

PART 5

KEEPING YOUR CHILD HAPPY AND SAFE

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HEALTHY HABITS

If you follow healthy habits, your child will be motivated to adopt them too. By setting a good example in healthy living, you can play a major role in inculcating such habits in your child from an early age.

Keep the following 5 simple rules in mind for healthy and happy living:

- Adequate sleep
- Regular exercise
- Right type of food
- Personal hygiene
- Growing up in harmony with Nature

ADEQUATE SLEEP

In my practice, I see many children who present problems related to lack of sleep.

The typical story is that of a school going child who has to catch her school bus at 7.30 a.m. She sleeps at 11.30 p.m. and is made to get up at 6.45 a.m. There is a mad rush after that for everything — the toilet, the bath, and dressing. The bus is to arrive any moment. The mother hands her a glass of milk. She has a few sips and wants to leave the rest. The mother insists that she finish it. She attempts to and then vomits out everything. Such children are often brought to me for

vomiting every morning. Interestingly, a detailed history reveals that they do not vomit on holidays.

Other victims of inadequate sleep present problems of tiredness and lack of attention in school. Young school going children need 10 to 12 hours of sleep at night. Teenagers need 9 to 10 hours of sleep. The bedtime must be fixed, except perhaps during the holidays.

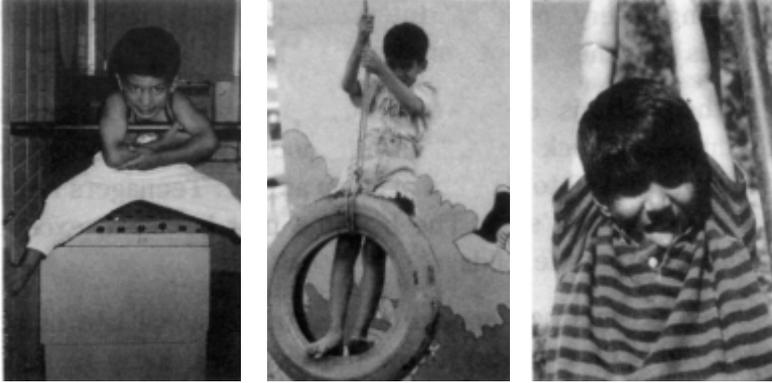
Even parents need enough sleep. An occasional late night is all right. Parents who follow the dictum of 'Early to bed, early to rise' set the right tone for healthy living. Children must be helped to go to bed early. Set an example for this healthy habit. Once you get used to the freshness of the early morning, you will never want to miss it.

REGULAR EXERCISE

Each cell of our body needs oxygen. Every muscle and joint needs movement. Inactivity leads to complications secondary to loss of calcium from bones and can give rise to various symptoms like general weakness, boredom and constipation. It has an adverse effect on the fluid balance inside our body and on the endocrinal as well as the muscular, skeletal, respiratory and cardiovascular systems. It can, of course, lead to problems like obesity with all its attendant risks.

Healthy parents exercise regularly and pass this habit on to their children. Moderate physical activity in the early years reduces the risk of heart disease later in life.

Exercise can take any form. Encourage the child to take part in sports like *kho-kho*, *kabbadi*, badminton, tennis, basketball, football, hockey, swimming, bicycle riding, etc. If children show an inclination, let them get involved in wrestling, judo, karate or athletics. Invite the child to join you on a brisk walk, jogging, or just going up and down the stairs of a high-rise building.



Healthy parents exercise regularly and pass this habit on to their children

THE RIGHT FOOD

Offer your child fruits and raw vegetables from an early age. Do not introduce her too early to fried foods and too sweet or too salty preparations made from refined flour or maida.

The best way to develop healthy food habits in children is to practise healthy habits yourself. Avoid the preparation of foods that you know are not healthy.

The list of unhealthy foods includes all cold drinks (especially colas), fast foods which have too much salt and saturated fat, cream biscuits, sweets, coffee, cakes, pastries, chewing gum and potato wafers. **According to an article in the *Journal of Pediatrics*, cola drinks appear to be strongly associated with calcium deficiency in children because of their high phosphorus content. Association of cola drinks with bone fractures has also been reported in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.**

As children grow, explain the difference between foods that are healthy and those that are not good for our system. If an older child insists, then let her have the so-called 'unhealthy' foods once in a while — say once a week. It is very likely that her friends are bringing such food to school from home, and being too rigid with an older child can backfire.

A child must be allowed to feed herself from an early age, even if she makes a mess. I have seen children aged 7 years being spoon-fed by their parents; this is not healthy. A healthy mind and an independent personality are even more important than a strong physique. Your child is likely to remain a spoon-fed baby, dependent on others, if you treat her as a baby for too long.

Do not give your child sweetened water. Give her plain water — without adding sugar — from an early age. In most Indian cities, it is necessary to boil drinking water. After it comes to a boil, let it keep boiling for at least 5 minutes. Incidentally, boiling water is a better proposition than using water filters. The best source of pure water is, of course, coconut water and the water contained in fresh fruits.

PERSONAL HYGIENE

Set a good example to help your child learn the principles of good hygiene from an early age. Since children often take a doctor's advice rather seriously, consider seeking the help of your doctor in this connection. Care of the skin, nails, teeth, eyes, hair and genital areas is essential. These are the vehicles for many infections.

Moderation Is The Key

Don't get obsessed with cleanliness. There is no need to wash all your child's toys every day or to clean the floor twice a day. Ideally, your baby should get some infections while she is still being breastfed. The protective umbrella of breast milk ensures that she develops antibodies against many infections that she acquires as an infant or as a toddler.

GROWING UP IN HARMONY WITH NATURE

Help your children develop an interest in Nature from an early age. Let them play with the mud, sand and water. Watch the stars on a clear night, a rainbow when rain alternates with

sunshine, and the changing hues of the sky when the sun is setting.

Yes, let your children learn to appreciate the beauty of Nature and its wonders. Take them to the planetarium. Help them appreciate the vastness of the universe. Make them understand the role of Nature in keeping us alive. It will help them develop respect for the quiet job done by the earthworms, the snakes, the birds and trees and all that they see around them.

Let your child know that, like sunlight, water is our other friend. Get her used to touching cold water. Bathing with very hot water is not advised even for newborn babies. If the water is cold, remove the chill by warming it a little. Gradually, let children get used to taking cold water baths.



Like sunlight, water is our other friend. Let your child get used to touching cold water.

FAMILY ISSUES

ADOPTION

For 20 years, I had the privilege to care for and provide medical relief to children in an orphanage. That also gave me the opportunity to share the joy of over 300 families whom I helped to adopt children from this orphanage and through adoption agencies like the Indian Association for Promotion of Adoption (IAPA) and the Family Service Centre.

Here I lay out information on the subject of adoption based on my personal experience, on Nilima Mehta's book (*Ours By Choice*, published by the author, 1992), and information provided by the IAPA.

To Adopt Or Not To Adopt?

A couple should never adopt a child unless both are keen to adopt. If you are considering adopting another child, besides your biological one, take your first child into confidence.

Private Adoption Or Adoption Through An Agency?

Always adopt through an adoption agency because these agencies employ men and women experienced in finding a child best suited to the prospective parents. They also ensure that the child you adopt is legally free for adoption.

Waiting Period

After the social worker has helped you with the completion of the documentation and the formalities, the time of waiting begins. The agency will locate a child suitable to and compatible with you; this may take anything between 3 to 6 months or even longer.

Do not be tempted to register with several agencies in the hope of getting a 'better' choice or a faster placement. The agencies have their own networking system whereby they co-ordinate with each other to locate a child suitable for you.

Is This Your Child?

If you have already pictured your child in your mind, share this image with the social worker; she will identify a baby who best matches your expectations and needs.

You will be provided with the birth history and social background of the child (but not the natural mother's identity, which is kept confidential as per the law), whenever it is available. The child's health profile will also be made available. Show the child to a paediatrician of your choice to confirm normal physical and mental development and to rule out any congenital disorder, if you like. The paediatrician will keep in mind that a child kept in an institution, though normal, may be below average when compared with one who gets constant individual attention from her biological parents. But I have seen that once the child starts getting individual attention from a loving adoptive family, she achieves her physical and mental milestones at an unbelievably rapid pace.

Legal Procedures And Costs Involved

When you have decided to adopt a particular child, a lawyer recommended by the agency or known to you will help you file all the relevant papers in court. After this, you can take the child home in pre-adoptive foster care.

You may be required to attend court when the case comes up for hearing. Then the lawyer will hand over the documents related to the adoption — the court decree, the Deed of Adoption (if relevant) and the child's birth affidavit — to you.

The costs involved are not exorbitant. The lawyer will charge his fees and the agency charges a reasonable fee for its services.

Are There Any Risks Involved In Adopting A Child?

Adoptive parents should be ready to take the same risks as natural parents do. In fact, adoptive parents have certain advantages — the choice of when to adopt, and the chance to check on the child's physical and mental normality. In comparison, biological parents take risks concerning their child's possible handicap(s).

How Will Heredity And Environment Shape The Future Of The Child?

Physical characteristics like the skin, hair and eye colour, height, etc. are determined by heredity, but it is the stimulating environment that the child grows up in that moulds and maximises her potential.

What About Illnesses?

Before adoption, certain tests are carried out to rule out the possible common illnesses that the child might have. The children are often underweight when brought home; some may have scabies, others lice, but these are problems that can be easily tackled.

When And How Does One Tell The Child About Her Adoption?

The process should first start with sharing your decision to adopt with your immediate relatives and close friends. As far

as the child is concerned, adoptive parents often successfully use stories of people like Sant Kabir (who was adopted) to initiate the revelation of her adoption to the child.

It is important that the child learns about her adoption from her adoptive parents rather than from an outsider. The information may be given to her around the age of 3 years; and certainly before she begins school.

Some agencies suggest the following response: "For a long time, we wanted a baby just like you. We were lonely and our house seemed empty. Then, a person who knew where there were some babies who wanted mummies and daddies, helped us find you. You were so lovable and beautiful, just as you are now. You were the very baby we wanted, so we brought you to your new home, to be our very own forever."

Telling a child about adoption is a gradual process. The most natural thing would be to give the child a big hug and kiss when you are happy and say: "We are so glad that we adopted you." This way the child begins to associate the word 'adoption' with love and a sense of belonging.

As the child grows older and learns how babies are born, an inevitable question is: "Mummy, was I also in your tummy?" If you say 'No', the child might ask: "Then whose tummy was I in, and why didn't she keep me?"

In most cases, the adoptive parents are not fully aware of the natural mother's reasons for relinquishment of her child, so here you could say: 'I don't know the real reason why she could not keep you, but I'm sure she had problems and couldn't look after you and wanted you to have a happy home.'

The child must be helped to understand that the woman whose tummy she was in gave her birth and that you are her 'real' mother now and for always — and that she is now part of your family. In this manner, she will develop a sense of belonging to you as your child.

A time comes in the life of some adopted children when they become restless and want to search for their roots and identity. They want to trace their biological parents. This is not possible in the Indian context, because adoption agencies have a sealed and confidential record system whereby there is no access to the relinquishment document and it remains a property of the court.

ALCOHOLISM

As a paediatrician, I have seen several families ruined due to alcoholism — usually in the father. Neither the rich nor the poor are spared. The children of such families are the worst sufferers. That observation has made me discuss this subject in these pages.

Should You Drink At All?

There have been suggestions that moderate drinking is good for health. This is also reported in the *Consumer Reports On Health*, published by the Consumers Union in the United States of America. I suggest that you read the following carefully and then decide for yourself if moderate drinking is good for you.

Studies have shown that those who drink moderately — 1 drink a day for women and 2 for men — have 20% to 40% less risk of developing coronary disease than non-drinkers. (One drink equals 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine or 1½ ounces of 80-proof liquor.) However, the reduction in this particular risk is comparable to what you might gain from a low fat diet.

Potential Risks Of Moderate Drinking

- **Breast cancer:** New studies indicate that even moderate drinking may raise the risk of breast cancer significantly more than was previously believed.
- **Addiction:** New drinkers who are impressed by the reduced risk of coronary disease due to moderate drinking

may not be able to keep their drinking in control and may become victims of immoderate drinking as given below.

- **Accidents:** The risk of dying from accidents or violence is up to 40% higher in moderate drinkers than in abstainers.
- **Other diseases:** Moderate drinking may increase the risk of cirrhosis of the liver and cancer of the mouth, throat, larynx, oesophagus and liver.
- **Danger during pregnancy and breastfeeding:** Some studies suggest that having as little as one drink a day during pregnancy may increase the chance of miscarriage, slightly lower birth weight, cognitive and behavioural problems, or minor physical defects in the baby.
- **Extra risk in certain individuals:** Do not even think about starting to drink if you have a family history of alcoholism or depression, a personal history of anxiety, depression, or dependency on a medication, or the slightest doubt about your own self-control.

The Age Factor

The earlier one starts drinking, the greater is the risk, both of starting to drink heavily and of eventually developing an alcohol-related disease.

Risks Of Immoderate Drinking

Immoderate drinking can harm rather than protect the heart by raising the blood pressure, weakening the heart muscles, and triggering abnormal cardiac rhythms. Excessive drinking increases the risk of breast cancer even more than moderate drinking does.

The biggest sufferers — besides the person who drinks in an immoderate manner — are the other family members. I have come across many instances of men battering their wives and children following immoderate drinking. It leads to shame, social isolation, economic loss, debts, antisocial

activities and divorce. Children suffer from severe anxiety and fear. The whole family's life gets disorganised.

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Child Sexual Abuse Is Not Only A Western Phenomenon

Sexual abuse of children is being increasingly reported from India. More cases have come to light from the cities, but I do not think it is just an urban phenomenon, it seems that cases from the rural areas often go unreported.

Boys As Well As Girls Can Be Victims Of Sexual Abuse

Male as well as female children can be sexually abused. Of course, it is more common with female children. I mentioned the male child as well because I once saw a case of syphilis affecting the anal region of a boy due to sexual abuse by a neighbour. Some people also have a wrong notion that having sex with a virgin will cure venereal disease, and therefore prey on young children.

Guidelines For Parents

I would not like to scare parents to such an extent that they start overprotecting their children and in the bargain, make children mistrust all adults around them.

Sometimes, it is just the curiosity of a boy or hormonal changes in a teenager that may have led to such an episode. Possibly, there was no intention to sexually abuse the other person. But all boys and girls must be made to understand that it is not right.

The moment children enter school, they should be told that certain parts of their body are 'private' and that others have no business to touch or play with them.

The issue of the possibility of sexual abuse should be discussed in a casual way in the presence of the child. An

incident that has appeared in a local newspaper, magazine or a journal could be used to bring up the issue.

Let the parents create an atmosphere in which a child feels free to report to them if anything like this happens. The parents should then listen sympathetically and follow up the case. The child should not be made to feel guilty or unduly fearful whereby she stops reporting to the parents in the future.

Sometimes, the person who abuses the child will brainwash her in such a way that the child will not be able to tell her parents. Very often, it is a family friend or a relative who is the culprit; though it can also be a complete stranger.

I encourage the custom in certain families where a grown-up brother or sister, and grown-up children and parents are not allowed to sleep in the same room. Also, as far as possible, children should not be left alone with servants. Movies, books and magazines that tend to titillate should be avoided.

Sexual abuse should be suspected if one finds a sudden change in the child's behaviour. The child may become withdrawn or may show aggressive behaviour. She may start bed-wetting or start masturbating excessively. She may seem afraid of meeting new people and feel insecure in the absence of her parents.

Seek the help of your doctor or a family counsellor if you have any suspicion that your child is being sexually abused. A book and reference guide on the subject is *Bitter Chocolate: Child Sexual Abuse In India*. Written by Pinki Virani, *Bitter Chocolate* records the testimonies of the police, doctors, child psychologists, mental health professionals, social workers, lawyers and traumatised victims themselves.

Helping Children In Need

If you sense that a child — any child — is being abused, whether sexually or otherwise, call your local Childline at the

number 1098, throughout India. Childline began in 1996 as a 24-hour phone service for children in need, and it is today run through a network of non-governmental organisations in 14 cities.

DEATH

Children usually develop an idea of the concept of death between the ages of 5 and 9 years. The death of a member of the family (a relative or a pet) or a friend; the television, movies or stories; religious influences and reactions of adults at home when a close one dies, all contribute to influence the child's concept of death.

Do not evade questions about death. Help your child to know that death is an inevitable part of life's journey. That we get upset when we lose something, or that we weep when a person dear to us dies need not be considered a sign of weakness. Similarly, anxiety about the future, feelings of guilt that we probably did not give our best to the one who has left us, or anger at the doctors who attended the patient are common reactions.

A child may show undue anxiety and fear, with restlessness, loss of appetite and difficulty in going to sleep. Some children may believe that they caused the death — by their bad behaviour in general and lack of respect. The child may also show no sign of grief if she was not attached to the bereaved; don't let this upset you. The important point is to accept the child's reaction as natural and respect it.

Should a child be taken to a funeral or to the burial grounds? Personally, I am for it if a child of school going age is keen on it. Keep someone in charge of the child; she should be brought back home if what she sees unduly upsets her. Children are less likely to be disturbed if they are prepared in advance about what they are likely to see at the time of burial or cremation.

A child may ask about what happens after death or where one goes. Follow your instinct when you answer, but never tell the child that bad people go to *narak* or hell. In some families, children are told that the person who has died has gone to be with God; tell your child this if you are comfortable with it. Soon, more questions may follow; ask a counsellor for help if you feel inadequate to answer them.

Terminally Ill Children

It is important that the parents be allowed to stay with a terminally ill child. Contact the Make-A-Wish Foundation if your child has a particular desire she would like fulfilled; ask your doctor or hospital counsellor about this.

Answer her questions honestly. And let her know that you will always love her — even when she is no longer with you.

DIVORCE

Parents who are either considering a divorce or have already divorced sometimes consult me about the possible adverse effects of the separation on their children. These children can become withdrawn. Their school performance may suffer. Some of them may feel guilty — they may wrongly believe that they were responsible for the rift between their parents. They can develop a strong bitterness against one or both the parents. Physical problems related to emotional disturbances may emerge. Fear may overwhelm the children. They may be afraid of losing the parent to whom they are more attached. They may even worry that the parent in whose custody they are now may marry again and that the new person in their lives — the stepparent — may not give them the love and security that they seek.

Some children quietly pray that the parents may come together again. When they notice that this is not happening, they start having behavioural problems. The insecurity of the early years may have a permanent effect on these children's

personalities and it may influence their own parenting skills later in life.

On the other hand, divorce may bring the children closer to other members of an extended family like uncles, aunts or grandparents.

For these reasons, carefully consider your decision to divorce. It is difficult to forget the hurts caused by one's partner, but it is possible — though not always easy — to forgive.

Do Prepare For Divorce If That Seems To Be The Right Option

Here I must quote a few beautiful lines from a song in the Hindi film 'Gumrah'.

*Taluq Bojh Ban Jai To Uska Chodna Acha,
Voh Afsana Jise Anjam Tak Lana Na Ho Mumkin,
Use Ek Khubsurat Mod Dekar, Chodna Acha.*

(When the relationship becomes a burden, it may be wise to quit. Let the story which cannot be brought to its logical end be given a beautiful twist and left alone).

Certainly a distinction must be made between a real burden and day-to-day problems. Sometimes, problems and difficulties in life help us grow. But if the relationship leads to the stunting of our growth, it may be time to end it.

Daily fights between parents can also adversely affect the growth of the children and can inflict wounds that may be difficult, or even impossible to heal. In such a situation, it may be right to prepare for a divorce.

Once the decision to file for divorce has been made, it is important to sit with your partner to discuss how you can part as friends rather than enemies and how you can minimise the effects your divorce can have on the lives of your children.

Take the help of a common trustworthy friend or your child's paediatrician if the situation is not amicable.

PET ANIMALS

I am in favour of children having a pet, provided you can organise the care that it requires. Therefore, discuss the subject with the family and even your doctor before you bring a pet home. Your doctor should be consulted because the hair of some animals can lead to attacks of asthma in those having a family history of asthma or other allergic disorders. The size of your living accommodation should also be considered before you take a final decision about the type of pet you should own.

A pet can help a child to learn to give and to receive love. Looking after a pet will also teach your child to assume responsibility for the care of another. A pet can also be a good companion for an only child or a child having chronic medical problems.



A pet can help a child to learn to give and to receive love

REMARRIAGE AND STEP-PARENTS

There is no doubt that those belonging to step-families are likely to have problems in adjusting with each other. But then adjustment is needed in all human relationships. I have seen both happily adjusted step-families and unhappy birth families and vice versa.

Some preparation is essential before a parent marries again. Children, especially older ones, must be taken into confidence. The single parent can explain to the children that, in spite of all possible efforts, it has not been possible for a lone parent to give them the best care. The parent can also honestly express his or her own need to have a companion.

The prospective parent can be introduced to the children before marriage. It is important to explain to them that their daddy or mummy was different from the would-be step-parent, who is also a good person.

When the step-family starts living under the same roof, the new person in the family should be ready to face opposition or even accusations.

Discipline should be left to the children's birth parent. If the step-parent treats the children with respect and understanding, the children start appreciating that. This should be enough to break the ice and the children may start coming closer to the step-parent.

The step-parent may also find out about the hobbies that the children have. He or she should encourage them to pursue the same. If the child likes to swim, they can all go together. The family may go out on a picnic to have fun together.

If the new couple have children of their own, the parents need to handle the situation even more sensitively. If one of the parents is divorced, the children should be allowed to visit the other parent.

As days pass, patience, understanding and a sense of humour can help step-families become united.

If parents also take time to care for the less fortunate people in the community, children may join them in such healthy activities, making the process of integration easier and smoother.

TWINS

If you have twins and you want a small family, you might as well decide not to have any more children, your chances of having twins again are higher compared to other mothers who did not have them.



If you have twins, your chances of having twins again are high

Prepare In Advance

Your doctor will be able to tell you when you are pregnant if you are heading for twins. You and your family should mentally and physically get ready to receive them. You will need extra help, especially if you already have another child.

Read about breastfeeding twins. With a little support, most mothers have no problem breastfeeding their twins.

Management

Elsewhere in this book, I have said, “Treat every child as a royal soul”. This is especially important in the case of twins, and more so if they are identical. They may develop such an affinity with each other that they may not mix with other children. While you should be pleased that they like each other, let them develop their own individualities.

Discuss their schooling with the teacher. Let them be placed in separate divisions in school.

WORKING WOMEN

All women work — whether at unremunerated household work or paid employment outside the home. Mothers play multiple roles in childbearing, child-rearing and house-keeping be appreciated.

Working Outside The Home

A woman who works outside the home deserves special mention. While she is happy to be a homemaker and wants to continue to play that role, she may also need to work for economic reasons or to satisfy her personal aspirations. It is the responsibility of her family as well as that of the employer to support her so that she can function efficiently and happily. For this to happen, more awareness needs to be created about such matters with the participation of men and women.

Working — And Pregnant — Women

A large study involving nearly 16,000 women in 17 European countries has shown that well-educated women who work in psychologically demanding professions are 40% more likely to give birth prematurely.

The study warns pregnant women not to strain and push themselves to the limit. They should also find time to relax.

Are Men Ready To Pitch In?

Earlier, the average Indian husband wanted his wife to stay at home. Reluctantly, he may have agreed to let her go out to work. But when they both came home equally tired, he still expected his wife to give him a hot meal cooked by her or under her supervision. He did not help her in the household chores. He also expected that his wife would meet all the needs of their children.

Fortunately, this scenario is changing. A Mumbai evening paper carried an article by Firdaus Ali about fathers who wanted to participate in the process and experience of bringing up a child. The gentlemen interviewed did not shy away from playing substitute mother, while their wives worked. All the fathers were “enjoying teaching, discussing, playing and perhaps reliving their own childhoods... New thoughts, ideas, innovations are some of the gifts growing children impart to their fathers,” wrote Ali.

Reveals Dr. Rajesh Parekh, who shares the joys of watching his three children grow while his wife Dr. Firdaus Parekh is busy at the Jaslok Hospital Infertility Clinic: “We have adjusted our timings in such a way that we spend more time with the kids.” Children too, benefit from watching their parents share the responsibility of their care. Dr. Parekh explains: “They develop respect for both sexes. And since there is no hierarchy within their family, they would make far more democratic adults in the future.”

Ten Helpful Points For A Mother Who Is Considering The Option Of Working Outside The Home:

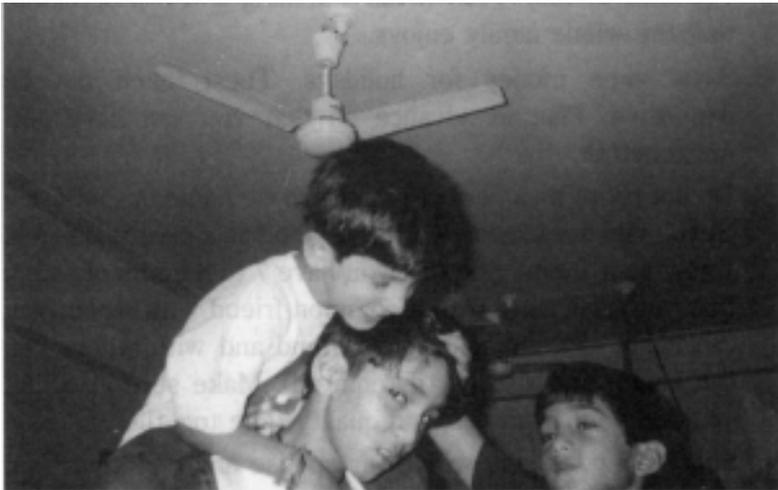
1. If financial constraint is not the limiting factor, stay with your child most of the time in the first 3 years of life. Even older children miss Mom if she is not around. They need her, not only to listen to their woes but also to share their joys.

2. Take a part-time job.
3. Work from home.
4. See that you have a proper person to look after your child in your absence. It could be your husband, your mother or mother-in-law, some other relative or a paid caretaker.
5. Discuss with your husband if he may be able to adjust his work timings in order to help out with the child.
6. Make sure that some person is at home when the child returns from school. Some employers may allow you to start work early and leave early so that you can be at home to receive your child. If it is not possible on a particular day, leave a note for the child with the other attendant(s) as to why you could not be present. Talk to her on the phone. It is not a good idea to allow a child to come home to an empty home; she is likely to feel insecure and get into bad company.
7. Do things together as a family whenever possible. See that you have at least one meal together. Spend more time talking to each other or playing simple games together. It may even mean watching a TV programme that the whole family enjoys.
8. Save some money for holidays. These need not be expensive. Plan in advance so that you can have real fun together.
9. Do not try to be a perfect parent whose home is spotlessly clean, who does social work and who has a prestigious job. Know your limits. See that you have 7 to 8 hours of sleep; that you have time with a common friend with whom you can share everything on your mind and with whom you can laugh (and also cry if required). Make sure also that you and your spouse spend quality time together.
10. Share your feelings with your spouse and children. Find out how everyone can share the responsibility of carrying out household chores.

PREVENTION OF ACCIDENTS

Most Accidents Can Be Prevented

I do not like the dictionary definition of an accident being an unexpected event or an event that happens by chance. It is true that sometimes an accident can take place in spite of all precautions taken by us, but this is not usually the case. An accident is often a harmful event that could be avoided by a little careful thought.



Accidents do not always happen by accident. This child did get a head injury from a moving fan on another occasion

Follow The Basic Rules Of Road And Automobile Safety

Teach your child the safety rules to be observed while crossing the road. Some cities are fortunate to have classes



Letting a baby sit in the front seat of the car is risky. Avoid it.

for school children run by the traffic police in specially designed parks for road safety. Mumbai has such a facility. Take advantage of such facilities. Train your child never to leave your hand and cross the street. Do not allow your child to ride a bicycle without first briefing her on road sense, rules and responsibility.

Wearing a seat belt can dramatically improve a child's chances of survival in a car accident. Seat belts in most Indian cars are unsuitable for small children. For this specific reason, never let your child sit in the front seat of a car. And make sure you lead by example. Always fasten your own seat belt.

Never let your child put her hand or head out of the window. Irreparable damage may result.

Make sure your child is wearing a helmet if she is on your two-wheeler. Also put a helmet on her if she is riding a horse.



A carrier is a good investment

Do not drive with your toddler in your lap. Do not be tempted to pile your whole family onto a single two-wheeler. I was once forced to draw the attention of a scooter driver to the fact that his 3-year-old daughter, clutching his waist, was half-asleep.

Do not let yourself be distracted on the road. According to a report in 1999, cellular phones in the US accounted for 984 automobile collisions, 2 deaths and 317 injuries each day.

When you go out, use a carrier that straps your baby to your chest or your hip. Till you get a carrier, learn how to use a shawl or a thick cloth sheet to serve the same purpose. Many mothers in the hill areas of our country use this simple device with great ease.

BURNS

In children, the common causes of burns are spilling of hot water, oil or other liquids, crackers, fire from a stove or any other source, and electricity.

All of us need to be careful about placing stoves or heaters on a platform at home, out of our children's reach.

Diwali Dangers

In general, I am against crackers. However, I appreciate parents who help the child buy the right type of crackers and allow them to play with them under supervision.

Burning oil lamps and candles are other sources of burns during Diwali.

The Loss Prevention Association of India offers useful suggestions to minimise deaths and injuries due to fireworks.

- Buy fireworks from authorised/licensed dealers. Make sure the packet is intact and instructions for use are printed clearly.
- Have an adult around when children are handling fireworks.
- Never light fireworks inside the house or in confined spaces. Use open, clear grounds, away from congested localities.
- Do not bend over fireworks — light them from the side. Move away quickly once they are lit and do not return to them. They may explode in your face.
- Never throw lighted fireworks. You may injure a bystander.
- Wear close-fitting cotton clothes.
- Keep a first aid box and cold water handy.
- Pour water in case of burns. Do not smear ointment, butter, ghee, grease or any other oily substance on wounds. If the burns are serious, see a doctor.

Make Your Home Safer

While an electric heater or immersion rod (to heat water) are convenient appliances, they can prove very hazardous to a small child in the house. Bare electric wires, an electric iron, and open electric sockets placed within the reach of a crawling infant or toddler can be very dangerous.

Go about your house to see how you can prevent accidents waiting to happen.

- Do you see matchsticks lying around?
- Do you have a fire extinguisher in the kitchen? Make sure all adults at home and older children know how to use it. Has it been tested lately to ensure it is in good working condition?
- Do you have tablecloths on your table that a toddler can pull at and have a full teapot or hot dishes come down on her?
- Do you smoke in bed, or in the presence of children?
- Do you hold your child while sipping hot tea or while boiling water in the kitchen?
- Have you told your children what to do if there is a fire in the house or in the building?

The point that I am making is that you can anticipate danger in order to minimise the risk of burns.

Teach children what to do in the case of fire as soon as they are old enough to understand.

- They must crawl towards the exit if there is smoke in the room.
- They must never take the elevator (lift) if there is a fire in the building.
- **They should not run if their clothes catch fire. Instead, they should be trained to stop, drop and roll on the ground. Remember — stop, drop and roll.**

Lightning Strikes

Also train your child about the dangers of lightning. Approximately a third of all lightning strikes are fatal. Deep burns, brain injury and cardiac or respiratory arrest can arise from lightning. To prevent the same, teach your child not to take refuge near hilltops, riverbanks, hedges, telephone poles and trees during a big thunderstorm.

Instead, the safest shelter is a closed home, while a closed automobile, cave, ditch or even lying on the ground, curled up with hands pulled in together, are relatively secure.

POISONING

Only you can determine whether or not your child will be in danger from improperly stored medicines and poisonous items like insecticides, kerosene, acid for use in the bathroom, and drugs. Nurses are trained to read the label of a medicine 3 times before giving it to a patient. Let us learn this principle from them.

Lead Poisoning

Children can be victims of lead poisoning if they eat wall scrapings or chew on furniture having unsafe amounts of lead in the paint or if they have toys painted with similar unsafe material. *Surma* applied to the eye may also have lead in it. Lead poisoning can cause anaemia and brain damage. Most paints, especially those of yellow colour, have a dangerous amount of lead. White paints are relatively safer.

ACCIDENTS AT HOME

Careful planning in the placement of furniture can prevent many of the accidents that involve children falling out of windows and from balconies. Never play with babies or children near open windows, on balconies or terraces. Also ensure that you have grills or bars installed on all window frames, and that the child's head and neck cannot get stuck in them.

Make sure that proper guards restrict access to the stairs till the child is able to navigate them safely.

Children playing 'hide-and-peek' should not be allowed to hide in open cupboards lest they lock themselves in.

Door handles of bathrooms should be at a higher level so that a small child cannot lock herself in.

DROWNING

It goes without saying that you should not take children to beaches that have been declared unsafe — like Aksa beach in Mumbai.

But more positively, take the time to teach your child to swim, or to make sure that she is well versed with the need to wear a life jacket when she enters the water or goes on a boat ride. It makes sense to carry your own if the boating facility does not provide it. Young children can also drown in bathtubs and in stored water which is kept uncovered. Never leave an infant alone with even a bucketful of water; she may put her head into it and 'drown' herself. Keep wells in and around the house covered. Make sure that lifeguards are always on duty at private swimming areas or pools. A child below 3 years should not be allowed to learn swimming. He can play with his parents in the water.



Safety device in place during a boat ride

DOG BITE

If you are a dog lover, you must have made sure that your dog is regularly vaccinated against rabies and other diseases as advised by your doctor. But what about the stray dog which is seen around your building? Have you made sure that, that dog is also vaccinated? Have your children learnt to stay away from stray dogs and not to tease them or hit them?

INJURIES FROM SHARP OBJECTS AND DOORS

Children are often inspired by teleserials like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat* to play with bows and arrows, which can lead to major eye injuries. Some toy guns available in the market also release dangerous projectiles.

Sometimes, we do not realise that sharp objects like knives, scissors and blades lying around the house can be dangerous for our kids.

Also be careful while closing and opening room doors or car doors. Severe injuries can be caused to fingers being caught between doors if we are not cautious enough.

SUFFOCATION

Plastic shopping bags lying around the house can prove hazardous. An infant or a toddler playing with a bag may put it on his head and then not be able to remove it. Small children can also choke on the scraps of balloons that have burst. Peanuts, tamarind (*imli*) seeds, buttons and beads are often aspirated by unwary infants and toddlers or get pushed into their nostrils. A child may also choke on a thin, raw carrot that he has bitten off. Never allow a toddler to have foods like nuts while he is playing, talking, laughing or running around because he is more likely to choke on them.

There is also a possibility of suffocation when a child tries to put a rope around another's neck, or when he tries to wear a tie around his own.

Infants do not need pillows to make their heads rounded or for any other reason. If you want to raise a child's head, put the pillow under the mattress. I am in favour of small infants sleeping with the parents. I have never seen a baby crushed because of this. However, if the mother is drowsy because of some drug or alcohol, then the child should not be made to sleep with her.

May I also add that I am against an umbrella-type device to protect an infant from mosquito bites, because this may close automatically and suffocate the child. A net covering the whole bed is preferable.

SWALLOWING UNDESIRABLE OBJECTS

Smaller children should not be allowed to handle coins and small objects like safety pins and needles. Small, round objects without sharp edges may smoothly pass out of the stomach and intestines, but others may get stuck and cause problems.

UNSAFE TOYS

Infants and toddlers should not be allowed to play with games or toys having small parts that they can swallow or aspirate. Some parts of Lego, for instance, may not be safe. Watch out also for stuffed toys with buttons used for the eyes or the nose, which can get detached and be swallowed. Toys with sharp edges could cause injury. Even expensive toys may not always be safe.

Only toys that meet the Bureau of Indian Standards specifications should be available for sale. I have noticed that toys made by village craftsmen from unpainted wood or mud are often (though not always) quite safe.

Flying kites is fun, but quite a few children cut their fingers (or even neck) on the sharp thread used for flying the kite. Similarly, it is not uncommon to see children forgetting all safety measures while running around in a

street or on a terrace to catch a kite. Caution your child against this.

I am against ‘walkers’; they are not good for the sequential development of the child’s milestones and can also result in serious injuries.

ACT BUT DO NOT PANIC

If you are at the scene of a road accident, rush the patient to the nearest hospital. A course in first aid is helpful to revive a child who stops breathing or to know exactly what precautions to take while transporting the patient to the hospital. Go to the casualty department of the hospital.

ACCIDENT-PRONE CHILDREN

Some children (and I would say even some adults) are more prone than others to get involved in all sorts of accidents. Similarly, there are children who have the habit of putting everything into their mouth. All such children need extra attention, to ensure prevention of accidents.

The persistently hyperactive child or the child prone to attacks of epilepsy should also be kept under supervision in special circumstances, when there could be the possibility of an accident. For instance, a child with epilepsy can go swimming, but only under the watchful eye of a guide or his parents.

LEARNING FROM ACCIDENTS

Parents who allow their child to touch a hot object and yet make sure that he does not harm himself in this process are educating him about prevention of accidents. Parents who let a child climb a tree after having made sure that he is old enough to do it and that the branches of the tree are strong are giving the child confidence to learn new activities. But a child who is suddenly pushed into water to learn swimming may remain afraid of water throughout his life. No purpose is served by it. It may do permanent harm to his psyche.

KEEPING CHILDREN ENTERTAINED

All of us like to be entertained. Children are no exception. A month-old child enjoys hearing some soft, recorded music or a lullaby sung by her parents or someone else. A 2-month-old looks at her mother and waits to be entertained by a broad smile in response to her overture.

A father and child laugh together, share a joke, fly a kite or build sandcastles on the beach, have a bath together, read a storybook, ‘fool’ around with each other — these are all good examples of entertainment that does not cost much.

Spending time together in such pursuits helps the child enjoy the company of her parents, to come closer to them, to feel more free to share her problems with them if need be, and to grow to become a happy and healthy individual.

HOBBIES

Hobbies provide children with a good means of self-expression. A hobby does not interfere with a child’s studies unless she starts spending too much time on it at the cost of her schoolwork. Don’t force your child to take up a particular hobby. Expose her to different possible hobbies and help her pick according to her aptitude.

If your child shows an interest in dramatics or crafts, help her join a summer camp that has a theatre workshop.



Hobbies provide children with a good means of self-expression

In Mumbai, Prithvi Theatre and the National Centre for Performing Arts conduct these. At the Prithvi Theatre, children from 9 to 16 years of age can join. Nehru Centre in Mumbai also organises the Kaleidoscope summer camps for the 5 to 15 age group. Most big cities provide some such activity for younger children. If not, parents of a particular school can themselves take the initiative to start something similar in the school.

Among the hobbies which children can pursue are music, dance, gymnastics, sports, painting, swimming, martial arts like karate and judo, reading, nature study, bird-watching, astronomy, yoga, photography, chess, stamp collection or growing plants in a garden or in a terrarium.

TOYS

Basic Principles To Be Followed While Selecting Toys

- Choose toys appropriate to your child's age and physical development.

- Make sure that the toys are safe (see chapter on PREVENTION OF ACCIDENTS).
- Toys need not be expensive.
- Toys should not make too much noise.

Below The Age Of 3 Months:

At one month, a child enjoys watching a moving object with bright and different colours within a distance of about 30 cms. (12 inches). So a mobile to be hung above her crib is an investment worth making. Some of these toys also play music.

After she crosses the 3-month mark, the same mobile can be hung up elsewhere. Music — from a tape recorder or a music box — may also be played, but make sure it is soft.

Between 3 And 6 Months:

A child likes to look into a mirror at this age. She loves music. You can now let her handle a rattle. Light, plastic rattles with rather big ends are preferable to expensive silver rattles



Colourful nursery toys can be hung on baby's crib

with smaller ends. Colourful posters and soft toys are added attractions.

Between 6 And 12 Months:

While your baby will still show interest in her older toys, now is also the time for floating toys, wooden blocks, magazines and cardboard books with bright pictures, balls, squeezey toys, a spoon and a cup or a saucepan, cars, buses and trucks, pushalong toys, a rubber hammer and a toy telephone. At this age, children also love to play 'peek-a-boo' with older people.

Between 1 And 2 Years:

Hardbound picture books with stories, blocks, wooden animals, dolls, teddy bears, buckets and spades, vehicles, simple jigsaw puzzles and bottles and boxes of different sizes are popular with children in this age group.

Between 2 And 3 Years:

Crayons and papers, plasticine, a handbag, a toy cooker or a tea set, large wooden beads to string, playing with sand, playing ball with others and riding a tricycle interest children. At this age, they like to build castles in the sand, dress up dolls, and pour water into containers.

Between 3 And 4 Years:

To the fleet of vehicles may now be added an ambulance, fire engine, airplane and scooter. Model animals, garden tools, a rope ladder, masks, a model village or a housing colony would interest the child. An easel may be given to a child who shows an interest in colouring.

At this age, children exhibit a vivid imagination. They will imagine the presence of people who are not around. They may like to play at being mummy and daddy, or doctor and patient.

Between 4 And 5 Years:

Table games with dice (ludo and snakes & ladders), and carrom start interesting the child. Give them material to draw and paint. Allow them to have scissors with round edges and old newspapers to cut. Let them make models of chairs or tables with plasticine or play dough.

Between 5 And 6 Years:

Spinning toys are favourites at this age. A skipping rope may also be introduced. A child can be given a thick needle and thread.

Between 6 And 7 Years:

A child may like to ride a bicycle or to join you or his friends in kite flying.

Keep It Simple

Toys are increasingly becoming sophisticated and high tech. Multinational companies are entering the market, and your child can probably have the same toy as his cousin in New York. Keep in mind, however, that while some of these are engineered to stimulate your child's skills, others may just be trendy. In exchanging the simple toys that were once de rigueur in our lives for automatons, our children may be losing out on the joy of constructing imaginary surroundings with traditional toys.

NOISE POLLUTION

Because we know that excessive noise is injurious to health, we should remember that we add to noise pollution when we buy our child noisy toys. Add to this the noise produced by certain firecrackers, marriage bands and loudspeakers during the festival seasons and *jagratas*.

If you can't talk to people 2 metres away in a party, then the background noise level is dangerous. Young

people visiting a nightclub should be advised to take regular breaks from the dance floor, and to stand away from the speakers. Choose restaurants with tablecloths on the table and soft furnishings on the walls.

Loss of hearing due to noise is now well established. There is also evidence to indicate that noise may endanger overall health as well.

TELEVISION

Should Children Be Allowed To Watch TV?

Whether we like it or not, television has come to stay. Also, some of the programmes on sports, travel, music and science are quite educative. Keeping this in mind, I suggest that you stick to intelligent rationed viewing for yourself as well as for your child.

The Ill-Effects Of Television

Shital Shethi raises the issue of television viewing in *Indian Pediatrics*, the official journal of the Indian Academy of Pediatrics. Quoting experts like Zuckerman, Suckerman, Forman, Kerschbaum and Schor, she points out that television displaces reading, outdoor play time and hobbies, increases aggressive behaviour and acceptance of violence, results in difficulty in distinguishing between reality and fantasy, distorts perception of reality in relation to consumerism and violence, trivialises sex and sexuality, has a negative effect on cognitive learning, and increases passivity.

Wrote Arvind Kala in *Mid-day*, "TV watching causes a communication breakdown in families. See a family of 4 before a TV set, for example. The wife wants to see a soap, the husband wants BBC, the son wants Prime Sports, the daughter wants Channel [V], and everybody wants the remote. How can conversation even begin in such a context?"

It is not uncommon to see young children watching television for hours, and munching junk foods. Add to this a life without exercise and sports and you have a fat child with all the attendant risks of obesity.

And what about commercials? They can definitely lead to bad eating habits and undue demands on parents.

A Balanced Approach

I recommend the following guidelines to parents:

- Restrict TV viewing to 1 hour during school days and 2 hours during weekends or holidays.
- Parents should restrict their own viewing. Cooperation should be sought from others in a joint family. If it is not forthcoming, let others have the TV set in another room. If that is not possible, take the children out or let them go to bed early.
- Let all members of the family come to an agreement about which programmes should be seen. Film actor Sunil Shetty, father of two, says, "I prefer that my kids watch Discovery and National Geographic, not violent serials. Even cartoons sometimes have a negative impact because of the violence and negative attitudes they often portray."
- Inculcate the habit of reading, playing and exercising from an early age.
- Encourage your child to develop a hobby.
- Don't expose infants to television.
- Be firm about TV programmes which a child should not see. If she does happen to see such a programme, find time to discuss with her the characters, and that these are all made up and rarely portray real life situations. With an older child, discuss a different possible approach to handling problems that are portrayed.

- The school authorities could invite experts to speak to the students about the possible dangers of indiscriminate television viewing or misleading advertisements.
- Children may even be encouraged to write to the sponsors of programmes. If the programme is good, let them appreciate it. If it is not appropriate, let it be known to the sponsors and the government that such programmes are not acceptable and that the government must take stern steps to prevent such programmes being shown on Doordarshan, the cable network, or the foreign television channels.
- During holidays, see that the child's spare time is well occupied. She may be encouraged to join classes in public speaking, music, drama, dance or the martial arts.
- The family may plan a holiday trip. Take the children for nature walks or to explore the city museum. Both boys and girls should be encouraged to learn cooking. Some parents can get together and plan to share the responsibility of keeping the children busy in groups, on different days of the week.

SPENDING THE HOLIDAYS TOGETHER

The primary purpose of taking a holiday should be to have real fun with your family. Holidaying gives us an opportunity to understand our children and spouse better. It gives us more time to introspect and decide if our priorities in life need to be reordered.

Holidays may also enable us to explore our country and our world. Children may also get more time to pursue their hobbies or to join certain coaching classes.

When you next decide to have a holiday, do not forget the main reason for taking the money and time for doing so. Holidays need not necessarily be expensive affairs.



Building sand-castles – fun for the entire family

A family I know decided to go for a holiday during the off-season. The hotel rates were much lower and the place was less crowded. They got extra attention all around. Instead of spending money on a holiday trip during the expensive summer season, another family decided to install an air-conditioner at home. The father took leave from work to be with the family to have a holiday at home. They played an old video recording of a family wedding. The children were so introduced to various relatives. The family saw some interesting cartoon films and adventure films and played indoor games. They loved every moment of this time spent together.

Medical Care On Holidays Spent Away From Home

If you are going to a malaria-infected area, the whole family should start on a prophylactic drug (see *Malaria* in THE A-Z OF CHILDHOOD ILLNESSES).

If you are going abroad, ask your travel agent if any special vaccines need to be taken.

When you are away from home, avoid taking unboiled water, cold food items, salads and milk preparations at places that are not likely to be safe. Drink only packaged water if you cannot get boiled water.

In general, I am against readymade commercial cereals for small infants, but you may carry tinned cereal (to which only water need be added) if you are going to a remote area.

You should also carry your family first aid kit with you. (See chapter on A FIRST AID KIT).

IMPORTANT ADDRESSES

Action For Autism,

T-370, Chiragh Gaon,
3rd Floor, New Delhi 110 017.
Tel: 2641 6469/70

Association For Consumers Action On Safety And Health (ACASH),

Servants of India Society Building,
2nd floor, 417, SVP Road,
Girgaum,
Mumbai 400 004.

Baby Friendly Hospitals,

The Convenor, National Task Force,
Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI),
Indian Medical Association,
IMA House, Indraprastha Marg,
New Delhi 110 002.

Breastfeeding Promotion Network Of India (BPNI),

BP 33, Pitampura,
Delhi 400 034.

Childline,

For Helping Children in Need:
Tel : 1098 (throughout India)

Family Planning Association Of India,
Bajaj Bhavan, Nariman Point,
Mumbai 400 021.

HELP (Health Education Library for People)
Om Chambers, 5th floor,
Kemp's Corner,
Mumbai 400 036
Tel: 2368 3334/1014

Indian Academy Of Pediatrics,
Kailas Darshan, Kennedy Bridge,
Mumbai 400 007.

**Indian Association For Promotion Of Adoption And
Child Welfare,**
7, Kanara House,
Mogul Lane, Matunga (W),
Mumbai 400 016.

Make-A-Wish Foundation,
B 2/12, Samruddhi Society,
B. Parulkar Marg,
Dadar, Mumbai 400 028

The Madras Dyslexia Association,
10/1 Sambasivam Street,
T. Nagar, Chennai 600 017.

The Maharashtra Dyslexia Association,
303, Jharna, Dr. Ambedkar Road,
Mumbai 400 052.

National Down Syndrome Congress,
1605, Chantilly Drive,
Suite 250, Atlanta GA 30324.3269.

The Spastics Society Of India,
K C Marg, Bandra Reclamation, Mumbai.
Tel: 2643 0703/04

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