



Positive Parenting

The Official Guide Series On Maternal, Child & Family Care By The Malaysian Paediatric Association

Malaysia

Mental Health Matters

Staying-at-Home:
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Mental Health Doesn't Discriminate by Age

In previous years, the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) had unearthed worrying statistics of increased numbers of Malaysians with mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. In fact, it was serious enough to be labelled as a 'mental health epidemic', and this was before the long periods of enforced social distancing/ isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this issue, we look at why mental health matters. Parents need to be aware of the importance of mental health, not just for themselves but also for their children. The stigma towards mental illness exists, and is a significant barrier that may prevent some parents from seeking help for their child. The Feature article will explore this issue and hopefully, open parents' eyes and unlock their hearts to allow them to embrace the idea that mental illness is not something to be ashamed of or to avoid.

We also explore other topics such as the importance of preventing influenza among parents, some tips on modern parenting and digital resources, useful info on selecting and keeping pets, and also the importance of vaccinating against pneumococcal disease. This time, we focus on children born before 1 January 2020 who are not eligible to receive the pneumococcal vaccine recently introduced in the National Immunisation Programme.

You may also refer to other articles from previous issues of the Positive Parenting Guide series that have been uploaded to our website. Positive Parenting is also on Facebook and Instagram which are updated regularly and contain quick tips, links to articles, infographics and short videos. We wish you every success in your parenting journey!

The articles contained in this magazine are not in any way intended as substitutes for medical attention. When in doubt, consult your doctor. Malaysian Paediatric Association, the experts and their respective organisations do not endorse any brands and are not responsible or liable for any advertisement or advertorial by sponsors.

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Programme

Mental Health Matters

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has been the source of much worry and anxiety among Malaysian parents and by extension, our children as well.

As part of ongoing efforts to combat the pandemic, the government has enforced stringent measures such as nationwide movement control orders (MCO). However, being forced to live under the various phases of the MCO has led to

various negative effects on our mental health.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has acknowledged that the pandemic will have a long term and significant impact on mental health, and action should be taken to address anxiety and stress. This means that both adults and children will be affected and many will face difficulties coping, leading to a higher risk of developing mental health issues such as depression or anxiety.

Even before the pandemic, the 2019 National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) had indicated that Malaysians (including children) faced a potential “mental health

epidemic”. During the early stages of the pandemic, another survey in 2020 found that university students experienced high levels of anxiety.

As has been recently reported in the news, suicide rates have also increased substantially. Police records for the first five months of 2021 showed 468 suicides, as opposed to 631 and 609 for the whole year of 2020 and 2019 respectively.

Importance of mental health

Living in close proximity with each other for long periods of time, without being able to step

outside of one's home, is not an ideal living situation for families. In order to achieve stability and harmony in the household, family members need to make a conscious effort and work together.

This can be challenging, especially in light of potentially new stressors that MCO has introduced into our lives, e.g. enforced social isolation, cramped living conditions, lack of privacy, and even dealing with the loss of loved ones.

For children, these are new stressors on top of the usual academic pressures which can lead to an increased risk of mental health problems. Therefore, it is important that children are actively involved in how the family can learn to cope with these drastic changes in lifestyle.

Stress management can be handled by using reactive

approaches such as having some "me-time". You would need to actively organise and adapt your daily routine in collaboration with other family members to make time for this. Find something that works; it could be listening to music, gardening, exercising, spiritual practice, or a combination of these activities.

Take care of yourself first

According to **Prof Dr Alvin Ng**, "It's helpful for parents to manage their mental health first. It's just like when you're in an airplane and you have to wear your own oxygen mask before you put one on your child. It is easier to deal with your children's issues more effectively when you are in a rational and calm mood."

Parents may do a simple self-assessment on symptoms of

anxiety and depression by scanning the QR code:



This online tool is meant for self-assessment and should not replace professional help or advice. If your score indicates potential problems, e.g., moderate to severe scores, please seek professional advice. You can visit your doctor or any nearby Klinik Kesihatan for a referral letter to a government hospital if you need to see a specialist. For more immediate help, please call Talian Kasih 15999. (Note: The online assessment is from the UK and the contact number on it is not applicable to Malaysia).

The difference between mental health vs mental illness



Mental health refers to our emotional, psychological and social well-being and it influences how we think, feel and behave. Mental health is about being functional, adaptable and generally well, with the ability to thrive.



Mental illness is the opposite, and comprises conditions which negatively affect our mental health to the point that we are dysfunctional, maladaptive and frequently in distress.

Prof Alvin warns, “Do not ignore signs of distress, poor functioning, lack of pleasure or extreme anxiety especially if they last for weeks as this usually indicates a problem. Left alone, things may worsen and lead to clinical depression or anxiety. There’s no health without mental health. Get that into your vocabulary and let’s break the stigma surrounding it. Consult a professional and find out how to get better.”



The next step

After ensuring that your own mental health is good, it’s time to look into your child’s mental health. Compared to adults, children are more vulnerable to fear and worry. The danger lies in the fact that most of the signs and symptoms are subtle.

Dr Rajini Sarvananthan

reminds us, “Some aspects of parenting are important, and they include having a positive parent-child relationship, accepting your child for who he is, being involved in his life, encouraging positive social development among peers and other age groups, and also taking care of his physical health. While important, these are just the basics, so you have to do more.”

Explore emotions by talking about them, especially fears and worries. One way to help your child better cope with stressors is by addressing any fears they may have. Talk with him about the latest news, listen to what he says and acknowledge his feelings/fears. Just like adults, children (especially adolescents) may need some “me-time” to help

them manage stress, so do factor in some time for this in your children’s schedule. Keep an eye on their activities without excessive monitoring.

Social and emotional skills are important, so teach them and lead by example. Don’t avoid sensitive topics but speak about them as openly and honestly as you can. This will provide your child with a better environment to enhance his resilience, and is helpful in preventing mental health problems. Additionally, encourage family activities that can be done daily (e.g. having meals together) or weekly (e.g. going for a walk or exercising together). The idea is to spend quality time together, so keep digital gadgets away!



child. You may use this self-assessment tool to check for observable signs of depression and anxiety in your child by scanning the QR code:



Watch for warning signs

Dr Rajini also points out that mental health problems in children can go unrecognised, especially in the case of young children under 6 years of age. As parents, you can start identifying warning signs by paying close attention to your

This self-assessment tool serves as a guide and should not replace a proper diagnosis. If you have any worries about your child’s mental health, seek advice from his doctor.

Research has shown that intervention and prevention efforts are needed and can be effective in reducing problems caused by internalising symptoms in children. Internalising symptoms are essentially emotions turned 'inward' or toward one's self, e.g. feelings of sadness, low self-esteem, behavioural inhibition, and fears. A sign to watch out for among children is regressive behaviour, which is a common response to stress, frustration, or traumatic events. This is how young children exhibit distress.

The consultant developmental paediatrician remarks, "Another way to describe regressive behaviour is 'not acting their age', so your child may throw a tantrum or 'forget' some of the skills that he has already learnt, such as getting dressed by himself. Although regressive behaviour is more common among toddlers and pre-schoolers, it can still happen with older children and yes, even adults!"

In addition to this, parents will also need to take other factors of social development (and relationships) into account. That means balancing physical health with the need to stay safe against the pandemic (via lockdown or social distancing). Since children won't be able to socialise as they did previously, find ways for them to maintain their closeness with their friends and family, especially grandparents. You can arrange for weekly video calls for a

virtual family gathering so you can catch up with each other.

School-going children have also been forced to attend virtual classes, so once schools reopen (and this includes nursery schools and preschools), your child may need some time to re-adjust before going back to school; and you should consider putting aside some time to help them get in tune with this.



Don't neglect mental health

The Chairman of the Positive Parenting Programme **Datuk Dr Zulkifli Ismail** highlights the importance for parents to be more involved with their children, saying "Without a doubt, early recognition of potential problems is important to take effective preventive actions. In order to do this, it's important for parents to take mental health seriously."

You should recognise the importance of mental health, both for you and for your child. It is unfortunate that when it comes to mental health and mental illness, some stigma still exists. Don't shy away from reaching out for help. The Malaysian Mental Health Association (MMHA) offers counselling services;

alternatively, there are hotlines that provide safe spaces for people who need someone to talk to. Befrienders KL operates a 24-hour hotline (03-7627 2929) and the BuddyBear Hotline meant for children/adolescents operates from 12pm-12am (1800 18 2327).



Malaysian Mental Health Association (MMHA)



More info on BuddyBear

Datuk Dr Zulkifli says, "I hope that parents will keep a more open mind about mental health and mental illness. Remember that mental health problems can occur at any age, and children are not 'immune' to it. Please seek professional help if necessary, whether it is for diagnosis, treatment or to manage the condition. It's important that we learn how to reach out for help if we need it. As parents, don't be afraid or shy away from asking for help if you truly need it as doing so can help alleviate some of the stress and pressure that you face." PP



Relief from Labour Pains

By **Dr H Krishna Kumar**, Consultant Obstetrician & Gynaecologist and Past President of the Obstetrical and Gynaecological Society of Malaysia



When it comes to delivery, it's common for mothers to be worried about the pain and discomfort associated with it. Rest assured that countless women through the ages have gone through this experience and emerged all the stronger from it.

While it is not my intention to diminish labour pains, there are ways to deal with it. Effective labour pain management is important – too much labour pain can be tough, making it difficult to bear down properly during labour. Let's explore some of the available pain-mitigating approaches that are available to expecting mothers.

Non-medical pain relief

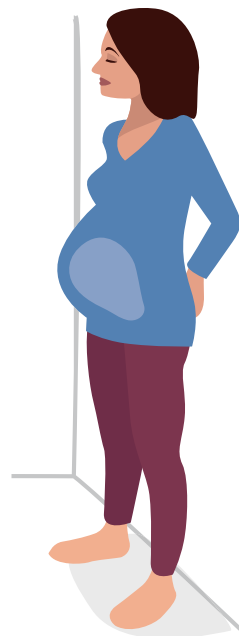
Mums who prefer not to rely too much on medication find this method useful even during early pregnancy. However, at its core are two basic prerequisites, namely:

- **Be in good physical condition.** Labour can be physically tiring, so being in better physical shape helps. Maintain a gentle exercise

routine regularly throughout your pregnancy and avoid strenuous exercises. The simplest would be to take morning or evening walks. You may also opt for other low impact exercises, e.g. prenatal yoga, pilates.



- **Good posture helps.** This helps reduce fatigue, and pain in the lower back and neck area. If you're not sure what constitutes good posture, ask your gynaecologist for tips on correct standing and sitting posture. Even when reclining, do use small pillows to help support your body and legs where appropriate.



Other alternative methods that can be used to help mitigate labour pains are:



- **An exercise ball.** Also referred to as a stability or physiotherapy ball, it is essentially a large inflatable ball used as exercise equipment. It can also be

used during pregnancy and right up to delivery to help keep you more comfortable, e.g. first sitting on it, then rocking while leaning forward on the bed, as opposed to reclining on the bed, preferably with the spouse to assist you. Just like any other exercise equipment, care and precautions should be observed when you are using it.

- **Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS).** This therapy uses a mild electrical current to stimulate the nerves and muscles. Its use during pregnancy should be done by a professional as there is a possibility

of inducing labour if the electrodes are placed on the wrong acupuncture point (i.e. it will cause contractions). It can be used on its own or with other pain relief methods.

After delivery, you may want to consider postnatal massage not just for pain relief, but to help the body to recover. These massages are helpful for boosting the recovery process and can be soothing physically, mentally and emotionally – this is especially important if the childbirth was difficult.

Medical choices for pain relief

Other than non-medical means of pain relief, there are the tried-and-tested medical options. These include:

- **Medical gas.** A mixture of nitrous oxide and oxygen is inhaled just as contraction starts. While it does not stop pain, it helps to downplay the intensity of the contractions. It also does not interfere with contractions and the gas does not stay in the mum's or baby's body after birth.

- **Injections.** Pethidine is a popular choice as it is relatively safe for both the mum and child. It can be injected into a large muscle such as the buttocks or intravenously via a drip. However, some women have reported feeling nausea, disorientation, shortness of breath, and even lack of pain relief.

- **Epidurals.** It's an effective option that is injected directly into the spinal cord. While the procedure itself can be painful, once it takes effect, mum will be numb from the



waist down. Some common side effects include nausea, feeling weak-kneed, possible difficulty with vaginal birth (due to numbness), and pain/tenderness at the injection site.

Before you make your pick

Pregnant mums should feel free to discuss the available options with their doctor. Each has its own pros and cons, so learn as much as you can and your doctor will help to provide you with the information you need to make an informed choice.

Don't worry! Whether you gave birth naturally, via caesarean section, with (or without) the use of medical pain relief, you are still going to become a mum. At the end of the day, it's your body so you deserve to make a choice about how you handle your delivery. PP

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Staying-at-Home: Ways to Improve Family Bonding

By **Mr Alexius Cheang**, Behavioural Psychologist

Home: a place where most of us have been spending all of our time during the past months, no thanks to the global pandemic. Yet, not all is doom and gloom, as this situation has proven to be a golden opportunity for us to strengthen our family bonds.

Working from home, attending online classes and virtual meetings, getting food deliveries – these practices have become an integral part of the new normal in our lives as we turn our houses into home bases for almost all of our daily routines. Hence, it may seem natural to expect that our family bond would become stronger as more time is spent together at home.

The challenges

However, with all the tasks and roles that we need to juggle, it may not be as easy as we think to find quality time with our family. Quantity time does not equal to quality time. Parents face a new situation of having to balance paid work

with house chores, while simultaneously supervising children's remote learning, for prolonged periods of time.

Conflicts and clashes may arise when family members are "locked-in" under the same roof. For instance, the lack of personal space for work or studies could lead to interference in day-to-day activities. This is a potential problem for households confined to smaller living spaces or having fewer rooms, and may lead to stress as family members are unable to focus on individual tasks or meetings.

Besides, the blurring of boundaries between work, family, as well as personal time and space has not necessarily made things

better. Yes, you may have more flexibility in managing your schedule and less time is spent on commuting between home, school and office. But this situation has led to a work-life imbalance. Work matters may interfere with personal life, and conversely, one's home

environment may also impact job performance.

These unprecedented times also present a challenge for young children who are just starting out kindergarten or school. The lack of interactivity between students and teachers

makes it harder for them to pay attention. Hence, parental supervision during lessons is often required. Parents themselves need to adapt to the added responsibilities they must manage during this extraordinary period.

5 proven strategies

How can you and your family turn these challenges into opportunities for family bonding? Here are some practical tips:



1 Sharing is caring:

Mums and dads need to complement each other to fulfil the multiple roles at home. Communicate and plan ahead to arrange work and house chore schedules, so that as one manages the household, the other spouse can attend and focus on a virtual meeting. The whole family can also bond by doing chores like meal preparation or cleaning the house together. Create a house chore schedule that involves your kids. An efficient task management system is vital to reduce

misunderstandings once all members of a household are clear about their duties and responsibilities of sharing the workload.

2 Allocate family time:

Set a specific time to spend with all family members. The chosen time can be during dinner every night, a twice-a-week family game night, a weekly movie screening or other preferred joint activities. During this time, all tasks related to work and school should be set aside. Ideally, personal gadgets should be turned off or muted during family time.



3 Start a family project:

This can be a home improvement project that all family members can contribute to, e.g. setting up a small garden, painting the room or fence, reorganising

the furniture or installing wallpaper in the room. Creative art projects like family photography, scrap-booking, or painting are also great ways to spend quality time together.

4 Small gestures, big impact:

Sometimes the smallest gestures are the best. Simply saying thank you after helping out with chores or genuinely complimenting the cook of the home for a delicious meal can make the day for your family members. You can also leave simple notes on your children's desk or bed to thank them for behaving nicely. Even a hug or kiss counts. By the way, this works great with your spouse too!

5 1-on-1 time:

Try to find time to communicate 1-on-1 with each of your children, as well as your spouse. Be in the present moment to listen and give them your undivided attention. Some things can only be expressed when you are alone with them. These deeper conversations develop stronger bonds and allow you to deal with any unaddressed issues.

You don't have to practise all these tips all the time to bond with your family. A small yet consistent effort is key. The most important thing is to consciously make meaningful interactions and communications with them to create a positive atmosphere at home. This will go a long way towards promoting a stronger family bond. Like the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "A house is made with walls and beams; a home is built with love and dreams." PP





The current situation has been tough on many parents. School closures, working from home, and enforced social distancing can be a challenge for anyone to navigate, especially if you happen to be a parent. Thus with our busy lifestyles, modern parents need to be more resourceful & efficient.

Meet Modern Challenges with Smart Parenting

By **Datuk Dr Zulkifli Ismail**, Consultant Paediatrician and Paediatric Cardiologist

The impact to our lives

There's no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a severe impact on us, especially our reliance on the internet and our digital habits. Due to the nature of the hybrid work-home environment, more Malaysian parents are online than ever.

This has contributed to digital media becoming a part of every parents' toolkit, leading to what we call "the new normal". Many parents regard the internet as the 'go-to' resource for research on parenting information and also the destination of choice when shopping online for child-related or other household products.

Plan ahead to juggle parenthood duties efficiently

Our time is limited, especially during the pandemic. To make the most of it, planning ahead is absolutely crucial because it helps you better optimise your time for daily/weekly household chores and any family activities. A simple example is to plan your menu for the week (which is a big help if you're cooking). It saves you time and

money when grocery shopping (i.e. you only buy what's needed instead of buying on impulse) and you also won't waste time wondering what to cook every day. Various apps like OurHome, Whisk and HappyFresh are available nowadays to help you plan menu and chores, look for recipes and help with grocery shopping.

Another modern tool is to use time-saving devices such as modern and reliable home/kitchen appliances for cooking and cleaning. Nowadays, there are many such devices that boast a variety of features which are useful for busy parents. Many of these home/kitchen appliances can be expensive, so you definitely want something that's worth your investment. Thus, browse



the internet to compare information with others and look for useful reviews.

Digital credibility

The internet is also the main resource for modern parents to look for various parenting information, e.g. child health and development, nutrition, family planning, etc. It can be difficult to know who to trust when looking at information online, hence this is where a little “smart parenting” comes into play.

Working parents need to be more digitally savvy in recognising credible websites and this would be a big help for the modern “smart” parent as it will help you achieve a better balance between work and family, especially in adapting to the post-pandemic changes to our lifestyle.

With the wealth of online parenting resources available, the trick is finding reliable ones and here are some useful tips:

- **Internet domain:** Common ones include *.com*, *.org*, and *.net* which can be bought and used by individuals. However, the *.edu* domain is reserved for schools, colleges and universities, while *.gov* denotes that it is a government website. Thus, *.edu* and *.gov* domains are much more credible sources for information. The *.org* is normally used by non-profit organisations, but it’s good to be discerning when using these websites.

- **Author’s details:** Credible sources of information usually include the author’s name. Sometimes, the author’s designation or their contact information are also included, and this is a good sign that the information provided is reliable.

- **Relevant dates:** Credible information should include relevant dates, especially if it quotes research information or when the information was found on the Internet. This is helpful to see whether the information is recent enough for your consideration.



- **Source of information listed:** Any credible websites should cite the source of the information they have presented, and preferably include links as well (just like how books or scholarly articles include a list of references).

- **Website ‘quality’:** The website’s style and grammar can give you a clue to its credibility. A poorly designed website that features grammatical errors and/or typos is indicative that it may not be credible.

- **Online safety:** Practise online safety whenever you’re using the internet or letting your child use the internet. You can watch educational online programmes together with them, learn child-friendly home activities online or play simple online games with them as a way to spend time together. What’s important is the family time spent together while keeping them safe from online threats.

A smarter parent is a more productive parent

It is a constant challenge to juggle both family and work, so parents should definitely learn how to manage time efficiently. This will leave you with more time for your family, and you will find more productive days ahead as you will be able to achieve more goals.

Being more efficient and productive can go a long way toward that perfect family you aspire to have, while still maintaining remote working productivity, and at the same time, keeping our families safe and healthy. However, let’s also not forget that there’s a silver lining to the COVID-19 pandemic, i.e. an opportunity to engage more closely with our families and manage our time better. PP

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Parents play a crucial role in helping to prevent the spread of infectious diseases, such as influenza, especially to their own infants and children.

Flu Prevention among Parents

By **Dr Husna Musa**, Paediatrician and Lecturer
Dato' Dr Musa Mohd Nordin, Consultant Paediatrician and Neonatologist

This is because influenza easily spreads from one person to another, and statistics show that 1 in 4 infants or young children are hospitalised because of this disease. Influenza is also a greater threat than the common cold as it can cause serious complications.

Home exposure

Even if infants or young children stay at home without going out, they still face indirect exposure to influenza from their parents or other caregivers/visitors.

In the case of parents, they may be exposed to influenza when they go out to work, buy groceries, or for any social gathering. As parents usually have close contact with their children, this increases the

risk of transmission; especially since they could be an asymptomatic carrier. What's worse is that often influenza is also mistaken for the common cold as they both have similar symptoms such as fever, cough and runny nose.

One of the reasons why infants or young children tend to be more severely affected by influenza is because their immune system is still developing. Delays in getting treatment because it is mistaken for the common cold can also increase the risk of complications such as pneumonia, bronchitis, sinus and ear infections.

If your child has a chronic health condition (e.g. asthma,

heart disease, diabetes, etc.) or is below 5 years of age, then he would also face a higher risk of developing complications.

What you can do to prevent influenza

There has been an unexpected positive outcome from the pandemic, with regards to influenza. Because influenza is a type of respiratory infection, the recent COVID-19 prevention SOPs have been helpful in also limiting the spread of influenza. Coupled with the Movement Control Order that started in 2020, this has led to a drop in the number of reported influenza cases in Malaysia.

As a quick recap, these are the preventive steps you should observe as they are useful in flu prevention:



- Avoid taking infants out to public places as there is a higher risk of exposure.



- When taking a child out to public areas, make sure that he wears a facemask.



- Use a hand sanitiser when taking him out of the house.

- If you have flu-like symptoms:

- Keep your distance from him until you have fully recovered



- Follow proper sneezing/ coughing etiquette



- Use a hand sanitiser after touching your face/nose

- Do not share your eating utensils, drinking straws, drinks or toothbrush with him



While the COVID-19 SOPs and the measures described above can help minimise the risk of influenza to your child, your best option for prevention still lies with vaccination. In addition to vaccinating your child against influenza, do get yourself vaccinated every year too. Just as how the COVID-19 vaccination has been successful in reducing the number of cases (thus helping to control the pandemic), flu vaccination is also crucial for preventing flu outbreak.

Don't leave it to chance

Most experts agree vaccination plays a crucial role in the prevention of childhood diseases. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), US Advisory Committee on Immunisation Practices (ACIP), and even the Malaysian Paediatric Association (MPA)

all advocate that young children (from 6 months and older) should be vaccinated against influenza every year.

As parents, you may not fall under the high-risk group but vaccination is still an important form of prevention. As the active influenza virus is different every year, you will need to be vaccinated every year for optimal protection. Remember, by protecting yourself, you are also protecting your child. Despite the cliché, prevention is the best cure! PP



MAT-MV-2101049-7/21

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Babies love to be touched. It is one of the senses that develops even before they are born, and one of the best ways for parents to quickly bond with their little ones.

Baby Massage & Its Benefits

By **Datuk Dr Zulkifli Ismail**, Consultant Paediatrician and Paediatric Cardiologist

Massage is a form of skin-to-skin contact that helps improve the bond between parents and infants as it helps to engender trust, especially in the first few years of a baby's life. Both fathers and mothers also should engage in other forms of physical contact such as cuddling, hugging and rocking newborn babies.

Massage = big benefits

Massage is a primal form of intimacy between mum and her baby. One of its benefits is that it helps stimulate maternal feelings, as well as the release

of hormone oxytocin. This hormone is usually secreted before pregnancy, during birth and later as mum comes into physical contact with the baby. It is responsible for triggering various physiological functions and emotions such as happiness, attraction, love, and affection.

Another benefit is that touch also helps mum's colostrum (the first milk that is full of nutrients that protect the baby) to flow more easily. Mums are also likely to experience more positive breastfeeding and improved breast milk production. So make sure that

you supplement your baby massage sessions with lots of hugs and cuddles!

And while mum is reaping those benefits, massage and other forms of close physical touch with baby has a powerful effect on their mental, emotional and physical development, both in the short term, and long term as it helps to:



- Regulate baby's heartbeat, breathing and body temperature



- Relax and soothe baby, thus improving his sleep quality & quantity



- Decrease crying time



- Improve weight gain



- Stimulate digestion, and interest in breastfeeding



- Reduce baby's emotional stress



- Promotes closer parental bond with baby (also helps to reduce mum's risk of postnatal depression)

Why preemies need this too

Premature babies will benefit from infant massage, but the technique differs from the massage for ordinary term babies. The positive effect of baby massage on weight gain is well documented. Reduced stress hormone (cortisol) has been shown to occur too. There are many other positive benefits as well.

Preemies should not be massaged when they are on the ventilator or require oxygen. Preterm baby massage is only done when the baby is out of the woods and already stable.



Improving your bond

Baby massage is also a great way to improve the bond between parents and their baby. However, avoid giving your baby a massage if he is feeling unwell or has a fever. In the case of colic, baby massage has been shown to help alleviate the symptoms.

While you can give him a massage at any time, it's preferable to set a routine for him to look forward to – for example, right after bath time or before you put him to bed at night. You may also opt to use baby massage oil/lotion/

cream. However, before doing so, do consult with your paediatrician first.

Baby massage should be delivered using a slightly firm but gentle touch to convey a parent's care and love to their little one. For more details on how you can do this, you may refer to previous *Positive Parenting* article "Massaging Your Baby".

Remember to take full advantage of this early chance to bond with your baby by starting right after his birth. Don't miss out on giving your baby a massage as it is a simple way for you to start bonding with your child! PP



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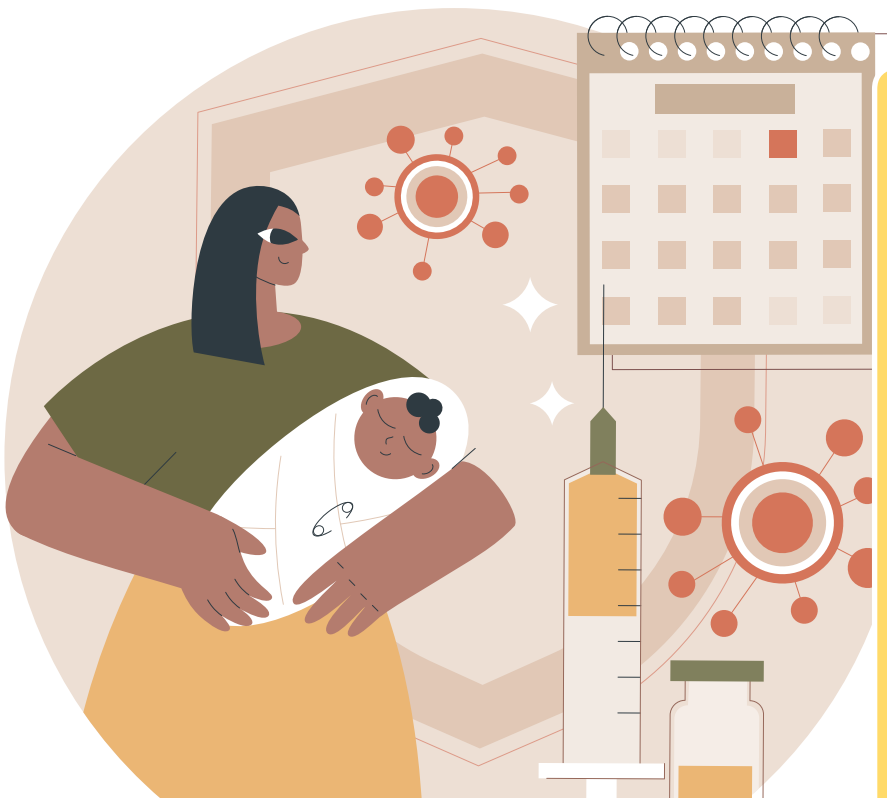


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One of the better pieces of news we received last year was the inclusion of pneumococcal vaccine in the national immunisation programme (NIP). However, it's currently only available for babies born in 2020 or later. What about those who were born earlier and have missed it?

Leave No One Behind: Pneumococcal Catch-Up Vaccination

by **Datuk Dr Zulkifli Ismail**, Consultant Paediatrician & Paediatric Cardiologist

Timely vaccination is crucial to ensure that a population is fully safeguarded against vaccine-preventable diseases (VPDs) as early as possible and

will be able to sustain herd immunity; and also to prevent massive outbreaks. Yet, even with the best efforts, not all individuals will manage to get

their vaccinations as scheduled according to the NIP. This is where "catch-up vaccination" comes into play.

Catch-up vaccination

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), catch-up vaccination is defined as the practice of vaccinating a person who has not received the recommended doses of vaccines according to the routine NIP schedule due to a number of reasons including delays, out-of-stock vaccines, no access, hesitancy, service interruptions, etc.

Catch-up vaccination serves a major role in preventing possible immunisation gaps that could affect herd immunity. The best course for everyone to fully benefit from a vaccination exercise is to receive the recommended vaccines as soon as they are eligible. However, those who are "late" should also "catch up" when they can.

Certain vaccines do have upper age limits for administration, but most are safe and effective to administer without any upper age limit. For most VPDs, a late vaccination will still result in vital protection against morbidity and mortality. Though timely vaccination should always be the aim, keep in mind that even with vaccination, it is better late than never!

Catching up with pneumococcal vaccination

In Malaysia, pneumococcal vaccination for children was introduced in the NIP last year for babies born in and after 2020. However, this means that children born earlier, including those who are toddlers or in kindergartens currently, would not be eligible for the vaccination. This group of children should be considered for catch-up vaccinations.

Why is it important to vaccinate the catch-up population against pneumococcus?

Pneumococcus is the leading cause of bacterial meningitis among children under 5 years old. Young children also have a high risk of suffering

other severe complications due to pneumococcus, including pneumonia and bacteraemia. The catch-up population also tends to spend more time in close proximity with other children at child care centres and kindergartens, thus exposing them to a higher risk of infection.

Additionally, pneumococcal catch-up vaccination prevents children from being carriers who can transmit the deadly bacteria to infants, elderly and other high-risk groups. In fact, 20-60% of school-aged children may be carriers. The duration of carriage may vary, but it is generally longer in children

than adults. On top of that, catch-up vaccinations help to reduce other associated burdens (cost, productivity, life quality, etc.) due to illness and hospitalisation.

The WHO 2019 position paper on pneumococcal conjugate vaccines (PCV) in infants and children states that catch-up vaccinations should be applied when introducing PCV in the NIP to speed up its preventive impact on the disease in children between 1-5 years old, especially in settings with a high disease burden and mortality. The more children are vaccinated, the faster herd immunity can be achieved.

Recommended catch-up schedule for PCV (from WHO position paper)

Pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (PCV)	
Age of 1st dose	6 weeks (min)
Doses in primary series (min interval between doses)	3 doses (4 weeks) OR 2 doses (8 weeks)
Interrupted primary series	Resume without repeating previous dose
Doses for those who start vaccination late	≤ 12 months: 2-3 doses
	1-2 yrs: 2 doses
	1-5 yrs at high-risk (e.g. HIV, sickle-cell disease): 2 doses
	2-5 yrs: 1 dose



Children who are eligible to receive the vaccine under the NIP can still get the vaccine even if they miss their schedule; just contact the nearest Klinik Kesihatan to arrange for an appointment. Those who are not eligible can get their catch-up vaccination from private healthcare providers. It's never too late for your child to get the pneumococcal vaccination even if they don't qualify for the shot in the NIP. Speak to your doctor to find out more about how your little one can catch up! PP

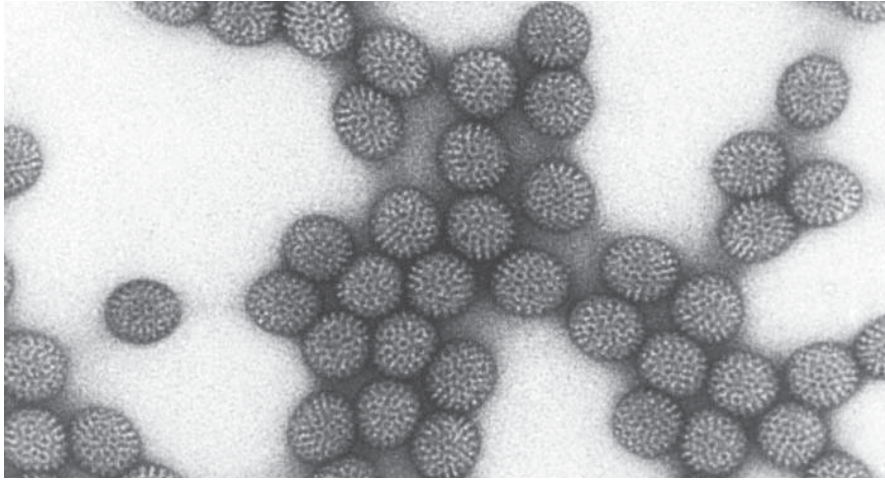
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What You Need to Know about Rotavirus

by **Datuk Dr Zulkifli Ismail**, Consultant Paediatrician & Paediatric Cardiologist

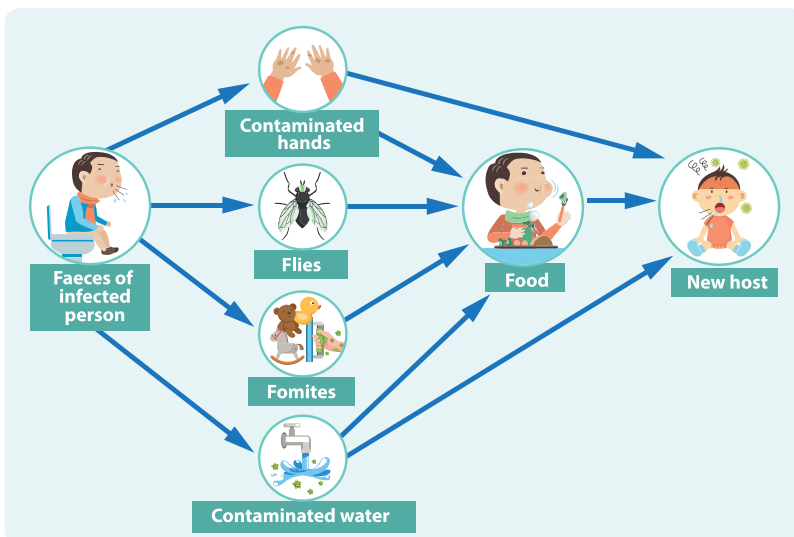


Source: CDC USA

What is rotavirus?

- The name *rotavirus* was suggested by Thomas Henry Flewett in 1974 after he observed that a rotavirus particle looks like a wheel (rota in Latin) when viewed through an electron microscope.
- There are nine species of rotavirus, consisting of *Rotavirus A, B, C, D, F, G, H, I* and *J*.
- *Rotavirus A* is the most common species, causing the majority (>90%) of rotavirus infections in humans.
- It is also the most common cause of severe diarrhoea among infants and young children.
- It is estimated that every child would have been infected by rotavirus at least once by the age of five.
- A study published in 2016 estimated that rotavirus causes 27 deaths, 31,000 hospitalisations and 41,000 outpatient visits in Malaysia annually.

How does rotavirus infection spread?



- Rotavirus is a highly contagious virus that is transmitted by the faecal-oral route.
- The viruses are shed in high amount in the stool of infected people and spread easily through hand-to-mouth and close person-to-person contact, as well as by fomites (surfaces and objects, like door handles and toys), food and beverages, and unclean water.
- The virus is very stable and may remain viable in the environment for a long time, up to weeks, if there is no disinfection process.

What are the common signs of rotavirus infection?

Typical signs include gastrointestinal symptoms, which generally resolve in 3-7 days and are non-specific, such as:



Diarrhoea



Abdominal pain



Fever



Vomiting



Tiredness

How can rotavirus infection be managed?

- Consult a doctor if your child is showing any symptoms of severe rotavirus infection or dehydration.
- Certain medications may be prescribed to alleviate the symptoms. Note that antibiotics are not effective against viral infections.
- The main focus of treatment is to prevent dehydration:
 - Babies: Continue feeding them with breast-milk or formula as usual. Oral rehydration solutions (ORS) may be necessary.
 - Older children: Give plenty of fluids from drinks or foods. ORS may be prescribed to the child.
 - Avoid carbonated drinks, apple juice, dairy products and sugary foods, as these may worsen diarrhoea.

What do you need to be alert of?

Beware of severe dehydration in your child as this can be life-threatening! Here are the signs:



Little urination or dry diapers



Crying with no tears



Dry mouth and throat



Irritability



Extreme sleepiness



Sunken eyes



Poor skin elasticity

How can it be prevented?

- Good hygiene
 - Frequent and thorough hand-washing (e.g. after using the toilet, changing your child's diaper).
 - Regular cleaning method is insufficient; the best option is to use a bleach solution (1 part bleach + 9 parts water) to disinfect surfaces/objects.
- Rotavirus vaccination
 - Vaccination is the primary public health intervention against rotavirus.
 - Two types of oral vaccine available: 2-dose series and 3-dose series.
 - Can be given as early as age 6 weeks with a minimum interval of 4 weeks between doses and maximum age for any doses at age 8 months.
 - Speak to your doctor to learn more about rotavirus vaccination. PP

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New parents or a baby on the way?



Speak to a healthcare provider about **prevention of rotavirus diarrhoea.**

Rotavirus diarrhoea is very common and has potentially serious outcomes.¹

By the age of 5 **nearly every child** is likely to have encountered rotavirus.¹

Babies are most susceptible to rotavirus disease which may cause **severe diarrhoea and vomiting**, putting them at risk of **dehydration** and **hospitalisation**.¹

While hygiene and breastfeeding are important, they are not enough to prevent rotavirus diarrhoea. Vaccination against rotavirus diarrhoea is the most effective way to help protect your baby.¹⁻³



References: 1. European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. ECDC Expert opinion on rotavirus vaccination in infancy. Stockholm: ECDC; 2017. 2. Tate JE, *et al.* Lancet Infect Dis. 2012; 12(2): 136–41. 3. Rotavirus gastroenteritis. World Health Organization. Accessed June 2019. Available at: <http://www.emro.who.int/health-topics/rotavirus-gastroenteritis/disease-and-epidemiology.html>

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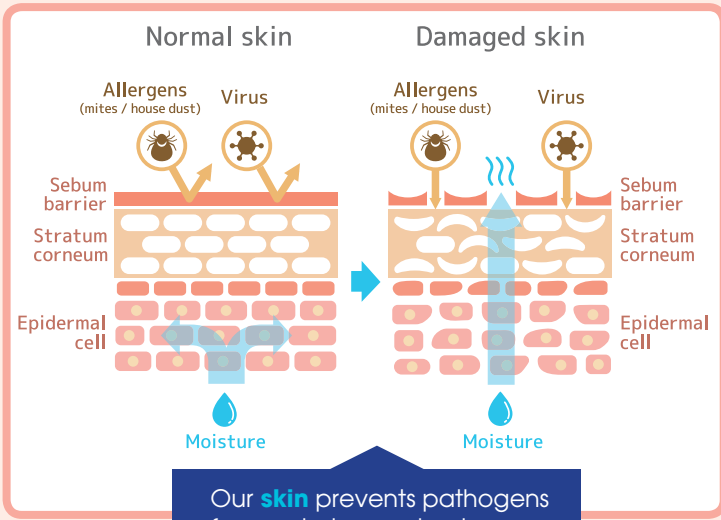


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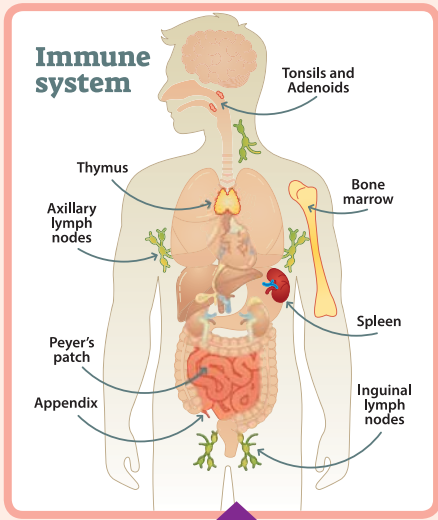
By Prof Dr Raja Affendi Raja Ali, Consultant Physician & Gastroenterologist

WHAT IS THE IMMUNE SYSTEM?

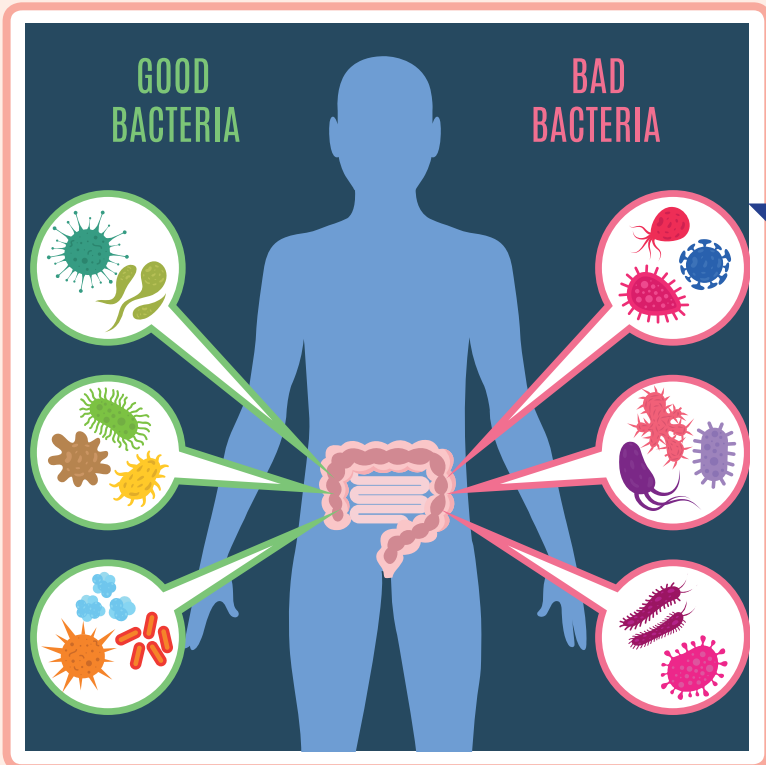
Our immune system is made up of many different organs which contribute to our immunity:



Our **skin** prevents pathogens from entering our body



Various **internal organs** (e.g. bone marrow, spleen, lymph nodes) produce cells/antibodies that specifically target pathogens.



The **digestive system** helps defend against pathogens entering via the gastrointestinal tract. The digestive & immune systems work together to signal immune cells. The gut is also the largest immune organ in human body. The gut microbiota, which are the microbes living in the gut, enhances immunity by forming a protective barrier and signalling (communicating) with immune cells.

Good bacteria (gut microbiota) also helps your body digest food and supports your child's immune system. Keys to good digestive health:

Consume balanced, nutrient-dense diet rich in fruits, vegetables and whole grains



Eat a variety of food as they provide important vitamins, minerals, and dietary fibre. Some vegetables also contain prebiotics (i.e. indigestible fibres that good bacteria feed on). This will contribute to optimal digestive health, which in turn helps improve the digestive process.

Manage stress & get enough sleep



Stress and lack of sleep can negatively affect both digestive health and mental wellbeing. To prevent this, manage stress effectively and get sufficient sleep daily.

Include probiotic-rich foods in our diet



This includes food such as cultured milk drinks, yoghurt that contains probiotic live cultures, and fermented food (e.g. kimchi, sauerkraut, *tempeh*). Studies have found that probiotics promote good digestive health and can both directly and indirectly enhance our immune system.

Exercise & hydrate



Helps improve diversity of gut microbiota. Try simple exercises, e.g. brisk walking around the house compound or indoor exercises such as stationary bike workouts, yoga, tai chi, and light stretching exercises. Drink plenty of water to stay well-hydrated. Exercise and staying hydrated help ensure proper food digestion, bowel movement and also helps maintain a healthy balance of good vs bad bacteria.



Take oral nutritional supplements with live probiotic cultures



Supplementing your probiotic intake is usually not a worry. It is good to consult your doctor first to learn if supplementation is necessary and to see the most suitable probiotic supplement for you or your family.

HOW PROBIOTICS HELP

- Inhibits pathogenic (bad) bacteria by competing for nutrients.
- Forms a protective barrier preventing harmful pathogens from entering our body.
- Modulates our body's immune responses (e.g. stimulates production of antibodies, signals immune cells) in response to infection.

TIPS FOR CONSUMING PROBIOTICS

- The probiotic strain in a product or supplement must be clinically proven and supported by studies and data that show the safety and efficacy of the product. E.g. *Bifidobacterium lactis* BB-12 and *Lactobacillus paracasei* L.CASEI 431.
- Choose products with minimal or no added sugar.
- Store probiotic products properly to optimise their effectiveness. This helps to maximise the viability of live strains before consumption. Some products require no refrigeration while others need to be refrigerated.
- Consult your doctor for further information.

Why Good Digestion and Nutrient Absorption are Important for Kids?

By **Dr Sharifah Intan Zainun Sharif Ishak**, Nutritionist and Member of Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM)

Better digestion leads to more efficient nutrient absorption, which contributes to optimal growth and development. This is also essential to maintain healthy body functions and strong immunity.



One key aspect of good digestive health is efficient nutrient absorption. While the majority of this process happens in the small intestine, it begins in the mouth with the first bite. To ensure that children get the most nutrients from the food they are consuming and to avoid nutrient deficiencies, the nutrient absorption process has to be efficient.

Good digestion and nutrient absorption are crucial for optimal growth and development, as well as optimal body functions. In fact, a huge part of the immune system is housed in the gut. So, it is important to make sure that your child's digestive health is in the top condition for his or her overall health.

Factors influencing nutrient absorption

• **Bioavailability of nutrients:**

This refers to the proportion of nutrients from food that is absorbed, utilised and stored by the body. The bioavailability of different nutrients depends on various factors that can either enhance or inhibit its bioavailability, such as the:

- Physical form of the food (e.g. raw, cooked, chopped, processed)
- Chemical form of the nutrient (e.g. heme iron from animal sources is easier to be absorbed compared to non-heme iron)
- Nutrient concentration
- Interaction with other nutrients or compounds in foods (e.g. Maillard reaction reduces protein digestibility)

• **Medications and health:**

Certain medications like laxatives can interfere with the nutrient absorption process. Being sick, stressed or immobile may also affect nutrient absorption.

• **Individual variables:**

Age, gender, genetics, nutritional status, diet, pregnancy, lifestyle – all these factors can affect nutrient absorption. For instance, the level of gastric acid will decline as we age, and hence, our ability to absorb nutrients follows suit. In contrast, children's gut tends to be more sensitive, which can also affect digestion and absorption.

Boosting nutrient absorption

A healthy digestive system is important for efficient nutrient absorption and vice versa.

Here are some ways to promote digestion and boost nutrient absorption in your child:

- **Balanced and varied diet:** The key to obtaining all the nutrients needed by the body is to **eat a variety of food in balanced proportions.**

Include various colourful vegetables and fruits in your child's diet to get different types of nutrients. Try different varieties of proteins, from nuts and legumes, fish and seafood, as well as poultry and meat.

- **Go for less processed foods:** Highly-processed foods tend to be higher in refined carbs, food additives and trans-fats, which may negatively affect digestive health. **Prepare fresh and whole foods** for your family, e.g. by making your own chicken nuggets, instead of buying fast food or ready-made products.

- **Choose nutrient-dense foods:** Nutrient-dense foods are important to provide



essential nutrients to fulfil the recommended nutrient intake for children's optimal growth.

Opt for more nutrient-dense foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, milk and dairy products.

- **Increase fibre and good fat:** Fibre is beneficial for digestive health and can be obtained from grains, nuts, seeds, fruits and vegetables. Meanwhile, good fats (unsaturated fats in fatty fishes, nuts and seeds) are essential for proper nutrient absorption of some vitamins.
- **Prepare foods with suitable methods:** Foods need to be prepared and cooked in the right manner to retain nutrients. **Don't overcook** green leafy vegetables or soak them

for too long in water **as excessive heat treatment will cause nutrient loss.** In contrast, some vegetables like tomatoes have to be cooked to enhance nutrient absorption.

- **Stay hydrated:** Sufficient fluid intake is necessary for good digestion and to prevent constipation. Plain water, milk and water-rich fruits and vegetables are good sources of hydration. Encourage children to **drink 6-8 glasses of water every day**, or more on a hot day or after an intense physical activity.
- **Eat and chew slowly:** Chewing breaks down food into smaller pieces, while saliva in the mouth starts the digestion process. Advise your child to chew food thoroughly and slowly so that it's **easier for the body to absorb the nutrients** in the small intestine.
- **Be active:** Regular physical activity is another way to improve digestion and promote healthy bowel movement. You can take a short walk with your child after a meal.

The best match

- **Vitamin C and plant-based iron:** Vitamin C helps increase the absorption of non-heme iron in plants. **Tips:** Pair your child's breakfast of iron-rich wholegrain sandwiches with orange juice (source of vitamin C).
- **Vitamin D and calcium:** Vitamin D from food and sunlight helps boost calcium absorption. **Tips:** Play outdoors more often with your child, so they can get more vitamin D from sunlight. You can also pair foods offering vitamin D (salmon, tuna, egg yolk) with calcium-rich foods (broccoli, collard greens) for your family.
- **Fat and fat-soluble vitamins:** Vitamins A, D, E and K (fat-soluble vitamins) are more readily absorbed by the body when paired with fat. **Tips:** Opt for good unsaturated fats from olive oil, fatty fish, nuts and seeds, to complement food sources of fat-soluble vitamins.

On top of the advice recommended above, an easy and good strategy to remember is "balance, moderation and variety" in your diet. Then your child can eat healthily, grow healthily and live healthily! PP

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The Benefits of Having Pets & Things to Consider Before Getting One

By **Prof Dr Alvin Ng**, Clinical Psychologist and Founding President of the Malaysian Society of Clinical Psychology (MSCP)



Having a pet at home can have numerous benefits for the family, including children. Caring for and playing with pets can have a positive influence on kids and contributes to their well-being.

Pet benefits

The benefits of having a pet cover a wide range of factors such as mutual unconditional love and acceptance (between the child and pet), and most importantly, it helps kids develop a sense of care, love, support, acknowledgement and connection. Having a pet can also provide kids with a positive way to manage stress and learn about responsibility.

Letting your child care for a pet can help him develop self-esteem, self-confidence, compassion and empathy. Your child's pet can also become a confidant and help him understand some

of life's more complicated lessons related to reproduction, birth, illnesses, accidents and death. Most of all, having a pet can teach your child to become more independent, proactive and responsible.

The experience of having a pet and caring for it involves a deep process of engagement between your child and the pet in question. Learning how to care and nurture another living being is a huge responsibility, which allows for development of executive functioning (e.g. problem-solving, decision-making,

planning, organising, critical thinking, etc.). Your child is likely to learn how to:

- Plan and organise activities related to pet-care (e.g. training, feeding, grooming, etc).
- Respond to a crisis (e.g. pet becomes ill, problem with the pet's habitat, etc).

Getting the right pet

When it's time to get your child a pet, you need to sit down with him and talk about what type of pet is suitable for him based on factors such as where you live, who you live with or whether anyone has allergies.

As a general guide, these are some points to consider when getting a pet:

● Home & lifestyle:

Firstly, the size of your home limits the size of your pet, and this is especially true for dog-lovers (the larger the breed, the more space the dogs will need). If you happen to live in a small apartment or share a house with other people, this would also further limit your pet of choice.

● Time & commitment:

Your family's lifestyle determines how much time

you and your child have to spend on pets. In general, smaller-sized pets need less attention, so you can use this as a general guide to decide on the type of pet.

● Level of responsibility:

If the pet will be under your child's care, you will need to assess his level of responsibility, his capability in caring for the pet, and even the complexity of care that may be required. Ensure that the added responsibility should not clash with existing ones such as schooling. If you fail to take these factors into account, the pet's care would fall back to you as the parent.

● Start simple:

The level of care varies from pet to pet so if it's your child's first time caring for one, it's better to opt for an animal that's beginner-friendly, e.g. fish (guppies,

beta fish, or goldfish), hamsters, guinea pigs, or some species of cats/dogs. Avoid exotic pets or wild animals as they can be difficult to care for and may bite/scratch their owners. Certain wild animals are also illegal to keep as pets in Malaysia, such as pangolins or the Indian star tortoise. Make sure you do your research before heading to the pet store. Just because it's sold at the store, doesn't make it right!

Ideally, the final choice should be a pet that you have experience with. This will allow you to share your own experience in caring for it with your child and thus provide him with proper guidance. As a bonus, this is also a chance to spend some quality time together.

Developing skills for adult life

Caring for a pet encourages your child to develop skills in problem solving, creativity, critical thinking, reaching out for help and being resourceful. These skills contribute to better resilience and the ability to adapt to life's challenges, helping him to be more independent. Let's inspire our children towards personal competency and guide them to thrive on their self-efficacy!



You are your own backup

Lastly, you should also be prepared for the worst case scenario! If your child fails at fulfilling his end of the deal by not caring for the pet properly or neglecting it completely, you will need to either sit down with him to talk things through, or take over the responsibility yourself.

The responsibility of owning a pet is one that will span many years. With dogs and cats, that could mean over a decade. Make sure your family understands this commitment before deciding on getting an additional member of the family! PP

An educational contribution by



Malaysian Paediatric Association



The Peril of Teen Sexting

By **Dr Nazeli Hamzah**, Consultant Paediatrician and Past President of Malaysian Association for Adolescent Health

The trend of teen sexting has become a growing problem in the digital age, following the increasing smartphone ownership among teens. What are the concerns associated with this issue, and how can parents prepare their children and themselves to deal with it?

Sexting, a portmanteau of the words “sex” and “texting”, is a relatively recent phenomenon that basically means sending or receiving sexually explicit messages, pictures, or videos via smartphone, computer, or any digital device. Examples of the content (sexts) include nude photos, explicit videos and text messages about sex acts.

Sexting in numbers

95% of teens have access to a smartphone^a

45% of teens constantly use their smartphone^a



1 in 7 teens sends sexts^b



1 in 4 teens receives sexts^b

Reference: a) Pew Research Centre

b) S. Madigan, et al, JAMA Pediatr., Apr 2018

Forms of sexting

The occurrence of sexting has risen with the advance in digital communication; hence it is more popular among the younger generation. Some individuals even consider sexting as part of a digital romantic ritual between lovers. However, sexting is risky behaviour and should be discouraged, especially among teens. There are different forms of sexting:

- **Consensual:** Both senders and receivers are in a consensual or romantic relationship and both are comfortable with the act. However, there are still risks associated with sexting even if it is consensual. Note that it is not considered as consensual when sexting happens between an adult and an underage teen.

- **Coerced:** Even in a romantic relationship, there may be an element of pressure or coercion when producing or exchanging sexting materials. A common example is when a girl is asked by her boyfriend to send him nude photos of herself, even when she is uncomfortable with it.
- **Non-consensual:** This can be considered as a form of sexual harassment. For instance, when a person receives unsolicited sexts. Another example is when sexts are forwarded or disseminated to others without the consent of the original sender, particularly when the sext contains an explicit image or video.



What can parents do?

- **Start early:** Introduce your child to sexual education early. Build trust and allow your children to feel comfortable sharing anything with you. Discuss the topic of sexting and its dangers before giving them access to a smartphone, webcam or other digital devices.
- **Set guidelines:** If they want to use a smartphone, they have to follow your rules regarding its usage. For example, no gadgets after bedtime or during dinner. You may want to consider monitoring their smartphones from time to time. Phone/

What can go wrong?

The main problem with sexting is the risk of the sext becoming exposed to unintended audiences, whether done intentionally by the recipient, due to accidents/mistakes, or because the sext is stolen or hacked by a malicious party. Because it's so easy to spread this type of sensitive information on the Internet, the risk of being victimised is very high. Here are some possible consequences of sexting:

- **Humiliation:** A sext that has been widely leaked may lead to bullying (online or physical) and harassment of the subject of the sext. This can traumatise and disgrace the victim, and result in depression and even suicidal thoughts.
- **Sextortion:** A more serious consequence is when the subject of the sext is threatened with dissemination of their explicit image or video by a malicious individual to get money, sex or more images in exchange. This traps the victim in an endless cycle of extortion and leads to an even worse psychological outcome.
- **Internet is forever:** Everything that is uploaded or posted online can stay there forever. Leaked sexts may come back to haunt these teens in the future and continue to negatively affect their education, career and personal relationships.
- **Legal repercussions:** Making, keeping or sharing any kind of explicit materials, especially of an underage teen or child are illegal in Malaysia. In some countries, there have been cases where teens are investigated or even charged for producing and sending their own images/videos.

gadget privileges can be suspended if they violate stricter rules, e.g. keeping explicit images.

- **Explain the consequences:** Teens and children may not realise that they have no control of what happens to their image or video once it is sent or uploaded, even if they try to delete it afterwards. Ask them to carefully think about their actions before hitting that send button and to consider the risk of that material being seen by their friends at school, even if the message is supposed to be private.
- **Advice on what to do:** If someone asks your teen to send sexts, tell them to refuse and block the person. If they receive a random unsolicited sext, they may delete the image and block the person. But in case the

person continues to harass the teen, it may be necessary for parents to keep the sext as evidence for a police report. As a general rule, teens need to inform parents or a trusted adult if they have any concerns.

The emergence of various techs has led to new challenges in parenting. In fact, some teens are more adept than their parents at keeping up with the fast pace of technology. Hence, it is important for parents to keep themselves informed as well, to be aware of possible problems that may arise, and to know how to deal with these problems. PP

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