

# Creating and Maintaining Healthy Habits in Children



## A guide for parents on key health messages for primary-aged children

Parents have a huge influence in supporting children to make positive health choices. It can often be difficult to know which health messages are correct, and which sources of health information are reliable and trustworthy. This leaflet provides you with the most up-to-date Irish health guidelines for children, issued by both the HSE Department of Health.



*"It's so hard to know what information is correct and up to date, its always changing and there is lots of misinformation" Confused Parent!*

For further information, contact Health Promotion & Improvement, HSE South, Western Road, Cork, [hpd@hse.ie](mailto:hpd@hse.ie)

# KEEPING ACTIVE

## VITAL FOR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELLBEING

Supporting and helping your child to be physically active is one of the most important steps that you can take to maintain and improve their health, whatever their age or ability.



Being physically active is a core component of good health and wellbeing. Physical activity is essential for physical, psychological, emotional, and social health, and should be seen as part of everyone's daily lifestyle, whether young or old. By supporting and encouraging children and young people to take part in physical activity we can help them to develop good habits, which will prove invaluable throughout their lives.

The *National Guidelines on Physical Activity for Ireland* recommend that children and young people should be active at a moderate (heart is beating faster than normal, breathing is harder than normal) to vigorous (heart is beating much faster than normal and breathing much harder than normal) intensity for **at least 60 minutes a day every day**. This should include muscle-strengthening, flexibility and bone-strengthening exercises three times a week (Department of Health, 2009). 60 minutes a day can be accumulated by doing a number of shorter sessions during the day.



### Key Resources

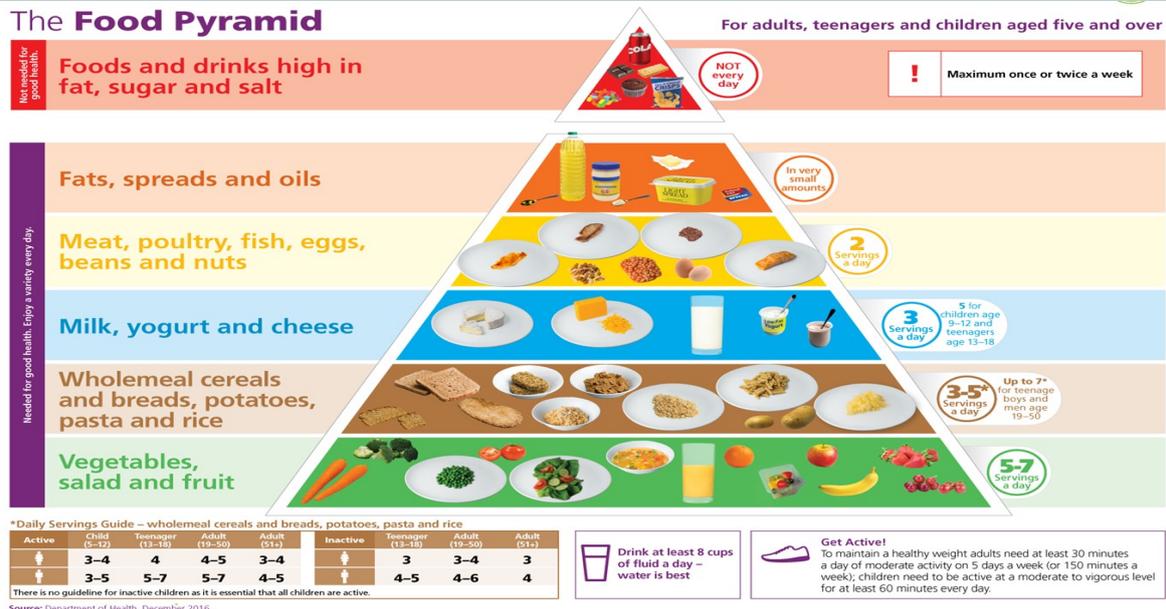
- Tips on how to improve children's activity levels <https://www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/teaching-your-children-to-be-active.html>
- The START campaign aims to support families to take small steps to eating healthier food and becoming more active <https://www.safefood.net/start>
- Health Promotion [https://www.healthpromotion.ie/health/physical\\_activity](https://www.healthpromotion.ie/health/physical_activity)
- National Physical Activity Guidelines <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/healthwellbeing/our-priority-programmes/health/physical-activity-guidelines/>

### KEY POINTS FOR PARENTS

- Being active does not have to be organised or structured 'Sport'. All physical activity counts towards your child's 60 minutes per day of activity. Activities such as dance, playing in the garden, running around, swimming, sport (including street sport and games), active travel such walking or cycling to school and even housework, e.g. Hoovering ALL count.
- If your children have not been active at all/for a while start slowly with bouts of 15-30 minutes once or twice a week and gradually increase and build it into your daily routine.
- Add activities over time until they reach the goal of at least 60 minutes of moderate intensity activity per day.
- Join in the fun and be active with your child – 'make family time active time', show them games you played when you were younger or go for a walk or cycle together. This will also help you get your recommended 30 minutes activity on least 5 days a week or 150 minutes a week for adults.

# EATING WELL

“WHAT’S FOR DINNER?”



Healthy eating is about getting the correct amount of nutrients – protein, fat, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals that you need to maintain both good health and a healthy weight. In order to help with our food choices, the food pyramid guide is used. Foods that contain the same type of nutrients are grouped together on each of the shelves of the food pyramid. Following the food pyramid will guide you towards the right balance of nutritious foods within your calorie range. While the food pyramid can be used as a guide for children over 5 years, it is important that children eat according to their growth and appetite.

## Key Resources

- Your Guide to Healthy Eating <https://www2.hse.ie/healthy-eating-active-living/nutrition/>
- Start your kids on their way to a healthier life <https://www.safefood.net/start/healthy-eating>



## KEY POINTS FOR PARENTS

- Offer your children a varied diet based on the main shelves of the food pyramid, limiting the foods from the top two shelves.
- Look at the proportions of food you offer during the day. They should be roughly one third fruit and vegetables, one third starchy foods and one third dairy (milk, cheese and yogurt) and protein (meat and fish)
- Give children smaller portions of food on their plates to start with, and if they want more food, then give it to them
- Avoid having fatty and sugary snack foods freely available between and after meals
- Foods and drinks that are high in sugar, fat and salt include sweets, chocolate, crisps, biscuits, cakes and fizzy drinks.
- Replace sugary drinks with water or milk. Sugary drinks are linked with excess weight in children.

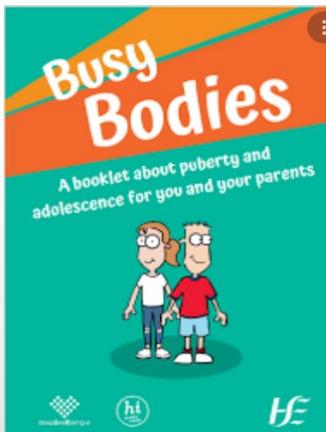
# GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

## SEXUAL WELLBEING

Sexual wellbeing is defined as a good balance of emotional physical and social wellness in relation to sexual health and is linked to your overall general health. Children experience many physical and emotional changes during puberty.

Talking with children about relationships and sexual wellbeing can help children to:

- Build strong and positive relationships
- Develop emotionally
- Stay safe
- Delay the age they first become sexually active



Children will receive Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) throughout their whole school life. At primary level, RSE aims to help children learn about their own development and about their friendships and relationships with others. This work will be based on developing a good self-image, promoting respect for themselves and others, and providing them with appropriate information. The role of parents and carers is to be open to discussion of your child's questions at home.

By talking, age-appropriately, about these issues from an early age, you will be reinforcing what your child is discussing at school, watching on TV, talking about with their friends or reading about in books and magazines. You will also be preparing them for secondary school.

### Key Resources

- There are a wide range of publications on [www.healthpromotion.ie](http://www.healthpromotion.ie) (under the search publications tool bar) on relationships and sexual wellbeing for primary aged children.
- [www.Mysexualhealth.ie](http://www.Mysexualhealth.ie)

### KEY POINTS FOR PARENTS

- In addition to what they are taught in school, children still need the opportunity to talk to you as their parent/carer about relationships and sexual wellbeing. This is not a one-off chat but an on-going process, starting when a child is as young as 8 years old.
- Be truthful and honest when talking to your child.

# GENERAL HEALTH FOR PARENTS

The Keep Well Campaign is aimed at showing people of all ages how we can mind our own physical and mental health and wellbeing by adding healthy and helpful habits to our daily and weekly routines.



## Key Resources

- Keep Well Campaign.  
<https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/healthy-ireland/>
- <https://www.tusla.ie/services/family-community-support/parenting-24-seven/>

## The campaign is focused on five main themes:

- **Keeping active** - keeping active and being outdoors, even during the winter, is important to help physical and mental health and wellbeing.
- **Staying connected** - staying connected with people, addressing isolation, supporting volunteerism and initiatives that support person-to-person connection is important to our wellbeing.
- **Switching off and being creative** - switching off and being creative or learning something new, getting back to nature and finding ways to relax can help our general wellbeing.
- **Eating well** - by nourishing our bodies and minds, we can develop a better connection between the food we eat and how we feel and positively impact our physical and mental wellbeing.
- **Minding your mood** – equipping people with information on where to go if they need support. This will also be linked with the local community helpline to ensure that people can access the support they need.

# MINDING YOUR MOOD

AS IMPORTANT AS OUR PHYSICAL HEALTH



The emotional wellbeing of children is just as important as their physical health. **Good mental health** allows children and young people to develop the resilience to cope with whatever life throws at them and grow into well-rounded, healthy adults.



It is amazing and rewarding to watch your children grow, and to learn to be independent, but parenting isn't always easy, particularly if you think your child is unhappy or if you are worried about their behaviour. Minding your own mental health and adopting good self-care is something that we should all prioritise. A new video-based mental wellbeing programme called Minding Your Wellbeing is now freely accessible.

## KEY POINTS FOR PARENTS

- Make sure your children know you love them and are proud of them. Praise them for what they do well and encourage them to try new things.
- Worrying or difficult behaviour may be short lived, so give it some time. All children go through stages of feeling anxious or angry and this may just be them adapting to a change in the family or their school life. Children will generally grow out of worrying behaviour on their own or with family support.
- Talk to your child – even young children can understand feelings and behaviour if you give them a chance to talk about it. With older children, they may not want to talk at first. Let them know you are concerned about them and that you are there if they need you.
- Seek professional help if you are concerned
- Make time for YOU.

## Key Resources

- Mental Health and Young People. [www.mentalhealthireland.ie](http://www.mentalhealthireland.ie)
- Your Mental Health. <https://www2.hse.ie/mental-health/>



# SELF CARE FOR PARENTS

DO WE PRIORITISE IT?

## Self Care



Activities and practices that we deliberately plan and choose to engage in on a regular basis to enhance and maintain our well being

As we raise our children and juggle everything else in our busy lifestyles, we can forget to mind ourselves and “self care” can become lower down the priority list. Self care allows us to check in with how we’re feeling and look after ourselves. It should not be seen as a luxury but rather an essential part of our lives.

### Key Resources

- Minding Your Wellbeing. Five 20 minute videos sessions. <https://www2.hse.ie/healthy-you/minding-your-wellbeing-programme.html>
- The Five Ways to Wellbeing are simple actions to practice each day to maintain or improve our mental health and wellbeing. <https://www.mentalhealthireland.ie/five-ways-to-wellbeing/>

### KEY POINTS FOR PARENTS

- Good self-care is key to improved mood and reduced anxiety. It's also key to a good relationship with oneself and others.
- Put self care on your agenda!

*The **FIVE WAYS TO WELLBEING** are simple actions to practice each day to maintain or improve our mental health and wellbeing.*

## FIVE WAYS TO WELLBEING

