



*5 Steps to a  
Healthy, Happy Child!*

by holistic mama doc, Elisa Song, MD

healthy kids  happy kids



As mamas and papas, we all want to make sure that our kids are healthy and happy, and experience lives full of vitality and wellness.

But how do we do that?

How do we make sure that we give our kids the best chance in life, when so many of our kids are suffering from chronic health concerns such as ADHD, autism, autoimmune illness, anxiety, depression, asthma, eczema, reflux and chronic constipation?

Now, more than ever, we as parents need to know what to do, and what NOT to do.

I'm holistic mama doc – Elisa Song, MD. Read on as I share the 5 steps that I've learned in my decades as a holistic integrative pediatrician and mama to raising healthy, happy kids for a lifetime:

- ♥ **Step 1:** Get the right stuff in
- ♥ **Step 2:** Keep the wrong stuff out
- ♥ **Step 3:** Nurture the gut-brain connection
- ♥ **Step 4:** Prioritize life
- ♥ **Step 5:** Chill out!



## Step 1: Get the right stuff in

A healthy, happy child full of vitality requires the best nourishment possible.

The key ingredients for a vital life include a diet rich in:

- ♥ Whole, unprocessed foods without artificial flavors, preservatives, colors, and sweeteners
- ♥ Organic foods (at a minimum those foods on the [Environmental Working Group's Dirty Dozen list](#))
- ♥ Phytonutrients (eat a rainbow of fruits and vegetables!)
- ♥ Healthy fats (fish oil, coconut oil, flaxseed oil, avocados, egg yolks, etc.)
- ♥ Wild and free-range protein

Even with the most healthy, varied diet, however, our children are often missing or lacking in vital nutrients to optimally nourish their body, mind & spirit.

The key nutrients to consider adding to nourish your child's vitality include:

- ♥ **Omega-3 essential fatty acids.** The best source of omega-3 essential fatty acids is fish oil. Most of us lack an enzyme necessary to convert the fatty acids found in vegetarian sources like flax into omega-3 essential fatty acids. Ensure that your child's fish oil is free of impurities such as heavy metals. Nordic Naturals, Designs for Health, and Metagenics are reputable brands with very high quality fish oils.
- ♥ **Vitamin D3.** Vitamin D is critically important for optimal brain and mood support, and the proper functioning of our cardiovascular, immune, endocrine, and GI systems. The vast majority of kids and adults are deficient in Vitamin D. I encourage you to have your child's 25-OH Vitamin D level checked to ensure that it is in the optimal range of 60-80ng/ml. Once levels are in this range, a MAINTENANCE dose of Vitamin D3 is typically about 1000IU per 25 lb of body weight, although it may take much more than this to get your child's Vitamin D levels in the optimal range.
- ♥ **Magnesium.** Magnesium is often referred to as the "miracle mineral." Magnesium relaxes the body and calms the heart and mind. Most of us are deficient in magnesium. Magnesium-rich foods include dark leafy greens, nuts and seeds, beans and lentils, quinoa, brown rice and dark chocolate! Your child can also take a magnesium supplement (magnesium glycinate is the most calming form of magnesium) or soak in an Epsom salt bath to absorb magnesium through their skin.



## Step 2: Keep the Wrong Stuff Out

For a healthy, happy child full of vitality, keeping the wrong stuff out is just as important as getting the right stuff in.

This is especially important for children with chronic health concerns. Children with chronic health concerns have a harder time detoxifying and getting rid of whatever junk they're exposed to on a day-to-day-basis. This accumulation of toxins can build up in their brains, their joints, their gut, or wherever they have symptoms.

So clean up house! And keep this stuff OUT!

- ♥ **Pesticides in foods** – eat organic foods (at a minimum those foods on the [Environmental Working Group's Dirty Dozen list](#))
- ♥ **Pollutants in your water** – filter your water! Besides good 'ol H<sub>2</sub>O, unfiltered water may contain germs, heavy metals, volatile organic chemicals, pesticides, medications, hormone disruptors, and other chemicals that you definitely don't want your child drinking!
- ♥ **Artificial flavors, preservatives & dyes** – artificial food additives are especially harmful for our kids with ADD/ADHD, sensory issues and behavioral problems. Did you know that the European Union requires a warning label on all foods with artificial dyes that they “may have an adverse effect on activity and attention in children”?!?!
- ♥ **Heavy metals** – heavy metals can be found in fish, chicken, water and plastics, and have a direct impact on our children's developing brains and immune systems. Eat wild free-range fish and chicken, drink filtered water, and reduce plastics.
- ♥ **Plastics and other endocrine disruptors** – our children are suffering from early puberty, thyroid dysfunction and other hormone-related problems, in large part due to the chemicals found in plastics and cosmetics such as bisphenol-A (BPA), parabens, and dioxins. Reduce plastic use – glass, ceramic, and BPA-free containers are safer options. Use paraben-free skin and haircare products. Look at the Environmental Working Group's [Skin Deep Cosmetics Database](#) for to find this year's best products.



## Step 3: Nurture the Gut-Brain Connection

The key to a healthy, happy child is a healthy, happy gut!

You may have heard the gut referred to as the “second brain.” Did you know that over 90% of all the serotonin in our body is made by our gut? Serotonin is our “feel good” hormone. A lack of serotonin can lead to anxiety, depression, attention/focus problems, and a decreased ability to handle stress. Serotonin is also the precursor to melatonin, our “sleep hormone.” If we don’t have enough serotonin, then our body can’t produce enough melatonin, which then affects our ability to fall asleep easily and stay asleep. And if we don’t get enough sleep, our ability to handle stress decreases even more, which further depletes our serotonin and further reduces our melatonin, and on and on...

The gut is also the heart of our immune system and endocrine system. A healthy gut is critical to optimal immune health and hormonal balance in our kids.

There’s mounting evidence that the trillions of bacteria that make up our gut microbiome inform how we think and feel, how our brain works, how our immune system functions, and how our hormones interact. Having a healthy gut microbiome is essential to a healthy, happy child full of vitality!

Ways to ensure a healthy, happy gut:

- ♥ **Eat fermented foods.** Fermented foods are the best way to ensure that your child’s gut is chock full of all the good bugs. While sauerkraut, kimchi, and “real” pickles may not be your child’s cup of tea (yet! ☺), there are some super yummy ways to introduce fermented foods into your child’s diet. Start with a delicious coconut kefir or kombucha (Kevita and GT’s are some of my favorite brands). Yogurt may be an option if your child isn’t sensitive to dairy (See Step 2 below).
- ♥ **Take probiotics.** If despite your best efforts, your child just won’t eat fermented foods, then taking a probiotic supplement is another way to get in all those healthy gut bugs. If you’re new to probiotics, be sure to download my [Guide to Choosing Your Child’s Probiotic](#).
- ♥ **Health gut dysbiosis.** Your child may have something called “gut dysbiosis”, or an abnormal balance of bacteria, yeast, and even parasites in her gut. Some tipoffs may be sugar cravings, brain fog, tummy aches, diarrhea or constipation, gas, bloating, gaining or losing too much weight. If you suspect gut dysbiosis, then find a Functional Medicine practitioner near you to help do the right detective work and get your child’s gut microbiome on the right track!



## Step 3a: Identify and Eliminate Food Sensitivities

Did you know that the foods your child is eating may literally be making her sick?

Food sensitivities can cause a wide range of symptoms, including abdominal pain, bloating, gas, diarrhea, constipation, brain fog, fatigue, irritability, anxiety, depression, behavioral problems, insomnia, headaches, joint pains, eczema, asthma – pretty much anything you can think of. Food sensitivities are different than food “allergies,” which are ones that we are usually born with and cause immediate and potentially life-threatening reactions such as hives, wheezing, and anaphylactic shock. Food allergies are typically lifelong, and require permanent avoidance.

Food sensitivities, on the other hand, develop over time as our gut becomes increasingly imbalanced and “leaky.” Food sensitivities can develop to any food that we eat, especially to those that we eat frequently. Reactions to food sensitivities can occur up to 4-5 days after eating the offending food(s) and can include physical, mental, and emotional symptoms.

The biggest difference: food sensitivities CAN be healed, and your child's symptoms CAN resolve. The key to healing food sensitivities is to first identify what foods your child is sensitive to and then heal her underlying “leaky gut.”

### How can you identify which foods your child is sensitive to?

- 💖 When your child has chronic health concerns, the most likely culprits are GLUTEN, DAIRY, and SUGAR. Start with eliminating these 100% from your child's diet for 2-3 weeks. The impact on your child's body, mind and spirit can be dramatic!
- 💖 There are many other possible culprits, including soy, eggs, corn, citrus, peanuts, artificial dyes/flavors/preservatives/sweeteners. The “gold standard” for identifying food sensitivities is an “elimination diet.” The [Multiple Elimination Diet by Doris Rapp, MD](#) is a great example elimination diet to follow.
- 💖 Food sensitivities may develop to any food that we eat too often, even healthy ones! An elimination diet may not find all possible culprits, or may be challenging to do without “proof” that it's necessary. There are simple blood tests that a functional medicine practitioner can order to help identify what foods your child may be sensitive to.

### How do you heal your child's leaky gut and food sensitivities?

- 💖 The 5 R's to healing a leaky gut include: **Remove** food sensitivities and any other irritants to the gut like dysbiosis mentioned above; **Reinoculate** the gut with probiotics, **Replace** missing nutrients like zinc and digestive enzymes, **Repair** the gut lining with essential fatty acids and glutamine, and **Rebalance** lifestyle.
- 💖 Simple – right? Yes – simple, but not always easy, yet **ALWAYS worth it**. Finding a functional medicine practitioner to guide you and your child through the 5 R's can make the journey as smooth and successful as possible.



## Step 4: Prioritize Life

Make LIFE a priority...

Prioritizing a healthy lifestyle is a **necessity** for our children's developing brains and immune systems – especially for our kids with chronic health concerns. When our kids are sick, their bodies and minds are sending out an SOS that something needs to change, and it needs to change now! What is that SOS?

**S** – Slow down. **O** – Outside time. **S** – Sleep.

### Slow down

- ♥ Don't overschedule. We are ALL guilty of this. "Schedule" downtime if necessary. If you're stressed about how to fit everything into your kids' schedules, then your kids will be stressed about how to fit everything into their schedules, and you know you're already packing in way too much!
- ♥ Limit screentime – really! Increased screentime has been linked with obesity, depression, anxiety, attention/focus problems, lowered self-esteem, and poor decision making. The instant gratification of screens makes it harder and harder for our kids to learn to SLOW DOWN, and just enjoy doing... nothing. (BTW – this means limiting screentime for **parents** as well!)
- ♥ Talk **with** your kids, not **to** your kids. Spend time everyday just listening to what they have to say.

### Outside time

- Getting your child's body moving every day is an essential part of keeping them healthy. Exercise lights up the same parts of our brain that affect our mood and focus. The feel-good endorphins released by our brain during exercise help us stay calm and relaxed all day long. Exercise also helps us sleep more soundly and keeps our bodies and minds fit and strong. **Bottom line:** Get moving!
- ♥ Better yet, get moving **outside** in nature! Exercise in nature not only boosts Vitamin D levels naturally, but has been shown to reduce worries and obsessive negative thoughts more than exercise indoors.

### Sleep

- ♥ Make sleep a priority! A restful night's sleep makes everything better. But most of us, including our kids, are chronically sleep-deprived.
- ♥ Limit screentime at least 1-2 hours before bed. The blue light from screens shuts off melatonin production and tricks our brain into thinking it's still daytime.
- ♥ Drink chamomile tea, relax in a warm Epsom salt bath, and check out my blog posts to help your child get the sleep she needs to be healthy and happy all year long: [Eat Yourself To a Good Night's Sleep](#) and [The 3 Things You Need to Know to Get a Good Night's Sleep](#).



## Step 5: Chill Out!

A healthy, happy child is a resilient child.

One of our most important jobs as parents is not to “make” our children happy, but to teach children how to “create” happiness for themselves. This only comes by learning how to overcome obstacles, being proud of successes yet learning from failures, and moving on to the next challenge with optimism and hope rather than fear and discouragement. The “happiest” children with the healthiest hearts, minds and bodies are those who learn to “stick-to-it” and persevere. Books like Julie Lythcott-Haims’ How to Raise an Adult and Jessica Lahey’s The Gift of Failure are must-reads for all parents raising today’s generation of children.

Mindfulness and cognitive-behavioral relaxation techniques can be learned by children of any age, and are invaluable tools for children to learn how to help themselves and gain the confidence that they can handle whatever stressors come their way.

Reading simple meditations as stories is a beautiful way to teach toddlers and young kids meditation early on, and share in their relaxation ritual. Older kids and teens can read these books themselves if they prefer, and learn to incorporate relaxation techniques into their everyday lives. Some kids are more auditory, and listening to guided meditations that walk kids through relaxation is another powerful way to help kids learn calming techniques.

These are some of my favorite tools for kids to learn how to relax their bodies and minds and learn to live lives full of vitality and wellness:

- 💖 Maureen Garth's series of meditation books for young children called Starbright, Moonbeam, Earthlight, and Sunshine are wonderful stories that teach relaxation through metaphor and visualization.
- 💖 The Goodnight Caterpillar: A children's relaxation story by Lori Lite is a beautiful story of a girl who teaches a very anxious caterpillar how to slowly relax and unwind his legs, arms, body and mind, and teaches progressive relaxation to kids in a simple yet very effective way.
- 💖 Dreaming of Ponies by Lori Lite is available as an audio CD or MP3. Lori guides kids through meditations to learn progressive relaxation, breathing, and calming techniques for bedtime and everyday stress.
- 💖 Still Quiet Place: Mindfulness for young children and Still Quiet Place: Mindfulness for teens by Dr. Amy Saltzman, are available as audio CDs or MP3. Dr. Saltzman guides kids of all ages through various, short mindfulness exercises that are calming and easy to implement.
- 💖 What To Do When You Worry too Much by Dr. Dawn Huebner is a must read for any child to learn cognitive-behavioral techniques to use his brain to manage his worries.



*Celebrate Life!*



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*Advice & adventures with holistic mama doc – Elisa Song, MD*



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In health and happiness,

Elisa Song, MD