

# Cultivating Health and Wellness in Our Children: A Mindful Exchange

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*“There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children.  
One is roots; the other, wings.”*

- Hodding Carter

**E**ducation is a powerful tool in parenting and in making choices about health and wellness. As a naturopathic physician, I find it to be a foundational part of what I do with many parents as part of their child’s healthcare. Knowledge acts to empower and leaves less room for fear and the choices made out of fear rather than reason. Assisting parents in understanding health and wellness from a holistic, mindful approach will empower them to be proactive and preventative in their choices. Further, giving knowledge to children expands their own understanding of their health and empowers them to take an active role.

What makes a healthy child? Asking this question brings us to the many possible aspects contributing to a child’s health. Looking at this in terms of emotional, physical and psychological wellbeing reflects some of the possibilities. Perhaps it may be said that a state of wellness encompasses a healthy, able body; a happy heart; a soulful spirit, blessed with love and support in its environment; a curious mind; and a compassionate, mindful nature. Cultivating health and wellness in our children is an evolving web comprised of a potpourri of skills. As parents and as practitioners, providing the ideal conditions for the process of health to flourish in our young is at the top of our list.

The seeds of health and wellbeing for the child begin with a healthy mother and gestational period. The maternal uterine environment influences the growing fetus’s health on several levels, including physical development, emotional wellbeing and psy-

chological health. Children begin to develop preferences to flavors, music, voices and even stories while in the mother’s womb. The maternal environment consists of not only the mother’s state of physical health, but also her emotional state both day-to-day, as well as her emotional disposition; and her psychological mode of operating, her self-perception, how she perceives herself in her world.

## Creating a Healthy Foundation

Physical health and wellness is probably the easiest to approach as it can be measured by the presence or absence of illness, normal growth and development, and the body’s ability to perform normal physiological functions. Much of the groundwork is done during gestation and early childhood, making these periods especially important in the development of a healthy physical foundation. Healthy digestive function is a critical factor in overall physical health.

It is speculated that most of the growing sites for *Lactobacillus* species in the human gastrointestinal tract are established *in utero* and during the first two years of life. *Lactobacillus* species play an important role in digestive function, assimilation and absorption of vital nutrients, development of the immune system, healthy mucus membranes and skin. Infants have a sterile gut leaving the womb and are exposed to bacteria via the birth canal; the vagina, skin and meconium provide the starters for the gut flora. It takes up to two years for full colonization of the flora and maturity of the gastrointestinal tract.

There are many things in a child’s first two years that can interrupt proper colonization, including for-

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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mula feeding, breastfeeding, maternal diet and digestive health, food introduction and antibiotic use. Antibiotics disrupt normal flora growth and colonization. It is estimated that a course of antibiotics may disrupt normal flora colonization for up to three months post use.<sup>1</sup> If a child has been given several courses of antibiotics before the age of two, as is the case for many American children, the normal flora may be severely compromised, increasing the risk for common childhood illnesses. Recent research into the role of proflora and probiotics have shown some interesting results. The World Health Organization recognizes the importance of probiotics in the role of a healthy body as reflected in this statement, "Live microorganisms which, when given in adequate amounts, confer a health benefit on the host." Outcomes of several recent scientific studies have concurred, acknowledging the role of probiotics for a healthy immune system.

Many common illnesses affecting children can be treated with probiotics. Included in this list would be diarrhea, allergy, atopic dermatitis, sinus infections, ear infections, common cold, upper respiratory infections, colic, dental caries, urinary infection and IBS.<sup>2</sup> A Finnish study looked at the effect of *L. GG/rhamnosus* in reducing atopic disease in infants when administered to the pregnant mother in the third trimester of her pregnancy, during the breastfeeding period and to the infant. The occurrence of atopic disease dropped by 50% in the probiotic group and continued to stay low for the entire four years of the study without further supplementation of probiotics.<sup>3</sup> Several studies have looked at supplementation of children in day care centers with probiotics and the occurrence of URI, fever and GI infection. It was found that the probiotic supplemented groups had significantly less occurrence of infections.<sup>4,5</sup> Probiotics are believed to enhance mucosal immunity, stimulate

### Supplementing Probiotics

One can begin cultivating a child's health by cultivating healthy flora in the mother's digestive tract and vagina starting in pregnancy and continuing through the entire breastfeeding period. For non-breastfed babies, include probiotics in the formula daily.

Infants up to two yrs old, pregnant and breastfeeding mothers use *Bifidobacterium* species including *B.infantis*, *bifidum*, *breve*, *longum*, *lactis*. Look to give one billion to infants, 5 billion to children age 12 to 24 months and 20 billion daily to mothers.

Children two to five years old use 20 billion of the above strains along with adult strains, including *Lactobacillus* species including *rhamnosus (GG)*, *acidophilus*, *reuteri*.

local innate immunity, improve oral antigen tolerance and dietary metabolism.

Common symptoms an infant may present with which reflect disruption in health status include reflex, GERD, colic, cradle cap, seborrhea dermatitis, atopic dermatitis, restless sleep, irritability, insomnia, constipation, loose or smelly stool, asthma, URT congestion, diaper rash and copious ear wax. Regarding these signs as a measurement of the developing child's health can give the practitioner some insight. The infant's immature digestive system is not always equipped to deal with the foods it is interfacing with, allowing the infant's immune system to be overexposed at a time in which it is maturing and developing. This can start a cascade of events often leading to one of the symptoms listed above. Many of which can be avoided with proper maternal diet, good food introduction, good maternal digestive function and adequate probiotics for both



mother and baby. Some of the main contributing factors on the maternal front influencing a child's health during the pregnancy and breastfeeding stages include yeast infections, intestinal dysbiosis, chronic stress, chronic inflammation, environmental toxic exposure, zinc deficiency, medications, allergies, insufficient digestive enzymes, low fiber diet, immune overload from allergen exposure, leaky gut and chronic stress.

Creating a healthy maternal environment starting with the digestive tract can make an enormous difference in the quality of health of the child's immune system, digestive system, skin and normal growth patterns. Including substances for facilitating gut

### Facilitating Healthy GI Mucosa

*Ulmus fulva* (Slippery Elm bark), *Althea off.* (Marshmallow root), *Astragalus membranaceus* (Astragalus root), *Matricaria recutita* (Chamomile flowers), oats,<sup>6</sup> abrinogalactan,<sup>7</sup> green tea polyphenols,<sup>8</sup> cinnamon, *musa paradisiaca* (plantain fruit); also, chicory root, bananas, onion, garlic, and fermented foods including sauerkraut, tempeh, miso, yogurt, kefir, skyr, cottage cheese and kimchee.

wall healing, cultivation of probiotics and immune stabilization is of great importance, as is keeping the diet high in fiber to aid in creating a proflora friendly environment and a healthy bowel wall.

If the mother suffers from allergies, chronic skin rash, vaginal yeast infections, chronic respiratory congestion, leaky gut syndrome, irritable bowel syndrome, mal-digestion, GERD, poor bowel habits, environmental toxic exposure or chronic stress, supplementation may be needed to regain gastrointestinal health. Decreasing the contributing maternal factors that weaken the child's ability to colonize flora can be a great prevention of illness further down the line. Supplements to consider would include digestive enzymes, probiotics, fructoligosaccharides (FOS), folic acid, biotin, CoQ10, whey immunoglobulin, zinc,<sup>8</sup> glutamine, flavonoids and vitamins C, D and E.

Infant factors contributing towards rebuilding, restoring and maintaining good physiological health can be influenced by the maternal environment as discussed above and via the child directly. Two factors to consider when creating a treatment plan for an infant would be first the child's age, as this will determine the types of botanical preparations, herbs and dosage selected. It will also reflect the stage of gut maturity and development of the child. The second factor would be whether the baby is breastfeeding or not; again, a determining factor for mode of

delivery of medicines. A non-breasting infant would need to receive the therapeutics directly, as the breastfeed infant may receive them both directly and via the mother's milk.

Addressing the specific symptom picture for the infant, such as a presentation with skin rash, fluid in the middle ear or gastrointestinal discomfort; along with gut function and immune toning can move things along for the infant. Using proper food introduction so as to avoid exposing the child to food allergens in the diet by delaying introduction of high allergen foods such as gluten containing grains, soy, cows' milk products, eggs, citrus and some nuts. Introducing fruits and vegetable as the first foods for the initial three to five months of solids, followed by the introduction of non-gluten grains, some beans, nuts and seeds, sheep and goats products, grass-fed meats and eggs coming later. If the mother has a known food intolerance, that food should also be delayed in its introduction to the child's diet until at least one year of age. If the child's health picture is one that warrants the use of therapeutic supplementation of probiotics, digestive enzymes, vitamins, minerals or herbal medicines, they would be prescribed as necessary. The supplements mentioned for maternal therapeutic use can be used with the child as long as the dose is adjusted for age and weight.

### Cultivating the Spirited Child

Cultivating emotional, spiritual and psychological wellbeing in our children is an ongoing process happening in every moment in which we are engaged in our relationship with them and in which they are engaging with their own lives. The health of a child is influenced by many factors: family, community, peers, environment, tactile affection, education system, to mention only a few.

Many current educational systems are structured to develop cognitive dimensions of early development, but not the imaginal and creative aspects that make childhood so spiritually rich. Being playful, creative, cultivating imagination and spontaneity in our parenting and caregiving provides an important part of a healthy foundation for our children. Child psychologist Tobin Hart reminds us that children have spiritual lives filled with divine encounters and visions that adults all too often dismiss as fantasy. He holds that spirituality involves naturally occurring, direct experiences that originate from inside the child. Facilitating listening, self-expression, empathy, responsiveness and insight in a child's experience offers them the tools so that they may expand within.

I was recently sent a picture of a client at her fourth birthday. Gazing at her cake lit with candles, she stood surrounded by friends and family with the most

contented, peaceful look on her face. I was struck by her face as it held its angelic smile and lit up the room far brighter than the candles on the cake. In that moment she radiated such love, compassion and wellness that it made my lips smile and warmed my heart. Her picture calls to my mind the pure delight in which a child can see the magic of the moment; something many adults let slip by in the seriousness of adulthood. Julia Cameron states in her book *The Artist's Way: the Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, "The quality of life is in proportion, always, to the capacity for delight. The capacity for delight is the gift of paying attention." Whether at the sight of a birthday cake, a butterfly playing in the wind or the feeling of mud in their toes, children are experts at delight. We would do well to learn from our children as well; paying attention, using the power of intention and mindfulness in parenting may act to cultivate better quality of life and spiritual health in our children.

A child's relationship and exposure to nature and the natural world seems to provide avenues for development of important types of creative play, healthy development of the child's internal world, and a greater sense of wonder. Studies conducted across several countries on children in schoolyards with green areas verses manufactured play areas found that children engaged in more creative forms of play in the green areas.<sup>9</sup> Exposure to nature is now being explored as a therapy in the treatment of young children with ADHD and autism. In our modern world of technology, it is important to create the opportunity for our children to experience nature through interaction with the natural world, be it in the local park, the garden, summer camp, a camping trip, or exploring a beach or pond. Introducing a child

to the science and wonder of a tidal pool is better than any sci-fi movie I've ever seen. Bringing the natural world to the child's learning experience offers learning through all the senses, cultivation of creative imaginal play, a respect for nature and the earth we live on. Experiencing the nature world is a healthy activity for all ages, helping to enrich the relationship between parents and children, cultivating communication, creativity, health, and love for the entire family.

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