

NUTRITION & IMMUNITY PODCAST SERIES

GENERAL HEALTH & EXERCISE FOR CHILDREN AT HOME (FOR FAMILIES SHELTERING IN PLACE DURING THE COVID-19 EPIDEMIC)

Featuring :: Robert Murray, MD; Karyn Wulf, MD, MPH

TRANSCRIPT

Maura: When my family first started to shelter in place to help prevent the spread of Covid-19, I had what I thought was a fantastic idea. I ordered a punching bag, a speed bag, some hand wraps and boxing gloves for my teenage sons, and then told them to just have at it.

Maura: My intentions were good, but also wasted. Because, as it turns out, the gloves have stayed off. Aside from a few wistful layups and 3-pointer shots, the basketball is mostly still. Our rowing machine and barbells in the basement see only my face in the early mornings. No one is skateboarding along the driveway, and no one is playing catch in the back yard.

Maura: So it's almost like this virus has rendered my boys almost motionless—like they're worried it will come for them if it sees them moving. And who can blame them for that? They see the news. They see the stress it's causing their teachers, their parents, their friends, each other. So they help themselves feel better by connecting with friends online. I think they're really only exercising their texting and video-gaming thumbs at this point. I know they're not the only ones. But I do worry about them.

Maura: I'm Maura Bowen, podcasting for Abbott Nutrition Health Institute. I have the happy pleasure of recording again today with pediatric gastroenterologist Dr Robert Murray, and pediatrician Dr Karyn Wulf. In our most recent podcast episode, Dr Murray and Dr Wulf discussed the importance of helping kids maintain a balanced approach to nutrition, not just in this era of Covid-19, but anytime. Today, they're planning to hold a similar conversation, this time to describe some signs of stress to watch for in children, and to discuss strategies to help children remain physically and socially active.

Maura: Dr Murray, Dr Wulf, welcome. As you can probably guess, I'm really glad you're back.

Dr Murray: Thanks, Maura

Dr Wulf: Thank you, Maura. I'm happy to be here.

Maura: So, one thing to note for our listeners: This podcast recording may sound a little different than you're used to hearing. For the sake of social distancing, Dr Murray, Dr Wulf and I are all dialing in for today's discussion rather

than sitting in the studio.

Maura: Before we start, can you both tell us a little bit about yourselves, your current roles, and what brought you to this area of focus in your career? Dr Murray, would you like to go first?

Dr Murray: Sure. Thanks, Maura. I'm a pediatric gastroenterologist. I began my fellowship many, many years ago. I spent over 20 years in clinical practice in peds, GI and nutrition. I did work with Abbott for a few years. Ran a healthy weight medical/surgical weight management center for teenagers for about five years, and now I work on educational programs related to nutrition.

Maura: Wonderful. And how about you, Dr Wulf?

Dr Wulf: Sure, thanks, Maura. I'm a general pediatrician. I've been in practice for the past 17 years. I am the mom of four teenagers, and I'm currently the Medical Director of Pediatrics at Abbott. I was drawn to the role at Abbott because I really believe in the role of nutrition in health, and the importance of teaching our kids foundationally about good nutrition, and exercise follows in there as well.

Maura: We're going to switch up our format a bit today, because, as with your first recording, I think our listeners would appreciate a question and answer session between two experts. Does that sound fine with you both?

Dr Murray: Sure!

Dr Wulf: Sure does.

Maura: Alright. Dr Wulf, take it away...

Dr Wulf: Let's start by talking about stress. How is this pandemic affecting kids today, and what signs of stress should parents be watching for?

Dr Murray: Well, with kids, as is true for adults, they feel the stress and they recognize the stress in their parents. This is a very odd time. They're not in school, they can't play with their friends, they're limited in how much they can be outside with other people. It's a very stressful time for all of us. I think the first thing parents can do is kind of a similar conversation to what we had when we were talking about nutrition and meals is to maintain good structure in the day. A well-structured day, where a child can anticipate what's coming next—that really helps destress a child, and it's helpful for parents as well. Rather than have a kind of rolling, chaotic day, make sure there's a set sleep time, that there are three meals in the day, that there's family meals and reading time and importantly that there's time for play and physical activity woven into the day. Those are very important components to a structured day for a child and teen.

Dr Wulf: So as Maura mentioned in her intro, her kids are not really moving as much as she thought they might. Is this common for kids who are feeling stressed, to maybe withdraw from some of the activities they might normally like to do?

Dr Murray: Sure, and of course we've limited their social lives, so it's a little bit mystifying to a lot of kids as to what to do that would be, you know, that would fill that void for kids. One of the things that we do that I think is a mistake is that we think in terms of exercise. And for adults they see that as being very clear in their life. But for kids, it's not quite the same thing. For kids it has to do with activities around play. And play is really what builds a child's skills—their brain skills, their social skills, their language skills—and that is a very important think in their life. Play is true for young kids and all the way up through adolescence. So if you think in terms of, "How can I find ways for my child to play," I think it makes it an easier mindset for parents, than "How do I get my child to exercise," which is a real toughy.

Dr Wulf: I know that's something we've been doing more as a family is taking walks. We live in an area of the country although we're sheltering in place, we're still allowed outside the walk around. It's only when if we take the dog with us that I can get the kids to come along. But having time outside to play with pets and teach new tricks and do things like that, just to get them outside, do you think that's ok, even if we're not going for a walk?

Dr Murray: Oh, absolutely. And I think every day people who are sheltering in place need to go outside just to get sunlight and get fresh air and listen to birds alone is a de-stressor for all of us. And it's important for kids. Again, it's an opportunity for families to do what you're doing: do it together. It's a great time to talk and interact. You do get some of the physical activity in there, but there's so much more to it in terms of stress and mood and relationships, that I think it's something everyone can do if they can. I know there are some places, some cities, that are much more strict about going outside, but in most of the other areas of the country, going for a walk with the typical distancing and wearing masks, those are the kinds of things that can protect you. Going outside is still a really important piece of the day.

Dr Wulf: I know my kids are all teenagers now, and getting them out of their rooms and away from phones—which is maybe where they're doing online school or having online communication with friends or playing video games—is a little harder to get teenagers engaged in some sort of play or activity than it is for younger kids. How can we really encourage our older kids to also be active during this time, especially considering the different kind of stress teens can be under?

Dr Murray: Well, if you've got more than one teenager, you have more than one social group, there's lots of lots of things you can do. There are different kinds of play, and they all collectively help a child's skills and a teenager's skills. For teenagers, the social piece is really important. So, they may be doing screens and videos, there's opportunities for the screens to give that that social interaction, where they move—where they're dancing or doing TikTok videos or sharing those kinds of things back and forth. But they're not sitting sedentary and essentially watching a game. You want to involve them in many, many different types of play—even teenagers, and engage them pretty much throughout the day in different ways.

Dr Wulf: I think when you were talking about the importance of structure and routine, helping to create that structure and routine for the teenagers, we've given them a little more autonomy in what their schedule looks like but wanting them to create a schedule none the less, so that they have some routine to their lives. When kids are littler, it's easy for parents to help create those schedules, but one of the things we really have reinforced when helping our teen create their own schedules is building the time to just get up and move around. Our oldest likes to get up and do 10 pushups every hours, just to get up and move around. One of the funniest games I saw the kids doing the other day way, they took a deck of cards, and as they flip over the deck, they take turns doing the number of pushups on the face card, and they started to do this every evening because it's something fun to do. And one of them said, "If you told me I had to go do 120 pushups I'd say your crazy, but I did 120 pushups during the course of this game just playing pushups with my siblings." I don't think there's a proscriptive way to do this for anyone, it's just that we made pushups fun somehow.

Dr Murray: Yeah, somehow! You know, it's interesting that one of the drivers for creativity for young people is boredom. And if you give them the right environment and don't direct them, kids kind of have this automatic thing where they look for fun stuff to do, and they'll invent it. That card game is a great example. They'll invent something unique. Particularly if they're doing it with other kids as a social thing. They'll start to pretend play. So I think our assignment as parents and grandparents is really to find environments that draw that play mentality out of kids and not let them sink into the default of video games.

Dr Wulf: Yeah. You had great ideas about music, turning music on and dancing and moving. My gym is closed and I belong to a yoga studio. They've created a lot of online content now. So, when I'm doing yoga at home, a lot of times my daughter will sit down and watch me do it for a few minutes, then get a little curious and maybe try a few moves herself. Kids are always watching us, and so if we're also role-modeling some of those movements and opportunities

for fun in the day, sometimes they'll join along, even if you can't force them to do it.

Dr Murray: Yeah, that's a great thing for stress. One, yoga's a great thing for stress, but I think any of those kind of activities—whether it's fine motor activity where you're doing crafts and puzzles and paintings, or it's gross motor activity where you're doing sport-like things or hula-hoops, those are things that can really draw a kid out, and they'll get engaged and be much more active. What you don't want is to have the day unstructured where keep falling back into playing the same video games over and over again, or text with their friends and not do anything.

Dr Wulf: Yeah. It sounds like what we're saying is that during this pandemic and sheltering in place there are opportunities to try some new activities with the family, but maybe this isn't the time to make sure kids are getting exactly 60 minutes of exercise a day, and that you're giving them opportunities to play and exercise some of their creativity and move with some regularity even if it's not something they would regularly be doing.

Dr Murray: Right. It's interesting. I remember one time I was talking with a high schooler, and we were talking about what they do during their lunch hour, and the kid goes, "You know we like to play dodge ball as much as the young kids, but nobody gives us the chance to do it." So sometimes if you get into one of these circumstances, they'll get into things they might not normally even try, like doing puzzles and doing drawing or creating their own music. Those are things you want to encourage the child to do by having breaks in the day that are really set aside for some kind of physical play activity indoors or outdoors, just a break in the day. You know we were doing investigation of recess. We were pulling all the studies on recess. And we came to realize how many things recess improved in kids lives. They developed skills and communication skills and negotiation skills—all these social benefits. One of the things it also showed was that if a child is working on their school work and they took a break for a brief period of time, that break served to commit the information to memory. It allowed the information to be encoded. And I think for a lot of parents who are now the teacher as well as the parent, building those breaks in—they can do push ups or they can do something else—that's the way to get in the activity and the benefit of activity in terms of stress and emotional control and also academic learning.

Dr Wulf: And exercise doesn't have to be consecutive to be effective over the course of the day. So that movement doesn't have to be 60 minutes in a solid block, it can be 10-15 minutes blocks throughout the day.

Dr Murray: Absolutely. And that's probably the only way you can get it done is to break it up. But it's benefit is in the cumulative effect not in consecutive minutes. You and I were talking last time about kids getting involved in the cooking and that that involvement is one of the real important things. It may sound a little bizarre but I think you can get kids involved in some of the chores as well, and it can be really fun for them. Any time you put a kid with water, it's generally fun, so if they're washing a car outside, that's something that gives a kid activity, but it's also fun and something they can do together—brothers and sisters, cousins, even neighbors, if they're still part of the community and sheltering in place together.

Dr Wulf: That's so funny. I forgot how much my kids used to like to vacuum because they thought it was so satisfying to see the marks in the carpet. It's not a perfect job, but...

Dr Murray: Yeah, you did your Tom Sawyer thing and sold them on vacuuming. But it's great exercise. All of that stuff is really good exercise.

Dr Wulf: So it seems like the key points are to just try to reduce stress, and during this time of sheltering in place, create some sort of structure for the children, and build an activity to that structure. Build in small breaks for movement. It doesn't have to be full exercise. And play is a critically important piece of that movement and activity, especially for younger kids because it develops not just their physical body but also their mental and emotional well-being.

Dr Murray: It's an interesting thing, Karyn. You know, when you have young kids, usually you're busy and your life

work is really challenging and so you miss sometimes the opportunity to play with them, slow down with them, play with them face to face. And what's great I think about the whole greatness of grandparenthood is that you get a chance to do it a second time, and this time you get to watch more carefully. But playing with a kid really brings back those feelings that you had when you were young—what you were playing was the most important thing in life that was so serious. You were all invested in it. You forget how much kids invest in play. And it's a great opportunity for us, if we're all stuck together, let's watch each other and think like a child. You'll get a great benefit from that alone.

Maura: Thank you so much to both of you. Dr Wulf, respect to you for doing 120 pushups—I'm so impressed.

Dr Wulf: Oh now, that was not me!

Dr Murray: She was the cheerleader!

Maura: Oh, yeah, well, that will do it! And Dr Murray, you gave me a real idea when you mentioned dodge ball, so thank you!

Dr Murray: Yeah, just get a Nerf ball. You can play that inside. There's all kinds of fun stuff. Teenagers like that stuff, actually.

Maura: You're right. We really appreciate your willingness to talk today about exercise and the role it can play in keeping kids happy and well. It's really great to hear reminders of how much fun it can be to move around. I hope you'll join us on the ANHI podcast again very soon!

Maura: And for our listeners: If you're hoping for more podcast episodes on nutrition and immunity, rest assured we're developing a series of additional episodes to help support you, including Dr Murray and Dr Wulf's episode on the kids and good nutrition while sheltering in place. You can find these recordings and many others on anhi.org by clicking "RESOURCES" then "PODCASTS & VIDEOS" at the top of the page. Don't miss an episode: Become an anhi.org member today by clicking "REGISTER" at the top of our homepage to receive regular nutrition science news updates from our team. Or, follow the Abbott Nutrition Health Institute on LinkedIn.

Maura: Finally, our website, anhi.org, has a series of printable resources related to this topic—for instance, infographics on [nutrition and immunity](#), [dehydration](#), and [why maintaining muscle matters](#). You can find these resources on anhi.org by clicking "RESOURCES" and "PRINTABLE MATERIALS."

Maura: As a final note, I'm ready for baseball season—no matter what that ends up looking like—aren't you? We have bucket-list tickets to see the Yankees in September. Covid, just try and stop us.

Maura: Thanks everyone. Stay healthy and safe.