how your child feels about himself. If his self-esteem runs high, he feels he is worthwhile, competent, and deserving of love. He respects himself. Feeling good about himself gives him the wherewithal to love others. He attracts friends. Positive self-esteem is the keystone of contentment and success.

Many of the suggestions discussed in the next few chapters will raise self-esteem. Chief among them is love, especially parental love. Your daily expressions of love communicate to your child that he is valuable and worthy. You also show your love and respect when you listen to what your child says, when you trust him with appropriate responsibilities, and when you actively support his emotional struggles. Chapter X will go into more detail about the many ways you let your child know how you feel about him. We'll point out other simple ways to raise self-esteem in appropriate sections.

Now for the environmental and physical factors that can protect your child from stress and boost his inner capacity.

The Environmental Mediators: Peace, Beauty, and Harmony

When people talk about the environment, they're usually talking about problems such as pollution, deforestation, global warming, and the ozone hole. And these things do effect mental well-being. Worrying about them can act as a low-grade, chronic stress. Pollution of the air, soil, and water (not to mention noise pollution in the form of car horns, sirens, airplanes, trains, gunfire, and loud music) taxes our physical health, which, in turn, taxes our mental health. But, short of moving, you can only do so much to protect your child from pollution. For instance, you can install air cleaners and water filters in your home, but you can't single handedly clean the outside environment.

You can, however, create a safe and secure home environment. And it's the home environment that has a huge impact on children. Kids who grow up surrounded by peace, beauty, and harmony thrive. Fortunately, large sums of money are not required to create such a child-friendly atmosphere.

Peace

A peaceful home is one without conflict. When you have children, you are going to get the occasional sibling squabbles, along with a lot of running, yelling, laughing, and singing. If you have teens, you can add to the mix loud and raucous music. Despite this normal background hullabaloo, the hub of the family can still be calm.

A tranquil home, though not always easy to achieve, is critical to a child's well being. Family skirmishes make kids feel tense and worried. Temporary détente or superficial serenity isn't enough. Kids can always see through the strained civility veiling problems such as marital discord. We're talking about the rock-solid sense of peace that makes kids feel safe and secure so they thrive.

Peace starts with you, the parent. If you feel sad, angry, or otherwise upset, find a way to work it out. If it's temporary, do the things that make you feel better –meditate, learn yoga, jog, dance, read a good book, smell lavender flowers, take a bath, take a nap, take up knitting. If you need to forgive someone, do it. If you need psychotherapy, get it. If you and your partner can't get along, make an appointment with a marriage counselor. We don't mean to sound glib. We recognize that this kind of work can seem gargantuan. And we recognize that if one parent is abusive or severely disturbed, it's better for the children to be removed from his or her presence.

Become aware of the way you and your family members speak to one another. Small children are sometimes noisy. That's okay. If it starts to get to you, you can suggest they take their wild play outside. If kids are fighting, you can ask them to take a break for a minute, then help them use more civilized words and tones of voice to communicate their conflict. And make sure that you listen to them and help them listen to one another. You can rephrase your understanding of the situation. You might say, "It sounds to me as though your brother doesn't like it when you take his toys without asking permission. What do you think you can do?" Books such as, *Siblings Without Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Live Together So You Can Live Too* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish (Avon, 1998), can help you strategize ways to resolve day-to-day kid conflicts.

Another thing to keep in mind is your style of correcting your children. Do you provide a supportive and constructive atmosphere, or do you barrage your kids with frustrated, angry criticism? Do you pick your battles, selecting the issues that are most critical to correct, or do you harp on every imperfection? Do you radiate your own stress to your kids? My advice is to strive to have three positive or at least neutral interactions with your children for every critical or negative one. A negative atmosphere creates a drain of the inner capacity of any child. It also promotes anger and hostility in the child.

Aside from resolving internal and interpersonal conflict, there are other, more practical ways to make your home pacific. For one, you can set limits for your child's consumption of electronic media such as video games, computers, radio, CD players, television, and movies. You can also monitor the type of programming she watches. Research shows that most of us parents do not supervise their children's media usage. We seem to have forgotten our duty wait until our children are mature enough to reveal to them information about sex, violence, illness, and death.

Granted, the fare on TV isn't all bad. Depending upon the programming, kids also stand to learn all kinds of positive things on television. However, even if the television isn't broadcasting anything disturbing, the fact that it's constantly on can disrupt inner peace. And it prevents kids from doing other things, such as reading, studying, being creative, and exercising. One study found that decreasing kids' TV time has not only possible, but caused kids to lose weight, behave less aggressively, and make fewer demands for toys and snacks advertised on TV.¹

Here's what you can do. Limit exposure to computer games and television. Set limits about what programs your child can and can not watch. When the TV is on, sometimes watch with your child. Tell him how it makes you feel, which may put him in touch with his own emotional reactions. If the program is a bit scary, but you think your child is old enough to handle it, your presence can make him feel better. So can your comments that such and such wouldn't happen in real life.

Another thief of peace is a constantly blaring stereo. Because music can both modify mood and amplify a preexisting mood, you can put it to good use. Let me explain. If a child is sad and listens to the blues, he might feel worse. Listening to a banjo might lift his spirits. If he's feeling angry and irritable, listening to rap music (and yes, kids do listen to lyrics), might augment alienated, hateful sentiment. Classical music might soothe his savage mood.

If your child loves rap music (unless the rapper is promoting mayhem and misogyny), you may chose not to ban it (and if he's already an adolescent, such policing would be counterproductive). But you can play the music you like at your end of the house. Mealtimes are particularly good times to put on quiet jazz or classical music.

You might decide that mealtimes are also good times to turn off the telephone ringer. And if telemarketing intrudes upon family life to an intolerable extreme, take steps to stop it. Tell telemarketers to take you off their list. If you want, you can have the phone company put a message on your phone that says you don't accept unsolicited phone calls.

You can help your child become aware of how peace (and its opposite) feels in body, mind, and soul. If the music's quiet or the birds are singing or the rain is drumming on the roof, you might mention that those sounds make you feel peaceful. Point out the emotional impact of various colors. Notice aloud your observations of how he responds to different images and textures (the feel of a cat's furry and purring body until his fingers).

If the music is boisterous, you can say, "This music makes me feel like dancing." If your child is small, he'll likely dance with you. If he's a teen, he'll probably beg you not to dance. (You may choose to do so anyway, unless you're about to embarrass him in front of his friends.) If musical lyrics or the situation on television turns ugly and violent, you can say that you don't want to listen/watch because it makes you feel edgy. Soon, your child will notice when he feels off center and seek out the things that restore inner peace.

Beauty

The Navajos have an expression, *Nizhoni go na haasdlii*, which means "walk in beauty." We should appreciate beauty, surround ourselves with it, and live beautifully. Lovely things make us feel calm and content. Making your home beautiful does not require a big bank account. If flowers are blooming in your yard, cut some and put them in vases in strategic locations such as the dining room table, your child's dresser, the bathroom. Light candles (but don't leave your young child unattended around them). Get rid of clutter. Hang your child's art on the walls (an act that will also boost her self-esteem). Sometimes things that might otherwise get tossed—a woman's old straw hat, a pair of vintage of skis – can be turned into art objects. You can also play music, sing, and scent the home with pleasing essential oils. (Essential oils are concentrated from plants. Emerging research shows they subtly influence mental and emotional states.)

You can also take your child to beautiful places. Explore natural landscapes,

architectural marvels, botanical gardens, museums, and aquariums. Bring paper and markers or pencils or paints. Encourage (but don't coerce) your child into drawing what he sees, or writing or talking about his experiences. All of those forms of active engagement will enhance his awareness.

Beauty invokes all the senses – not simply vision, but also hearing, smell, taste, and touch. The sound of a Mozart sonata or of the wind singing in the pines is acoustic alchemy. The smell of roses is glorious. The taste of fresh strawberries or tomatoes straight off the vine (and still warm from the sun) is poetry. The touch of a rabbit's fur or a snake's smooth scales or velvet can all feel exquisite. Teach your child to be a sensual being.

Try to find beauty in atypical places. You might remark about the reflection from a mud puddle or the rainbow pattern created by the car oil floating on top. Notice aloud seemingly mundane things – the light shafting through the trees, the morning birdsong, the sound of children laughing, the smell of peppers roasting. Your words will build will build your child's awareness of the beauty that surrounds us. Because beauty is in the eye of the beholder, you'll want to respect your child's sense of beauty.

If you saw the movie "American Beauty," you probably still remember the video the teenaged boy made of white plastic bags circling and dancing in the wind. Despite an abusive father and a severely depressed mother, this boy saw beauty in the world. His artistic expression of the world's surprising and sometimes mundane beauty gave him the capacity to remain a sensitive and compassionate human.

Harmony

To create harmony in one's life is a not always easy. This skill draws upon an appreciation for peace and beauty. It also requires that we be in sync with the immediate environment. Remember the expression, "Go with the flow?" It captured the essence of that sense of being in harmony with the situation. Athletes and artists talk about being in "a zone," a place where they're focused and the task at hand seems to unfold fluidly. It's like those days when, as a family, you decide to do something – bake bread or hike or go to an amusement park. When everyone's in harmony, it's fabulous.

Everyone is engaged and enjoying themselves and getting along. But, of

course, family members don't function as a single organism. Each person has her own mood, her own activity level, her own likes and dislikes. Let's say you've decided to go to the amusement park. It's hot and crowded. There are no shade trees. There's no convenient place to change your toddler's diapers, and furthermore, he's not tall enough to go on the rides your six-year-old favors. The toddler wants to go home. His cheeks are flushed and crusty with cotton candy. He begins to cry. You also yearn for your cool and quiet house, but the entry fee was so expensive...now there's a situation noticeably lacking in harmony.

You (and your child) can learn to recognize what it feels like to go against the grain and figure out better alternatives. Let's say it's your day to have the playgroup come over. And a lovely day it is. So gorgeous that you have your heart set on taking the little tikes out for a walk. But the toddlers have already set about emptying the toys out of your son's toy chest. They don't want to go outside. They really don't. They tell you so. One boy, in particular, is adamant. You think, Who's in control here? You want to be in control. Then you realize control really isn't the issue. The issue is that you want to go outside and the toddlers don't. Making them go will be ugly. You decide to stay inside and go for a run later, after the kids leave. Smart decision.

Now let's say that you have volunteered to help in your child's kindergarten. (We complement you for your involvement in your child's school and support of the teacher.) The teacher tells you she's going to read from a book of children's poems. The two of you stand there a moment, watching the busy kindergartners run around the room. Two boys wrestle on the rug like puppies. A small group is seeing who can jump the highest. The teacher, a wise woman, smiles and says to you, "You know what? I think we had better go outside first." She claps her hands. "Grab your coats," she calls to the children. "We're going to run around the building three times." The children shriek with delight.

When you all come back inside, the teacher announces read-aloud time. The children sit in a circle, as they're expected to, and settle down to listen. If you hadn't felt this way before, you worship this woman. You vow to learn something from the experience. She has taken the pulse of the class and adopted the ideal course of action. Like an aikido master, she has created harmony by following the kids' energy, *rather than fighting it and trying to force her will upon them.*

You can help your child become aware of when she restores harmony. Let's say her hamster is gnawing neurotically on the cage bars. She opens the door, strokes it gently, and puts it inside the plastic ball that allows it run around the house (without being eaten by the cat). Or your middle-schooler comes home from school, kicks the soccer ball around the yard a little while, then disappears into her room. For a quarter hour, music throbs the walls, then the volume goes down. You knock, open the door, and peek inside. You expect to find her asleep on her bed, but no-- she's sitting at her desk quietly doing her homework. Now would be an excellent time to complement her ability to get in sync with the situation, to create harmony.

Physical Mediators: Lifestyle

The way we treat our bodies effects not only physical health, but also mental health. The physical factors divide into nutrition, sleep, relaxation, exercise, work, and play. Unfortunately, the current trends suggest all these arenas are changing for the worst. We're on our way to become a fast-food nation populated by chronically sleep-deprived, stressed, and sedentary workaholics. Fortunately, we can exert some degree of control over all these factors.

Nutrition: Food as Mental Messenger

You are what you eat, and what you eat influences your mental state. A fatty meal overstimulates the sympathetic nervous system (which raises adrenaline levels and elevates cortisol levels. Think about how you feel after you polish off a plate of pancakes smothered in butter and syrup, then wash it down with three mugs of coffee. Do your thoughts move like a herd of elephants, a covey of quail startled from their nests, or a cloud of gnats?

Your child is similarly affected by the foods he ingests. In fact, he's probably even more sensitive to such influences. Rats who consume high-fat diets don't recover from stress as well as rats on normal diets. Specifically, it takes longer for cortisol levels to return to normal after stress.² The high-fat, high-carbohydrate diets "American" diet decreases levels of brain-derived neurotrophic factor, or BDNF. This chemical encourages brain cells to grow and protects them from damage.

In humans, the issue is not so much too much fat as too much of the wrong

kind of fats. A host of nutrients, including fats, contribute to the health of the nerve cells. Several vitamins and amino acids are involved in the body's production of *neurotransmitters*. Neurotransmitters are the chemicals nerve cells use to communicate with one another. Most psychiatric conditions have been linked to imbalances in these chemicals.

Diet isn't the only factor linked to imbalances, but it's a big one. You don't have to be up on the latest nutrition research to know that we Americans eat way too many nutrient-poor foods, that we're becoming a nation of overweight kids and adults, a nation of people who are both overfed and undernourished.

What can a concerned parent do? Should you read nutrition books, study organic chemistry, or memorize the food pyramid? You could, but such measures aren't necessary. You can feed yourself and your family well simply by avoiding highly processed (a.k.a., "junk") foods and going for "whole" foods: unadulterated and unprocessed fruits, vegetables, grains, nuts, fish, meats, eggs, and milk. When possible, buy organic produce, meats, and dairy products. Food contaminated with hormones and pesticides stresses our bodies. Also, tests show that organically grown produce is higher in most vitamins and minerals than conventionally grown foods. Magnesium, a mineral critical to proper brain function, is one of those minerals.

Awareness factors in here, if your child appreciates how she feels after making unwise food choices (without harping or criticizing).

The essential fatty acid connection

Dietary fats have taken a beating from the press the past several years. What many people don't realize is that our bodies *need* fats to work properly. According to Michael A. Schmidt, Ph.D., author of *Smart Fats* (North Atlantic Books, 1997), the brain is more than 60 percent fat. So if someone calls you "fat head," you can tell him that epithet holds true for you and everyone else.

There are several types of fats. The "bad" fats are saturated fats and trans fatty acids. Actually, the brain does need some saturated fat, but our bodies manufacture plenty. (The same goes for cholesterol, which is yet another

kind of fat.) The problem is that we eat too much of the “bad” fats in proportion to the “good” fats.

Saturated fats come primarily from animal sources: meat, poultry, lard, and some dairy products. They are usually solid at room temperature. Trans fatty acids arise when unsaturated oils are heated at high heat for long periods of time. The word “trans” is a chemical term describing the placement of chemical bonds. Whenever you eat fried foods (donuts, fried chicken, french fries, chips), you’re ingesting trans fatty acids. Such fats are also formed during hydrogenation, a chemical process that involves adding hydrogen molecules to unsaturated vegetable oils to make them semisolid. Examples here include margarine and shortening. Store-bought bakery items and many brands of peanut butter contain hydrogenated fats. Saturated and are less liquid than unsaturated fats, and eating too much of them makes our nerve cells less flexible.

The more healthful fats are the monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. These fats are liquid at room temperature and come primarily from vegetables, but also from some kinds of fish and other sea creatures. Some of these fats are called *essential fatty acids* because our bodies can’t make them. These essential fatty acids are broken into two varieties: omega-6 fatty acids (commonly consumed as the oils of sunflower, safflower, corn, and sesame) and the omega-3 fatty acids (found in the oils of flax, walnut, pumpkin, green leafy vegetables, and cold-water fish).

According to Schmidt, many years ago, our forebears consumed omega-6 and omega-3 fatty acids in a 1:1 ratio. Our diets have evolved such that ratio is between 20:1 and 30:1. The problem is our brains require those omega-3 fatty acids. These fatty acids control various enzyme systems, cell membrane fluidity, inflammatory processes, and several aspects of neurotransmitter function. Research suggests that omega-3 fatty acid deficiency plays a role in depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and attention deficit disorder.

Schmidt recommends eating cold-water fish two to three times a week. Fish contains both docosapentaenoic acid (DHA) and eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA). Eggs, depending upon what the chickens eat, contain varying amounts of DHA. Although the conversion is not terribly efficient, the body can also create EPA and DHA from the alpha-linolenic acid (ALA) found in green leafy vegetables, flaxseed, chia seeds, rapeseed, pumpkin seeds, Brazil

nuts, and walnuts. In almost all my patients, I also recommend fish-oil supplements.

The B vitamin connection

Several B vitamins are needed to maintain the nerve systems involved in mood regulation. The B vitamin folic acid is closely linked to depression and bipolar disorder, with deficiency aggravating these conditions and supplementation improving them. Vitamin B-6 is a co-factor in the conversion of the amino acid tryptophan to serotonin. Most antidepressants augment serotonin levels in the brain. I find it interesting that the rate of depression rose dramatically in the U.S. since the advent in the 1950s of agents that block B-6 availability in the brain – FD&C yellow #5, hydrazine dyes, birth control pills, and other drugs.

Both folic acid and vitamin B12 are needed to convert the amino acid homocysteine into methionine, thus lowering homocysteine levels. High homocysteine levels are toxic to nerves and also raise the risk of atherosclerosis. The amino acid methionine made in this chemical reaction can go on to become *S-adenosylmethionine (S-AdoMet)*. S-AdoMet has many functions, including neurotransmitter production. Studies have shown this substance, taken as a supplement, can ameliorate depression.

Anyone under stress tends to burn up more of the water-soluble vitamins: the Bs and also vitamin C. People with higher levels of vitamin C may handle psychological stress better. In a recent study, adults took either 1000 mg vitamin C in three sustained-release pills and or a placebo for two weeks. Stress came in the form of mathematic tasks and public speaking. The people who took vitamin C supplements perceived that they felt less stress and also had lower objective signs of stress as measured by blood pressure and blood levels of the hormone cortisol.³

You can make sure that your family eats ample amounts of foods rich in these vitamins. Fresh greens make good sources of B and C. Just about any fresh plant matter contains vitamin C, although vitamin C is perishable so the fresher the better. Particularly good sources include guavas, strawberries, papayas, citrus, berries, red cabbage, and peppers. Many fresh fruits also contain B vitamins. Ditto legumes, whole grains, and nuts. Stressed kids can also take supplements of vitamin C and B complex.

Magnesium

After omega oils, I believe that magnesium deficiency is the most pervasive and detrimental dietary shortfall we experience in this country. Over time, our agricultural land has become depleted in magnesium, lowering the amount in vegetables and fruits. Stress exhausts the body's magnesium stores *and it is needed in the construction of the brain with essential fatty acids*. If your child is stressed, I recommend you start them on a calcium/magnesium tablet or multi-mineral supplement. Kids who can't yet swallow pills can take a powder if they can't swallow.

Zinc

Zinc is another mineral depleted by stress. It aids metabolism, including the body's processing of the essential fatty acids so critical for brain development and function. It is also critical in a number of metabolic reactions in the nervous system of the child. Zinc-rich foods include shellfish, fish, meat, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds.

Sleep

Sleep recharges our bodies. Unfortunately, many kids (and adults) don't get enough. A 1999 National Sleep Foundation survey found that 60 percent of kids under the age of 18 felt sleepy during the day, and 15 reported falling asleep at school within the previous year. Teenagers were more likely to complain of being tired than younger children. Indeed, studies show that most teens don't get enough sleep. One found that 17 percent of adolescents had insomnia, which they chalked up to busy schedules, life stresses, poor physical health, poor diet, and lack of exercise.⁴

The two main reasons for not getting enough sleep are going to bed too late (or getting up too early) and not being able to sleep once in bed. Over-scheduling and failure to go to sleep when tired promote the former. Consumption of caffeine and psychological stress cause the latter. Over-stimulation (e.g., viewing action-packed or violent movies, TV shows, and video games) both can cause kids to stay up too late and have insomnia. Increasingly, homework, school schedules, extracurricular activities, the television, and the clock govern kids' sleep patterns, rather than natural rhythms.

How do you know if your child isn't getting enough sleep? If he needs an alarm or you to wake him up. If he's really hard to rouse, you can be sure he isn't getting enough sleep.

Sleep deprivation elevates cortisol levels the following evening.⁵ After a few nights, insufficient sleep also increases activity of the sympathetic nervous system (the "fight or flight" branch of the involuntary nervous system) and decreases the activity of the parasympathetic system (the restorative branch of the involuntary nervous system). The net effect is to make a child feel jittery and hyper-aroused. No wonder it's hard to sleep after a few nights of insomnia.

The consequences of habitually not getting enough sleep include irritability, depression, anxiety, poor physical performance, problems getting along with others, diminished immunity, and an increase in accidents. Fatigue can make small problems start to look overwhelming and generally increases vulnerability to stress. Kids' daytime sleepiness and poor mental performance (specifically, decreased concentration and memory) causes many teachers to complain they feel they're trying to teach classrooms full of zombies.

One study found that insomnia and short sleep duration (less than seven hours a night) were associated with a wide range of behavioral and emotional problems in adolescents.⁶

Taken to an extreme, prolonged sleep deprivation can provoke psychosis. Insufficient sleep also aggravates anxiety. For people predisposed to mood disorders, not getting enough sleep raises the risk for an episode of depression or mania. (Once those illnesses take hold, they cause disordered sleep.)

If your child is under the age of 13, you have a fair amount of control over when he goes to bed. Starting at a young age, establish a regular (but not inflexible) bedtime. Make bedtime a relaxing and comforting ritual. Put on quiet music, read with your child, and perhaps stroke his back a moment after he lies down. Then turn out the light.

If over-scheduling prevents your child from getting to bed at a reasonable hour, try to change the schedule. I've known of parents who have protested

to coaches and relevant athletic associations when their son's ice hockey practice time was set at 10 p.m. Parents and sleep researchers have petitioned high schools for later start times. You and your child may have to make difficult decisions to safeguard sleep, such as withdrawing from an extracurricular activity or a high-pressure academic track.

Don't let your child rely on caffeine to stay awake. Once established, it's a tough habit to break. Plus caffeine aggravates anxiety and feelings of stress. And, taken in the evening, interferes with sleep. Many of my patients consume a shocking amount of caffeinated soda. Often, one of my first moves is to try to wean a child off these beverages. Late-night TV viewing (especially if the material is violent or otherwise psychologically distressing) can also trouble kids' sleep. Help your insomniac child kick that habit too.

Relaxation and Play

We all need wool-gathering time. Sadly, free time is becoming so scarce it deserves endangered species status. Researchers from the University of Michigan found that school-age kids' free time has diminished from 40 percent of the day in 1981 to 25 percent of the day in 1997. Yet unstructured time to think, play (and not just the athletics organized by adults), and do nothing is critical to a child's well-being.

How did this happen? For one, more parents work. In order to avoid having their child go home alone, parents often enroll them in structured after-school programs. These programs are not bad, per se. And certainly, kids can play in such program. But they can't really relax, which is more of a solo activity.

For another, there are fewer safe places for kids to hang out. Gone are the empty lots; open spaces are shrinking. With many parents afraid to send their kids to local playgrounds, children tend to remain indoors where they spend too much time in sedentary pursuits such as TV viewing and electronic games. Granted, lying on the couch watching TV is a form of relaxation. We would argue, however, that a child sitting in the yard and building fairy houses out of sticks and stones is engaging in a healthier form of relaxation. That child is learning to entertain herself (and also learning about architecture). She is thinking as she builds. She is exploring her environment. She is expressing herself. She is being creative. Creativity

flourishes best when a child has the necessary materials in the absence of parental expectations and instructions and time limitations.

Another consequence of this lack of safe outdoor play space is that parents tend to enroll their kids in organized sports. Organized athletics are not the same as free play. They usually entail greater expectations. Grownups make the rules, not the kids. And as more children start these activities at young ages, other families feel pressure to enroll their kids, lest they get left behind on the playing field.

The heightened stress, anticipation, anxiety, and downright fear too many kids feel serve to rev up their mental and emotional states. I also believe that ADHD and bipolar disorder are linked to excessive nervous system arousal. If the only form of relaxation such kids get is watching on-screen violence, then there's no release for this inner arousal. It's like removing the escape valve from a pressure cooker.

What can you do? Don't over-schedule your child. And don't let him over-schedule himself. If you catch yourself proudly telling someone that your child is enrolled in Scouts, soccer, gymnastics, violin and piano lessons, take a hard look at yourself. Be honest. Who's driving this schedule: you or your child? If you really believe your child is wedded to all these activities, you may have to put your foot down and tell him he has too much on his plate. When my kids were in elementary school, I used to make sure that they had three free afternoons after school and dedicated one weekend day to sloth and indolence. During middle school, I tried to keep two days free. Now that they're in high school, the school coaches mostly control their after-school sports schedules.

Let's say you work and your child is small. If you can afford it, try to find someone who can watch her at your home at least a couple afternoons. Sometimes you can find a retired elder or a high-school or college student who is willing to pick up your child from school and hang out with her till you return. Or you might find another parent who will carpool with you and trade after-school duty. In our culture, it's not always easy to find quality after-school care, but it's possible.

Remember that play and relaxation are powerful antidotes to stress. Playing with your child is a great way for both of you to unwind and serves as proof that you enjoy being with him.

Exercise

Regular exercise is practically a panacea. It promotes overall well-being, buoys mood, boosts energy, relieves anxiety, improves ability to cope with stress, heightens intellectual creativity, hones mental acuity, enhances immunity, improves sleep, helps control body weight, strengthens bones and muscles, improves cardiovascular health, stabilizes blood sugar levels, improves digestion and regularity, and, via sweating, helps get rid of toxins. Whew. Scientific research backs up all those claims. Plus, one study found that adults who jogged a mere 30 minutes three times a week scored higher in tests of memory than their couch-potato cohorts.⁷ Animals allowed to exercise at will have bigger brains than those who don't. Plus, they have higher levels of brain-derived growth factor (BDNF) and nerve growth factor (NGF), chemicals that promote nerve cell growth. These chemicals may account for why exercise is good for the brain and protects against stress overload. Interestingly, some researchers think that antidepressants may work by increasing brain levels of BDNF.⁸

Perhaps it's not surprising then that people who do not exercise have a three-fold greater risk of depression than those who do. Conversely, exercise lifts depression. A recent study explored the impact of physical exercise on mood in a group of nine- and ten-year-old children. For fifteen minutes, kids either exercised or watched a video of people exercising. Active exercise increased positive mood and decreased negative mood (e.g., sadness and irritability). Surprisingly, merely watching the video caused a decrease in positive mood and an increase in negative mood.⁹ These results seem particularly meaningful when you think about kids' increasingly sedentary ways (including their tendency to spend way too much time in front of TV screens).

Unfortunately, American kids don't exercise enough. Too many of them spend too much time sitting around watching TV, videos, and computer games. Here are some tips for getting your child off his backside:

First and foremost, show your kids that you value exercise. Do it every day. If you're feeling stressed, anxious, or blue, you might say, "I'm feeling (fill in the emotion). I think I'll go (fill in the type of exercise). Want to come?" The exact activity doesn't matter nearly as much as the pleasure derived from doing it. Some kids are drawn to organized team sports. Others may

prefer dance or martial arts or rock climbing or jogging solo or playing tennis. Some enjoy almost any sport, as long as they can do it with a parent or a friend. Help your child discover which physical activities suit her. If she likes it, she's much more likely to continue doing it.

Organized sports: Making them fun for your child

Organized athletics are all the rage these days. And they are fine physical activities that help kids get exercise, learn physical skills and a certain mental toughness, and develop relationships with teammates. It's a winning situation, as long as the child has fun. Fun means that no adult demands more than the child can or wants to deliver. Fun means the other teammates and coaches are nice.

If the coach shouts at the kids or ridicules them or otherwise humiliates them, our advice is to complain to the head of that particular athletic organization and (in the absence of the coach's reformation or replacement) withdraw your child from the team. Psychological abuse doesn't help anyone learn a sport. Plus, it can damage self-esteem and dampen your child's enthusiasm for that sport or sports in general. If the league your child plays on is so competitive as to cause (rather than relieve) stress, talk to your child about switching to a team that's more laid-back and recreational.

The biggest pit-fall kids have to face is pushy parents. A 2001 survey by the National Alliance for Sports found that seven out of ten kids quit by the age of 13, primarily because of their parents' behavior. These parents put too much focus on their child's acquisition of skills and too much emphasis on performance.

If you've ever attended a youth athletic event, you'll know what we're talking about here. Pushy parents are the ones who shriek at their child from the sidelines, the one who rush onto the field to yell at coaches and referees, the ones who complain if their child spends more than five minutes on the bench. These parents spend the car trip to the event giving their child advice on how to play the game better. They spend the car trip home criticizing their child's every misstep. They make their kids do extra drills. They brag to anyone with ears about their child's talent. This type of behavior isn't limited to organized sports, but can extend to theater, dance, and music.

Such parents are to their kids what Beethoven's father was to him: stern taskmasters.

We recommend that you give your child complete ownership of whatever extracurricular endeavor she chooses. That means you recognize that she's doing it for her own gratification, not yours. Neither over-value nor downgrade her talent. Your job is to play chauffeur and to show up to support her performances. If the event is athletic in nature, you can cheer for the team. If it's artistic, applaud at appropriate times. Never boo, hiss, scream epithets, or brawl with other adults. Allow your child to talk about her performance, and refrain from denying her self-assessment. If she's critical of herself, you can always say something like, "Maybe you feel that way. But I really enjoyed watching you."

Remember, your goal should be for your child to gain physical, mental, and emotional skills – not to see your child win.

Work

All of us need to feel productive and valued. Meaningful work makes kids and adults feel good about themselves. The acquisition of almost any skill requires some degree of effort. A job well done makes us industrious, proud, and confident. That sort of mastery one gains dispels the helplessness so typical of depression.

When researchers kept track of teenaged boys from disadvantaged families in inner-city Boston for forty years, they found a strong correlation between the basic childhood skills and successful, productive adulthood. They concluded that what goes right in childhood is more important than what goes wrong. One of the important positive predictors of resilience and success was work.¹⁰

What kind of work can children do? Almost all kids eventually have to do homework. Some will need paying jobs to have enough cash to buy clothes, gasoline, movie tickets, and maybe to help put food on the family table. All kids should help out around the house. Obviously, the type of chores depends upon the child's developmental abilities. Even very small children can help dust, pull weeds, set the dinner table, and prepare meals (as the preparation doesn't entail sharp knives and high temperatures). In fact, little kids love to do just about anything to be with their parents. Even older kids

enjoy working alongside a parent.

Avoid making work into drudgery. Show your child how to be playful or creative while doing chores. Sing or whistle while you work. Talk to one another. Put on some bouncy music. And be sure to thank your child for his help. Let him know that his willingness to pitch in lightened your load. Even if your sulky teen did a chore, you should still thank him.

Sometimes the hard part is getting kids to do their chores. Too often, they “forget” to do them. You can hold periodic family meetings to talk about who will do what jobs. Emphasize to reluctant children that chores are part of being in a family. After all, you shop for food and their school supplies and clothes. It’s only fair that they help out too. In return, you will be reasonable in your demands. A teenager who already puts a lot of time into homework and worthy extracurricular activities probably doesn’t have time to, say, cook dinner every night.

Once the work list has been agreed upon, you might want to post it in a prominent location (such as the refrigerator door). Kids can check off jobs as they do them. Small children often love putting stickers on the list. Think of other rewards for a job well done. We already mentioned thank yous. But you might hold out other “carrots.” For example, you might agree to take your child to see a certain movie if she does all her weekly chores. If she doesn’t do them, you don’t go. You’re teaching responsibility, which is a valuable skill in itself.

If your child does a good job, by all means, praise him. But don’t dole out positive reinforcement when your child’s efforts don’t merit it. If you do, you may actually undermine his self-worth. Martin Seligman, Ph.D., a prominent American psychologist and depression expert, has studied the impact of unearned rewards on kids. As part of his investigation into the rise in childhood depression, he scrutinized the “self-esteem movement” in schools. He observed that, as part of this well-intentioned effort, teachers tended to give out undeserved high marks. The kids knew they hadn’t earned these grades, and the charade did not boost their self-esteem or otherwise make them feel good. In fact, it made them feel like losers, like people who couldn’t get an A unless a teacher gave it to them on a silver platter. Unwarranted rewards robbed them of the pride and mastery that comes from working hard for an achievement.

Seligman concluded, “the feel-good society as it overtook the doing-well society created new opportunities and new freedoms along with new perils.” Those potential perils come in the form of diminished self-esteem and an increased risk of feeling helpless and depressed.¹¹

A Balancing Act

All the physical skills of resilience come down to a matter of balance and proportion. For instance, if you spent all your time preparing nutritionally sound meals for your family, that would be, well, weird. The same is true if you spent eight hours a day exercising, unless your job was training for the Olympics or teaching a sport. Most adults work too much and play too little. Remember that your children are watching you. Ideally, they will observe that you enjoy your work, or at least feel proud of what you do. Show them that you also make time to play – with them and with your friends. Show them that you value time for solitude and relaxation. Show them that, no matter how much work you have lined up and how much stress you’re under, you make sure you eat well, exercise most days, and get the sleep that keeps you working and playing at your best.

Eventually your child will internalize these healthy habits. Eventually, she will do them for herself, because they make her feel better – not because you are in charge of her life. She will learn to make adjustments for the changes in her life. She’ll learn that, in times of stress, she may need a day to sleep in. She’ll learn when she needs to create a peaceful environment and when to crank up the stereo. She’ll learn to obey her craving for a bowl of fresh strawberries (even though she may not recognize her increased need for vitamin C). She’ll learn that, when she feels anxious, going out for a run is just the ticket. Best of all, she’ll grow up to pass along these skills to other, younger people. If we keep moving along those lines, the world will have to become a better, healthier place.

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