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Supporting Quality Childcare for Military Families

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Children's Healthy Foundations: Taking the Right Steps

The Alliance for Childhood Policy Brief 1 (2009) shares "Children's health – today and in the future – is a critical public health challenge. Physicians tell us that today's children will live shorter lives than their parents, while economists predict that the long-term cost of childhood obesity will be catastrophic." As we look at the challenges we face, we can gather information to increase our knowledge and better our practices to strengthen healthy foundations for children and families.

To support children's healthy foundations we need to improve child nutrition and increase physical activity. Along with proper nutrition and exercise, nourish children in their relationships, their mental well-being, their communities, their environments, and in their physical and cognitive development.

"Every system that touches the lives of children offers an opportunity to strengthen the foundations and capacities that make lifelong healthy development possible." (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University 2010)

TAKING THE RIGHT STEPS

Play – "Children used to play for hours each day, burning calories and keeping fit and healthy. At the same time play helped them socialize with others, develop mental acuity, and reduce stress. With the decline of play, all areas of child development have suffered, but the impact on health and obesity is most alarming." (Alliance for Childhood 2009)

The Right Step: Allow ample time for play each day in both the outdoor and indoor settings. Offer safe, clean, organized environments. Include materials that are developmentally appropriate, inspire open ended ideas, wonder, and joy.

Build Relationships - "A child's environment of relationships can affect lifelong outcomes in emotional health, regulation of stress response systems, immune system competence, and the early establishment of health-related behaviors." (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University 2010)

The Right Step: Talk, laugh, sing, play, look at, and listen to children. Provide predictable routines and responses that are calm, kind, and fit the child's temperament, culture, and development.

Get Good Sleep – "Too little sleep is linked to increased risk of obesity, diabetes and heart disease. Improved awareness is needed that good sleep is as important as diet and exercise in maintaining health and helping prevent chronic diseases." (Fighting the Clock: How America's Sleep Deficit is Damaging Longterm Health 2012)

The Right Step: Find and share information regarding the importance of proper sleep recommendations for children. Be sure your own sleep patterns are healthy.

TAKING THE RIGHT STEPS (continued)

Move – "Today, children experience a very different lifestyle. Walks to and from school have been replaced by car and bus rides. Gym class and after-school sports have been cut; afternoons are now spent with TV, video games, and the internet. Children need 60 minutes of play with moderate to vigorous activity every day to grow up to a healthy weight." (Let's Move: Learn the Facts 2010)	*The Right Step: Encourage and model movement several times a day in safe spaces with responsive adults.*
Go Outside – Nature is said to lower stress, encourage opportunity for physical movement, and build strong immune systems. As stated in the National Wildlife Foundation's Why Be Out There campaign, "Children who play outside are more physically active, more creative in their play, less aggressive and show better concentration." (National Wildlife Federation 2012)	*The Right Step: Introduce children to natural environments and materials. Look to your communities for outdoor spaces such as yards, parks, nature preserves, and woods.*
Know Nutrition – "Health at every stage of the life course is influenced by nutrition…" (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University 2010)	*The Right Step: Limit sugary snacks and drinks and provide fruit and vegetables with every meal. Review nutrition information from programs such as U.S. Department of Agriculture's My Plate and the American Academy of Pediatrics' Kids Eat Right.*
Empower Partnerships –"When parent and family engagement activities are systemic and integrated across program foundations and program impact areas, families become empowered partners in learning and development, resulting in children who are healthy and ready for school." (The Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework 2011)	*The Right Step: Be committed to collaborating to achieve goals in a positive, respectful, and culturally relevant manner. Find what works for families and programs to partner.*

"...education is most powerful when it is combined with high-quality health care, parenting, child care, and nutrition."
(McCann 2012)

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