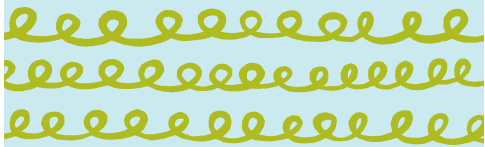


Early Foundations for Lifelong Health

a resource provided by
Way to Grow



Health is more than what you think it is. It is an ever-evolving state of mind and body, critical to our lives. When we are healthy, humans are more able to not only resist infection but also adapt to the challenges of everyday life, cope with adversity, and feel a sense of personal wellbeing. For children to grow into healthy adults, they must first learn to develop and nurture a healthy life—both physically and mentally. Beginning even before a child is born, parents lay the foundation for their child’s lifelong health.

Foundations of Health

Way to Grow has worked with thousands of families for over 25 years and we know that a strong start happens in a healthy home. We use the following foundations of health to guide our work with clients. With this knowledge in your parenting toolbox, you too can help ensure your child grows up healthy, ready to succeed in school and life.

HEALTHY PREGNANCY & BIRTH

A child’s healthy development begins with their mother’s wellbeing. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle during pregnancy helps strengthen the child’s developing biological systems, critical to their health before and after birth.

What you can do:

- Take extra care to monitor what you’re putting in your body during pregnancy. By increasing nutritious food and avoiding toxic substances like tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs, you can provide your developing child with the safe and nutritious environment they need.
- Minimize stress and seek out stress management tools like physical exercise, meditation, and a supportive community.
- Attend prenatal visits and connect with care services when necessary, including mental health and prenatal support.

STABLE, RESPONSIVE ENVIRONMENTS & RELATIONSHIPS

The community surrounding your child—family and surrounding support systems—deeply impacts their physical and mental health. Those relationships can be positive (nurturing and responsive) or negative (neglectful and abusive) influences on your child’s wellbeing. Children pay attention to everything and everyone they are exposed to, reading cues and signals of the adults around them from their earliest days of life.

What you can do:

- Children do not always know how to express themselves or their needs, but by stopping and responding thoughtfully

A leading advocate in early childhood learning for 28 years, Way to Grow empowers parents to be their children’s first and foremost teachers. Learn how you can help us do even more at waytogrow.org.

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Learn more about building resilience in your child at [apa.org/helpcenter/resilience.aspx](https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/resilience.aspx).

For more information on how you can create safe spaces for your child, visit [safekids.org](https://www.safekids.org) or talk to your child's pediatrician.

to your child, you show them they are valued and their wellbeing is important.

- Pay attention to who your child is exposed to and who you welcome into your network. Your child cannot easily distinguish between positive and negative relationships and so they will be impacted by every interaction they have. By surrounding your child with people who are responsive and nurturing, you can create a healthier foundation for your family—both physically and mentally.
- You cannot protect your child from all the negative influences in the world, but you can equip them with coping mechanisms to handle the ordinary ups and downs of life. Openly discuss emotions, practice problem solving and stress management skills, and reassure your child that you and other adults are there to help when needed.

SAFE & SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

A child's physical and mental health development requires safeguards against injury and exposure to danger, as well as a feeling of security and safety.

What you can do:

- Safeguard your home by keeping hazardous materials and dangerous objects out of reach. Implement safe sleep practices, properly install car seats, fit your child with a bike helmet, and make sure all doors, appliances, and stairways are made inaccessible to your child. It is also important to protect them from toxic substances in your home like lead (found in paint in older homes) or secondhand smoke.
- Safe neighborhoods, playgrounds, community centers, and other indoor and outdoor spaces are critical to the healthy development of your child. Whenever possible, allow your child to explore safe environments outside of your home.
- Support healthy community initiatives. The health of your community directly impacts the health of your family. Become educated and engaged in neighborhood issues such as pollution control and public safety.

APPROPRIATE NUTRITION

The long-term health of your child is shaped by the eating patterns established early in life. These behaviors are directly learned from adults and influenced by the nutritional landscape of your home.

What you can do:

- Make sure you have access to affordable, healthy food. Look for community gardens and farmers markets in your

neighborhood, and shop on the perimeters of grocery stores, where fresh produce and less-processed food can be found.

- Learn about nutritious age-appropriate foods, meal-planning, and portion sizes. As your child grows, the types of food they need and the amount they eat will change. Talk to your pediatrician about early nutrition and cooking for your child at every stage of their development.
- Explore new foods together as a family. Children can be picky eaters, but you can encourage healthy eating by exploring new foods, cooking meals together, and engaging your child in grocery shopping.

Prenatal care, nurturing environments, physical safety, and nutrition all deeply impact every child's development. We also know that a child who lives in a health-promoting environment and has positive early experiences will grow up to complete more years of school, have a higher-paying job, and live a healthier and longer life. As parents you have an important role in providing these foundational experiences for your child, but you do not have to do it alone. Use the support of your partner, family, friends, and greater community to help you create healthy environments for your child. Together we will make sure your child is set up for success.

Reference:

"Childhood Development: The Health Impact." *Way to Grow Home Visiting Curriculum*, 2013, pp. 20–42.