



# Developing Healthy Habits

Q&A with Dr. Sanjay Gupta,  
Chief Medical Correspondent, CNN

## How critical is it to develop healthy habits early?

We all know that habits are tough to break — that's why the earlier on we build healthy habits, the easier and more likely it is that we maintain them and be as healthy as possible. It's important for parents to model healthy habits. And I know that can be challenging — I've got three girls myself — and we try to incorporate healthy practices in to our family's everyday as much as possible like, picking and preparing nutritious foods; making exercise time also family time — so we go on lots of walks and hikes together. It's important to make these positive experiences, because forcing a kid to eat broccoli or making them go on a run can really backfire and create negative connotations with these practices in the long run.

## What can parents do to support cognitive development?

Cognitive development frequently happens to all of us without even knowing it. Whenever we are exposed to new experiences, we build new neural pathways. What's really amazing is that much of that brain development happens by the time we are five or six. At that early age — kids' brains are just exploding, building more than a million neural connections every second. Those connections are primed by their exposure to new things — this can include anything from a new book to a new food or new place. And that development continues as they grow, even though it may not be happening as quickly. Remember, it's not just about experiencing

something new — but it's also about thinking in a new way. Since the pandemic began, it's easy to get down — particularly for kids, they haven't been able to go to school or see their friends. I ask my girls each what are three things they are thankful for. It helps not only to remind us about the positive, but it also gets them to think about things from a different perspective. It makes them more likely to grow resilient in the face of these experiences instead of being crushed by them.

## How critical is preventive health care for kids?

Just as it is for adults, it is important for kids to get preventive care. In fact, for kids, their annual well visits are key in preventing disease but also catching conditions early on so they can get treatment as soon as possible. Early interventions — particularly when it comes to developmental issues — can make a significant difference. If you're noticing any signs of developmental delay, especially in the early ages, before the age of 3 — it's worth talking to your doctor. Getting interventions like speech or physical therapy is more effective earlier on when their brains are still able to adapt and create new connections. Right now, there is understandably so much concern about potential exposures to COVID, but there are still ways to see your doctors. Lots of doctors are doing telemedicine visits so families don't have to go into the office.

It's also more important than ever this year that we all get flu shots. It can help prevent

*(Continued on next page)*

## Dr. Sanjay Gupta: Developing Healthy Habits

or reduce symptoms of the flu. We know that kids can pass on the flu to other members of their household quite easily. Everyone getting a flu shot this year can help reduce the larger burden the flu has on our hospital system as we anticipate the flu season coinciding with COVID-19.

### What worries you most about COVID's impact on kids?

This has been such a difficult time on all of us – but particularly on kids. I see the impact of not being able to socialize and be with their friends or see their grandparents on my own girls. It's really hard. We know that schools have been such a huge resource for kids including for some of the most basic necessities such as food and shelter, as well as observing for any signs of abuse in the home. It's hard to see our nation's youngest have to deal with this all. But we can help buffer them from some of these harms and stresses

by protecting and supporting them emotionally. Decades of research have shown that one of the key factors in building resilience is by caring for and supporting them. Check in on your kids, give them hugs and spend quality time with them, read a book or share a meal; ask them how they are feeling. This kind of support promotes their well-being now as well as after this pandemic is over.

### What's at stake now and what can we do about it?

All of this can feel so crushing. Not only are we going through a pandemic, but many of us are experiencing economic hardships and loneliness. This is a very trying time for the world – but we can help shoulder this, particularly for our youngest, by being there for them and supporting them. It's so critical that they know that we are here for them to help them get through this now and whatever future adversities they may face.

**Sanjay Gupta, MD is the multiple Emmy® award winning chief medical correspondent for CNN.** Gupta, a practicing neurosurgeon, plays an integral role in CNN's reporting on health and medical news for all of CNN's shows domestically and internationally, and contributes to CNN.com. His medical training and public health policy experience distinguishes his reporting from war zones and natural disasters, as well as on a range of medical and scientific topics, including the opioid crisis, Pandemic outbreaks, brain injury, disaster recovery, health care reform, fitness, military medicine and medicinal marijuana. Gupta joined CNN in the summer of 2001. Since then he has covered the most important health stories in the United States and around the world. He reported from New York following the attacks on the U.S. on Sept. 11, 2001. In 2003, he embedded with the U.S. Navy's "Devil Docs" medical unit, reporting from Iraq and Kuwait as the unit traveled to Baghdad. He provided live coverage of the first battle field operation performed during the war, and performed life-saving brain surgery five times himself in a desert operating room. In 2009, he embedded with the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne, accompanying them on life-saving rescue missions in Afghanistan.