

Ask the Pediatrician

Solving the Riddles of Parenthood

1. Back to Sleep, Tummy to Play

Q: What is “tummy time”? What are its benefits? How can I make it more enjoyable for my 2-month-old son?

A: “Tummy time” is the amount of time babies spend lying on their stomachs while they are awake. Since the early 1990s, pediatricians have strongly recommended that babies sleep on their backs to reduce the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). But they also stress that babies need to spend time on their stomachs while they are awake and supervised.

One reason for “back to sleep, tummy to play” is to develop a baby’s motor skills. These include lifting their heads, rolling over, sitting up, balancing, crawling, and walking. In a recent survey of 400 physical and occupational therapists, two-thirds said that over the past six years they have seen a delay of motor skill development in babies. Those surveyed cited the lack of tummy time as the main reason. The American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) and Neuro-Development Treatment Association conducted the survey on behalf of Pathways Awareness.

In addition, parents now use car seats that serve as infant carriers, says Judy Towne Jennings, PT, MA, spokeswoman for APTA and a researcher in Ohio. Many of these fasten directly into strollers and swings so parents don’t have to remove their baby from the seat. While babies are awake, they should be placed in a variety of positions as soon as they return home from the hospital. “Ideally, babies should be placed on their tummies after every nap, diaper change, and feeding,” she says.

Tummy time also helps shape a baby’s skull. APTA spokeswoman Colleen Coulter-O’Berry, PT, MS, PCS, at Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta, says the back of babies’ skulls can flatten if they spend too much time spent on their backs. The number of babies with misshapen heads has risen dramatically since 1992, when the “Back to Sleep” campaign began. She adds that the combination of babies sleeping on their backs and spending time in infant carriers puts pressure on the head, which can flatten their skulls.

“Increasing the amount of time your baby lies on his or her tummy promotes muscle development in the neck and shoulders, helps prevent tight neck muscles and the development of flat areas on the back of the baby’s head, and helps build the muscles a baby needs to roll, sit, and crawl,” Coulter-O’Berry says.

APTA offers “Tummy Time Tools,” co-authored by Coulter-O’Berry, at www.apta.org. The brochure provides activities to help ensure that babies get enough tummy time throughout the day.



QUICK TIP: Allow your infant some supervised playtime on her stomach.

2. Keep Cholesterol in Check

Q: Should I have my children's cholesterol levels checked? If their cholesterol levels are high, what can I do to help lower them?

A: Unfortunately, with the increase of childhood obesity and diabetes as well as the lack of exercise, cholesterol screening should begin as early as childhood. By monitoring your children's cholesterol levels, you may be saving their lives. The July 2008 issue of the journal *Pediatrics* offers the following suggestions to keep your children's cholesterol in check:

- Review your family history. If your children are at risk of developing heart disease, they should be screened. Risk factors include diabetes, obesity, hypertension, and cigarette smoking. For these children, the first screening should take place after they are 2 years old but no later than 10 years of age.
- Modify your children's diets and lifestyles if they have or are at risk of having high cholesterol.
- Ensure your children eat a healthy diet. For children older than 2 years old, follow the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Children should eat at least two servings of fruits and three servings of vegetables a day. Also, use low-fat dairy products.
- Seek the advice of a nutritional counselor to develop a diet plan that meets your children's specific needs.
- Encourage your children to stay fit by being active. Fun activities such as skating, soccer, tag, swimming, and tennis build endurance, strength, and flexibility while burning calories.
- Visit your children's pediatrician regularly to monitor their cholesterol levels. Your pediatrician can tell the difference between "good cholesterol" and "bad cholesterol," and what levels are appropriate for the age of your children.

QUICK TIP: Ask your pediatrician to check your child's cholesterol levels.

3. Take a Bite out of Cyberbullying

Q: How can I protect my 13-year-old daughter from being bullied online?

A: "Cyberbullying" happens when teens use computers, cell phones, or other devices to hurt or embarrass another person. Even though you can't see a cyberbully or the bully's victim, cyberbullying causes real problems. It affects nearly half of all American teens.

Working with the National Crime Prevention Council, American teenagers have developed the following tips to help keep your child happy and safe while online:

- Don't write, keep, or forward cyberbullying messages.
- Tell friends who are cyberbullying to stop.
- Block communication with cyberbullies.
- Report cyberbullying to a trusted adult.
- Remember: if you wouldn't say it in person, don't say it online.

Teens can also help prevent cyberbullying by getting involved:

- Work with students, teachers, school administrators to develop rules against cyberbullying.
- Raise awareness of cyberbullying in your community by holding an assembly and creating fliers to give to younger kids and parents.
- Share the National Crime Prevention Council's anti-cyberbullying message with friends.

QUICK TIP: Help your child recognize cyberbullying and avoid it.

4. Do Girls = Boys in Math?

Q: Are boys really smarter in math than girls?

A: After sifting through mountains of data — including SAT results and math scores from 7 million students in 10 different states — a team of scientists says the answer is no. Researchers looked at average performances, the scores of the most gifted children, and students who excelled at complex math problems, and in all three areas, girls crunch numbers just as well as boys.

"There just aren't gender differences anymore in math performance," says Janet Hyde, Ph.D., a psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and the study's leader. "So parents and teachers need to revise their thoughts about this."

Researchers from UW-Madison and the University of California at Berkeley reported their findings in the July 25 issue of *Science*.

One of the massive study's most revealing components was a review of the granddaddy of all high-school math tests, the SAT. The fact that boys score better on it than girls has been widely publicized, contributing to the public's notion that boys truly are better at math. But Hyde and her co-authors think there are other explanations.

For one thing, because the SAT is administered only to college-bound seniors, it is hardly a random sample of all students. And since girls now make up more than 50 percent of students attending college, a greater number of girls are taking the SAT than boys.

"So you're dipping farther down into the distribution of female talent, which brings down the average score," says Hyde. "That may be the explanation for (the results), rather than girls aren't as good as math."

Still, will all of this be enough to shift this long-held attitude? Hyde can't say, but she remains determined to do so. "Stereotypes are very, very resistant to change," she says, "but as a scientist I have to challenge them with data."

QUICK TIP: Encourage your children to develop their math skills, regardless of their gender.