



HABITS OF

Healthy,
Happy Kids

SECRETS TO RAISING CHILDREN WHO THRIVE

RHONDA
SPENCER-HWANG, Dr.PH, MPH

Eight Habits of Healthy, Happy Kids



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Eight Habits of Healthy, Happy Kids: Secrets to Raising Children Who Thrive

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A Note Before You Begin

EIGHT HABITS OF HEALTHY, HAPPY KIDS introduces you to eight healthy habits that centenarians (people one hundred years or older) have practiced since childhood that may improve your family's overall health as well. Before making major changes to health practices such as diet and exercise, however, be sure to consult with your physician.

INTRODUCTION

One-Hundred-Year-Old Wisdom

*Direct your children onto the right
path, and when they are older,
they will not leave it.*

PROVERBS 22:6

ON A MILD CALIFORNIA WINTER'S DAY a few years ago, I sat on the patio watching my youngest child, one-year-old Julia, babbling away in the sandbox. Her brother and sister were already at school, and I had no classes to teach that day. I didn't have to rush off to a meeting, answer an email, give a health presentation, drive car pool, or settle sibling disputes. I relished this unhurried moment of calm.

Yet I felt uneasy. I knew something was not right, and I was headed for trouble. I was teaching public health at a university, but privately my kids and I were devouring junk food. I was teaching the

importance of physical exercise and movement but spent most of my time sitting at my desk working while my kids sat in front of the TV. I was dedicated to my church, but my family and I were missing more services than we attended. I had lost my direction—and worse, I was setting up my kids to follow the same rocky path.

Watching Julia dig her way to China with her plastic shovel, I thought about how far our family had drifted from a healthy lifestyle. Like so many other parents, I was overwhelmed by the endless bombardment of daily challenges, accompanied by heaping doses of exhausting stress. I found myself making one subconscious decision after another.

*Fast food just this once. I'm too tired to cook.
A marathon of TV for the kids just for today.
It's sure to settle them down.
Skipping church just this week. We've got so
much to do.*

Such days had turned into months and months into years, until these continual “exceptions” to the rule had *become* the rule—and soon characterized our daily lives. Making matters worse, my husband and I were paying for those unsettling selections

not only with our own personal health, but with our kids' health as well.

Ironically, I live and work in Loma Linda, California, a community known worldwide for the health, extraordinary resilience, and longevity of its citizens. Often referred to as a Blue Zone, Loma Linda is one of only five regions in the world—and the only one in North America—with clusters of centenarians, men and women who have reached a vibrant one hundred years of age.¹

Since many studies have shown that our habits and experiences in childhood lay the foundation for our health as adults, I suspected that these senior citizens had much to teach today's parents about how to raise healthy, happy kids. I interviewed as many of them as I could.²

It turns out, there were eight habits that virtually all of the centenarians had practiced in their childhoods and throughout the course of their lives. These habits helped build resilience and likely provided protection from all the hardships and adversity the centenarians faced, including the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic and many other outbreaks that often resulted in the death of family members, abuse, neglect, economic uncertainty during the Great Depression, and so many other

adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and stressors. Furthermore, I believe that if developed early, these same habits will result in both immediate and long-term physical and mental benefits for our kids (and us as well!).

This has been a life-changing journey for me, and I believe it can be life-changing for you too. Let's get started.

Active Movement and Outdoor Engagement

*In every walk with Nature, one
receives far more than he seeks.*

JOHN MUIR

AS I TALKED WITH CENTENARIANS, one thing became immediately clear—their early-twentieth-century childhoods were far different from the technology-driven, sedentary, and isolated childhoods that today's children typically experience.

Through their hundred-year-old eyes, I caught a glimpse of a much quieter and more connected time. They had been raised in slower-paced, do-it-yourself (DIY) communities—with an emphasis on community. Families didn't go it alone—they depended on one another. They also relied on much simpler forms of technology to communicate and get things done.

While today's technologies are supposed to make life easier, they tend to lead to increasingly hectic lives, demanding even more of our professional and personal time. Meanwhile, children spend most of their time indoors, glued to computers or watching TV, rather than playing outside in nature or with their friends.

In fact, a survey by the National Trust found that children today spend half the time their parents did playing outdoors.¹ According to the Child Mind Institute, children spend on average just four to seven minutes a day in unstructured play outside!² More alarming, they spend an average of seven hours per day sitting and staring at electronic screens, moving nothing but the distal digits of their fingers. Author Richard Louv coined the term *nature-deficit disorder* to describe this phenomenon.³

In contrast, most of the centenarians had been raised in farming families who maintained an active outdoor lifestyle immersed in physical activity from dawn to dusk, doing chores, caring for younger siblings, and helping their families garden and raise livestock. Their active lifestyles helped both girls and boys develop strong bones

and muscles, avoid depression, and increase their energy levels, confidence, and life skills.

“I loved to work on the farm,” said one-hundred-year-old Lidia Reichel, “[whether digging] in the soil or getting the cows and milking them. We used to do everything around the house. It’s not like these days—you go to the supermarket and buy food. . . . As soon as we learned how to walk and talk, we had to work. My mom would dig into the soil and plant, and I’d help her.”

While you don’t have to buy a farm or force your kids to plant fields and harvest crops, if you want your kids to be happier and healthier, take a lesson from the centenarians and get your kids moving!

MODERN TIMES CALL FOR MODERN METHODS

Trying to replicate the childhoods of current centenarians presents one small problem. The very fact that they are centenarians means that they experienced childhood nearly a century ago! Think about how much our world has changed in the last hundred years. For the centenarians, even going to the bathroom as children meant donning coats

(if it was winter) and heading outdoors to use the family's outhouse.

Today most people no longer live on farms, many have small yards or no yards at all, both parents may work full-time jobs, and children receive much more demanding homework and have longer school days than the centenarians ever did. Add to that the many structured activities for kids, from organized sports to other extracurricular activities, and the challenge grows greater. Most children work indoors from sunup to sundown, with little time or opportunity to get outdoors.

We lack the freedom the centenarians once had to roam the countryside without parental supervision, knowing they'd more than likely come home safe and sound for supper. So getting your children out the door—spending time together outside when you have work to do yourself—might seem like quite the mountain to climb.

Here's the good news: Just because the world has changed does not mean you can't engage with nature. If you commit to getting outdoors and being active, you'll find ways to make it happen.

To get started, do as the centenarians did: Keep it simple. If you make too many changes right from the start, you'll be more likely to give up.

Instead, take incremental steps. With time, you'll find that by beginning with just a few small adjustments to your daily life, you can achieve profound lifestyle changes.

Step 1: Develop your outdoor purpose

The centenarians I spoke with spent active time outdoors each day when they were children, but they didn't need to be encouraged; it was their way of life.

One-hundred-year-old Evelyn Reickman remembers going outdoors each day to take care of her family's cattle on their hundred acres. "There was no fencing on the farm, so it was a big job," she recalls. Likewise, 101-year-old Salma Mohr would walk barefoot into town every morning before breakfast to fetch milk in a coffee can for her family—ten children in all. Without her efforts, there would have been no milk for the day. Beyond outdoor work, they found trees to climb, ponds to fish, and woods to explore.

Instead of thinking only of exercises you can do indoors, start thinking of things you need or want to do that require physical activity outdoors. Start with fifteen minutes a day. Walk around the block

to mail that letter. If you have a yard, go outside and clean it up, plant something, weed something, do something! If all you and your kids have is a balcony, rotate time out there with them. One child could repot plants with you, another might deadhead the flowers, and yet another could do homework outdoors. Just get them outside doing something!

Try getting a dog, caring for a farm animal, or planting a garden. Gardening, for instance, provides an immediate purpose for getting outdoors each day. Consider planting a garden with a theme—an herb garden, an aromatic garden, or a garden of flowers that bloom only at night. Try making a fairy garden by building miniature houses from twigs, bits of bark, pine cones, leaves, and whatever else you can find. If you don't have a yard, try a container garden set on a patio, inquire about local community gardens, or see if you can start a garden at your kids' school.

If you have the space, consider caring for livestock or outdoor pets such as chickens or rabbits. Even if you live in the city, having your own vegetable garden or some simple livestock—like chickens—will put your family on the path toward becoming more self-sustaining, which can be

especially important during troubling times (like economic depressions or global virus outbreaks). You can check your local city laws to see what types of animals are allowed and how many.

Will your kids squawk at first about going outside? Will they try it once and think they've made sufficient sacrifice? Probably. Don't let their resistance defeat you. Be firm about your commitment to getting outdoors. The younger your children, the easier it will be to acclimate them to playing outside. Older children, such as my nine-year-old daughter, may resist more. Most need encouragement. Make it clear that staying indoors is not an option. Take away electronics if you have to.

Once you do get outside, don't rush. During their early childhoods, the centenarians I spoke with escaped the frenetic or competitive sports-like pace of modern life. The meditative quality of their peaceful outdoor time lowered their blood pressure, calmed their nerves, and helped them relax.

Ninety-nine-year-old June Ohashi recalled the

*No matter
where you live,
there's a door
to the outdoors.
Open it.*

tremendous challenge she faced as a teenager because of her Japanese heritage. World War II had broken out, and there was often hostility toward Japanese living in America. June had to decide whether to remain where she was living and attending school or return home. She remembers heading outdoors to a serene nature area and walking all around to help gain clarity on the decision she had to make.

During the recent COVID-19 pandemic, spending time outdoors and away from people worked wonders in reducing household tension. No matter where you live, there's a door to the outdoors. Open it. You never know what you might find. Some kids have even found a purpose for getting active in nature that's tied with a positive social benefit. A smart nine-year-old boy named Robbie Bond, a Hawaiian native, grew up on Oahu and always had a passion for being physically active outdoors. When he heard that the White House was reviewing national monuments and parks, intending to downsize or eliminate twenty-seven of them, Robbie convinced his family to visit as many of these monuments as possible over a six-month period. He not only got himself and his family moving, Robbie started a

national movement when he became founder of Kids Speak for Parks, the nonprofit he launched in July 2017.⁴

Step 2: Use your feet for travel

How many times have you found yourself getting in the car to drive less than a mile to visit someone or pick up something at the store that you could easily have carried back home? With car accidents most likely to happen within five miles of your home, you quite literally risk your life to drive less than a mile! Instead of turning the key in the ignition, consider simply putting one foot in front of the other—there's a reason we were created to be bipedal. Our feet get us places.

One-hundred-year-old Evelyn Reickman didn't make a fuss about walking places as a child. Her longest journey each week was a whopping six-mile walk with her family to church and another six miles home. Without ready access to cars, getting around to nearby neighbors, schools, places of worship, and most other activities meant walking many miles—often for two to three hours a day. While walking that much today may seem unrealistic, perhaps you can promote living more like the

centenarians by walking your children to school or enjoying a walking adventure to the store or library. If you can sit for an hour, you can walk for an hour. Sitting for an hour will drain you of your energy, while walking for an hour will increase it. Try it for a week and see how much better you feel!

Try not to let the rain or snow deter you. Encourage your children to get outdoors in different types of weather—with appropriate clothing. If they balk—and they will—acknowledge the unpleasant conditions but tell them you’re going out anyway. Make the weather challenge a part of your adventure. If it’s hot, be sure you’ve got plenty of water and sunscreen. Then splash in a pool or get out the garden hose. If it’s raining, feel the drops fall on your face and watch them bounce in the puddles. Of course, don’t go out if there’s any thunder or lightning—lightning is nothing to play with. But a cloudy day, a nip in the air, or a bit of rain or snow falling from the sky can turn an ordinary day into an extraordinary one.

Need some additional inspiration? Consider 101-year-old Dr. Ellsworth Wareham. The climate in Alberta, Canada, where young Ellsworth grew up, could range from bitterly cold temperatures and heavy snowfall in the winter to highs in the

nineties in the summer and everything in between. Even on the coldest days, Ellsworth would get up each morning around 4 a.m. to fetch the cows and milk them by hand before eating breakfast and heading off to school. In fact, most of the centenarians stayed outdoors throughout the day in every season, experiencing all kinds of weather. Many indigenous people and peasant farmers continue to live this way in other parts of the world—entire families living in mud homes no bigger than most of our bedrooms. It takes nothing short of a cyclone to keep them indoors. Houses are for eating and sleeping in much of the world; the outdoors is for living. So don't let weather keep you locked up indoors.

*Step 3: Simplify your requirements
for getting outdoors*

The centenarians lived a simpler lifestyle than most of us today. With limited financial income, they connected with the outdoors organically, taking a hands-on, do-it-yourself approach to getting things done. In addition to making his own kites as a child, 105-year-old Dr. Robert Boltan helped his father make sleds to enjoy the snow.

Like the centenarians, wear clothing that encourages you and your children to be active outdoors. In warm weather, ditch the heels, sandals, or flip-flops and opt for sturdy tennis shoes. If girls prefer dresses, be sure they wear shorts or leggings underneath so they can climb and run. The same goes for you—get out of your suit and dress shoes and replace them with walking shoes and activewear.

Most of the centenarians I spoke with grew up extremely poor, so they made do with what they had on hand. Rather than shop at Eddie Bauer before an outing, they simply hiked—knowing the terrain and not putting themselves into risky situations, of course. They didn't buy tents that cost a week's wages; they camped under the stars or made shelters of their own. They often used what they had around them and stayed close to their homes.

*Houses are for
eating and
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Have you ever thought about untapped opportunities that might be available in your own community? Sometimes

we have resources we aren't aware of. Many local communities offer outdoor adventures in zoos, public gardens, forest preserves, and even museums. You might call ahead of time to ask if they have any hidden attractions, tours, or just plain advice to help make your trip even more fun. By seeking insider tips prior to a museum visit in San Francisco, my family and I ended up taking a semiprivate and memorable outdoor tour of a flower field surrounding a whale bone graveyard.

The centenarians didn't routinely take vacations, but if those are a treasured part of your family's life, consider heading to local or distant campgrounds to spend time in the "wild." The simpler the camping experience, the better. You don't need a fancy recreational vehicle or elaborate camping gear. A modest tent and simple camp stove will help you temporarily leave modern times behind while you enjoy nature.

Another option: Visit a national park. Make your plans well in advance and reserve a camping space online. Read books on outdoor survival skills that teach you how to live with nature while in it—not how to replicate indoor living or "glamping." Learn to make and cook simple meals over an open fire, to fish, and perhaps even to forage

for edible foods (though be cautious). Pack food in tight containers so you don't attract animals, and don't leave your toothbrush out overnight—a lesson I learned when a raccoon used mine as his personal body comb and paw cleaner!

If you live in a cold climate, winter may seem a challenging time to get outdoors, but take advantage of sunny, warmer winter days to enjoy places and activities that are rare (or nonexistent) in warmer climates: outdoor ice-skating rinks, sledding hills, and ice-carving festivals. Snow brings out the kid in all of us, so join in with your children as they build snowmen or snow forts. The Scandinavians even have a saying: “There’s no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing”!

READY, SET, GO!

Whatever you choose to do to make outdoor living a part of your natural life, start small. Don't try to conquer Mother Nature your first week stepping out. Try varied activities to discover what works best for you and your family, and where you find your greatest joy. When mishaps occur—and they will—address them and carry on. Don't let skinned knees, bee stings, or mosquitoes keep you

from living your life. You belong in nature as much as any other creature.

Be prepared for protests from your kids, but also be prepared to change your life for the better once you put the keystone principles into practice.

Here are a few ways to include active movement and nature engagement in your daily life:

- Park your car on the distant edge of parking lots during the day so you can walk a bit farther (avoid doing so at night if it might be dangerous). This tip comes from martial arts master Bruce Lee, who never parked near his destination. Sometimes my kids and I use the parking lot voyage to pretend we are jungle animals making our way to the store. We've even had teenagers join us!
- Get a jump rope, Hula-Hoop, and resistance stretch bands, and engage your family in competitions on the lawn. Who can jump rope the longest or has the funniest style on the Hula-Hoop? You'll have fun and get in shape. I can almost assure you of laughter and family bonding.
- Get a Fitbit (available for both kids and adults) that will let you know when you

need to move. Before I adopted the lifestyle of the centenarians, I was so unfit that after I ordered my own Fitbit online, the bank called to see if my credit card had been stolen! I took that call to mean it was time for me and my family to get moving.

- Got a phone with a camera? Or even an old-fashioned Polaroid camera? Older kids may like the idea of capturing wildlife through their lens. They can learn to capture great photos simply by being quiet, still, and observant while out in nature. They may even choose to enter their photos in one of the many contests, some with prize money, held by nature organizations, from the National Wildlife Federation to The Nature Conservancy.
- Are your kids learning how to spell? Try making the learning process active. Stand on one side of the yard and tell the kids it's a pretend lake or field of lava. Spread out rug squares or other objects to be "rocks" (or use real rocks if they are present) to help your kids cross the lava and have them jump to the next "rock" for every word correctly spelled.

- Need help enticing older kids outside? For teenagers, most everything is better with friends. Encourage them to invite their friends over to play basketball, ride bikes, or go for a local hike. Consider putting up a basketball hoop in the back or front yard (where it is safe from traffic) and watch the magic unfold as neighborhood kids—and your own—are drawn to it.
- If you have a dog, head outdoors with the kids and take them all for a brisk walk. If your kids are old enough, encourage them to hold the leash. And if you don't have a dog, consider getting one—it will keep everyone active and entertained.
- Planning a playdate or a visit with a neighborhood friend? Don't drive—walk to your destination. Once you arrive, spend time outdoors, playing kickball in the grass or making mud pies in the dirt.
- Put on upbeat music and dance with your children every day. Dancing during household chores (indoors and outdoors) makes the duty much more fun. King Julien's lyrics can motivate you while you clean up. Simply replace the lyrics “move it, move it”

with “wash it, wash it” or “dust it, dust it,” depending on your chore. Try singing with different accents. The lyrics work perfectly for housekeeping and yard work!

- Head to a nearby park and fly a kite, bat a balloon around, enjoy the playground, go for a short hike, or sled down a hill (with or without snow). Invite your friends. Have an adventure!
- Drive to another neighborhood for a walk. Pretend to be scientists studying a new ecosystem or anthropologists observing an exotic culture.
- Encourage your kids to build an outdoor fort. Supply old blankets, PVC piping, or anything else you have on hand, and let them get creative. Even better, have them use natural materials, such as tree branches and logs.
- Plan a farm “staycation” with your family. Search for locations online and take part in working on a farm. Many places allow younger children to get involved. It’s funny how doing chores at someone else’s house is considered a vacation, but it works to get everyone moving.

CONQUERING RESISTANCE

As you work on becoming more active and engaging nature, your family may experience a few challenges. Just remember:

Boredom is okay. Life outdoors is not always an adventure. While establishing an agenda will help you stick to it, don't worry about planning every detail for your kids. It's okay if they get bored outside. Boredom lets their minds relax and leads to creativity. When children whine, "I'm bored," tell them that's fine. You might even suggest they count the life-forms they can find; look for things of a specific color, texture, or shape; or just identify the sounds they hear.

Resist the urge to compete. Don't try to keep up with everyone else. Being active outdoors in nature should cost little to no money. You'll find the best items for digging and sorting lying around the house: pots and pans, muffin tins, or spoons. Use your imagination—and encourage your kids to use theirs.

Rethink how your kids are spending their time. If their schedules are filled with activities outside of school—additional classes, sports, other extracurriculars, and chores—consider making

changes to allow time for unstructured outdoor play. For example, if your child participates in two indoor after-school activities, consider dropping one. Or find everyday activities your family can enjoy outdoors—even eating outside at mealtime.

Finally, whatever you do outside, expect to get your hands dirty. Ditch the hand sanitizers—just wash with soap and water. We're made to get dirty; enjoy it!