

Building Healthy Habits and Routines

With the start of the new year, we typically think about setting resolutions and making new habits. This can be challenging during the colder winter months. Spring time is a great time to work on developing healthy habits as the weather improves and daylight hours are increasing.

When thinking about making a new habit or routine, remember to make it SMART - specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. For example, a goal of “being more active” is difficult to measure success or achievement. Instead a SMART goal could be “movement/exercise for 10 minutes a day, 4 days a week for the next month. A visual tracker can be helpful to monitor progress. There are many apps available for this purpose or a paper chart to track progress along the way. At the end of the established time frame, you can look back and monitor progress before adjusting the goal for the next month.

External rewards can be a helpful motivator for building these skills. For example sticker or goal charts can help build consistency with a new habit or routine. For some tasks, a sticker may be an appropriate reward. In some cases, earning a certain number of stickers may prompt a specific reward. For example, five days of successfully putting clothes in the laundry hamper earns a coloring book.

Movement and play are great ways to encourage activity for children (and caregivers). On rainy days, a living room dance party can get everyone moving. Luckily in Florida we have lots of great weather for outdoor play as well. Family walks or bike rides to explore our wildlife and area parks can get everyone in the family moving as well. By making movement and physical activity fun and enjoyable, we can build positive associations that will help continue physical activity in to adulthood.

Meal times are an opportunity to build healthy habits. When possible, sitting together as a family without screens can bring every one together with more intention and focus on the meal in front of them. When thinking about meal time, building our plates with a variety of colors can be helpful when possible. Involving children in meal preparation can help encourage more adventurous eating, although it can take many exposures before trying a new food. It can help to offer a safe or known food alongside a small portion of the new food.

Many caregivers would like to see improved sleep and bedtime for our families. A bedtime routine can be a great place to build some structure so everyone involved knows what to expect. A certain amount of structure is helpful for all of us, including children. One example is practicing Bs before bedtime: bath, brush teeth, books, bed. This can start as early as infancy with caregivers taking the role of reader. As children grow, they can start to practice reading as well as part of the bedtime routine.

Waking up and getting ready for school and work in the morning can be a hectic challenge for many families. Visual cues are a great way to help with getting ready for the day. For young children, a checklist with pictures can guide the process with fewer verbal reminders from caregivers. As they grow, the checklist can be a place to practice reading skills. Adolescents and adults can benefit from having a checklist each morning to avoid forgetting chores or tasks along the way.

When building routines and habits, it is helpful to gather all the materials needed for the task in one area. For example, storing socks next to shoes in the entryway to avoid the scramble to find

socks in the morning. After completing homework, it could be placed in the backpack. This avoids the scramble to find things in the morning.

As a final note, building healthy habits does not need to be a grand undertaking or complete overhaul of our day-to-day routines. Starting with a few small changes, in a sustainable way, can lead to long-lasting change instead of quick fix mentality that often is forgotten after a few days to weeks.