

## **New Year's Resolutions for Washington Parents**

By Erin Mantz

Throughout 2006, news reports and parents were buzzing about all the startling statistics, study findings and safety scenarios affecting kids. From the rise of childhood obesity and a renewed focus on school safety to the importance of family meals and unstructured play, many parents started rethinking their priorities. How can we head in the right direction in the year ahead? Below, five resolutions for families help parents define goals and gear up to protect and empower their children – and themselves!

### **1. Encourage more exercise.**

Inactive children are likely to become inactive adults. It's important for all kids to stay active, weight issues or not. According to the American Heart Association (AHA), physical activity produces overall physical, psychological and social benefits. Increased physical activity has been associated with an increased life expectancy and decreased risk of cardiovascular disease. It helps build strong muscles and bones, control weight, reduce blood pressure, raise HDL ("good") cholesterol and reduce the risk of diabetes. Kids who are active gain more self-confidence and higher self-esteem. They can even sleep better and better handle everyday physical tasks, like running to catch the school bus!

For all these reasons and more, the American Heart Association recommends that all children ages 2 and older participate in at least 30 minutes of enjoyable, moderate-intensity activities every day. They should also perform at least 30 minutes of vigorous physical activities at least three to four days each week to achieve and maintain a good level of heart and lung fitness. If your child doesn't have a full 30-minute activity break each day, try to provide at least two 15-minute

periods or three 10-minute periods in which he can engage in vigorous activities appropriate to his age, gender and stage of physical and emotional development. Parents may think of “exercise” and picture treadmills and weights at the gym. But for kids, exercise can mean running around at recess, playing tag, riding bikes, having gym class at school, practicing soccer, having dance class and much more. If your child is not athletic, don’t count him out. Explore a martial arts class. Consult your child’s pediatrician regarding any questions or concerns.

Lead by example. Parents should try to be role models for active lifestyles and provide children with opportunities for increased physical activity. Sure, it’s winter and it’s cold as we begin, but you can tie fitness into family fun right away:

- Hit the slopes and go skiing.
- Go sledding or start a good old snowball fight.
- Stick close to home and make snow angels or build a snowman.
- Go ice-skating at one of the area’s many indoor or outdoor rinks.

## **2. Make more time to talk with – and listen to – your kids.**

Whether your kids are tots, tweens or somewhere in between, nothing takes the place of conversation. According to Jonah Green, clinical social worker and family therapist in private practice in Kensington, sitting down at the beginning of each year and having a “family resolutions” discussion can become a ritual in itself and provide a positive experience for the whole family. “Establishing this tradition is something kids will remember and cherish,” Green says.

In 2006, we heard a lot about the importance of unstructured play. Communication is a main benefit. Unstructured play times can lead to

great discussions with – and discoveries about – your kid. Simply spending time with your child while he does whatever it is he’s doing shows him that you value his creativity and interests.

Tied into finding more time to talk is resolution number three...taming your technology!

### **3. Tame your technology.**

In our wired world, most family members are plugged in to iPods, video games, cell phones, Blackberries, wireless laptops and more. Many family members are also on the move or in a rush, so it’s important to take a step back, work smart and remember to interact in person.

- Safeguard your stuff. “The biggest mistake families make is not backing up their data,” attests Jason Hacker, digital lifestyle consultant and owner of McLean-based Tech Plumber. Doing so is easy and relatively inexpensive. Hacker recommends parents protect precious family photos and important household files by saving these to an external hard drive once a month. Or, take the cheaper option and simply burn your data onto CDs.
- Protect your kids online. Your child can easily mistype a web address and land on an inappropriate site. Older kids may purposely seek out provocative or violent sites. Hacker has seen his share of both scenarios but stresses parents can use technology to stay in control. “Just like with TiVo, parents can calibrate Internet controls so kids can surf parent-approved websites. Also, keep computers in a central location like a playroom, so you can see what’s going on.” Some of Hacker’s clients even had him set up

keyword alerts that notify parents when certain words appear in Instant Messages.

- Keep “constant communication” in perspective. Do you really need to be checking your Blackberry while driving carpool, during your kid’s dance performance or while he is trying to tell you about his day at school? Remember, kids learn from what we do, not just what we say. If you want him to take off his iPod and chat or sit through dinner without grabbing his cell phone, set the example.

#### **4. Get hip to healthier eating.**

Now is the time to help your kids develop good eating habits for life. Nutrition makes a big difference in how kids grow, develop and learn. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), good nutrition is a matter of balance. The AAP recommends parents provide foods from several food groups at each meal. Emphasize foods that are less processed, such as whole grain breads and cereals and fresh fruits and vegetables. You can even review your child's diet with your pediatrician.

- **Make or serve food that tastes great.** How about serving your kids macaroni and cheese with cauliflower and finding it’s their favorite dinner? Meals4munchkins owner Sue Ledger created this recipe and calls it the number-one request from her clients’ kids. As meals4munchkins owner and “personal chef to kids,” Ledger makes wholesome, homemade and nutritious meals that kids love. Parents hire Ledger to come to their home, make a variety of healthy baby or toddler meals and leave a month’s worth of child-size portions in their freezer. If you have infants or toddlers and find yourself short on time and/or skills needed to cook nutritious, great-tasting food, this

may be one solution. Each dish is designed to be healthy and cook in anywhere from 1 ½ to 12 minutes. Recognizing the high demand that parents place on good, healthy food, Ledger recently started offering classes that teach them how to do it themselves. Find more information at [www.meals4munchkins.com](http://www.meals4munchkins.com).

- **Find time for family meals.** Recent studies, books and experts confirmed that children who have regular mealtimes are less likely to smoke, drink or use drugs. They are also more likely to learn good eating habits from their parents and actually eat nutritious food. Sitting around the table, the chance for communication is extraordinary. Sure, it can be a good time to check up on homework and share stories about the day. But, some experts believe these social interactions can even encourage development in younger children. As families explain things and tell stories around the table, kids' language development may expand, too.
- **Finally, don't underestimate your influence.** According to Katherine Tallmadge, M.A., R.D. and national spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association, "Mom has significant influence on a child's food preferences and eating patterns. Studies show that children will develop food preferences based on what is provided in the home by their moms." Other studies demonstrate that if parents don't eat vegetables, children don't. If parents don't drink milk and drink sodas instead, kids want to do the same. "Even if parents try to encourage their kids to eat healthier than they do, studies clearly find that kids do not respond by eating healthfully unless their parents actually do it themselves." So, what *can* moms do? Tallmadge recommends

getting rid of unhealthy foods instead of restricting access, because kids learn to love foods that are available. And, take “try it” to a new level. Remember that kids sample new foods more often when they observe their parents eating them, especially when combined with parental attention and encouragement.

## **5. Capture your family history.**

Nothing can take the place of creating family memories and making moments count. A kid can build a strong identity by understanding his family’s place in history and how he fits in. Yes, it’s shocking that my 5-year-old can’t imagine me growing up without a CD player or a cell phone, but it’s even more amazing to see the shock on his face when his grandmother talks about life before television!

- Visit the library or bookstore to introduce the “family history” concept to kids at an age-appropriate level.
- Make a family tree. Older children can do this online; younger ones can create an art project or use construction paper with your help.
- Leverage the power of online communication. Create a family home page, or start an e-mail family newsletter.
- Interview grandparents, aunts and uncles, and research the towns and times they grew up in (you can search online for interview questions and other resources). For in-person interviews, mom or dad can run the video camera (or the child, if he’s old enough) to get it all on tape.
- Start a family scrapbook for 2007.
- Learn how to play a game that was popular 50 years ago.

- If you want to get fancy, for a fee, you can work with your kids to use family tree software, hire a personal historian or have a company compile your memories into a beautiful bound book.

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### **Sidebar:**

#### **What More Can We Do?**

*Excerpts from The American Academy of Pediatrics' "Tips For a Healthier New Year"*

#### **Prevent violence by setting good examples.**

Set limits for your children by letting them know what's expected and noticing when they meet your expectations. Try to avoid hitting, slapping or spanking. Your children may copy you and think that it is okay to hit other people.

#### **Provide your child with a tobacco-free environment.**

Second-hand tobacco smoke increases ear infections, chest infections and even Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. If you smoke, consider quitting. Remember, your child loves you and will copy you – if you smoke, your children may grow up to be smokers, too.

#### **Read to your child every day.**

Start by the age of 6 months. Reading to children shows them the importance of communication, motivates them to become readers and provides a context to discuss issues and learn what is on their minds.

**Practice "safety on wheels."**

Make sure everyone in the car is buckled up for every ride, with children in the back seat in age-appropriate child safety seats. All bikers, skaters and skateboarders should wear helmets and other appropriate sports gear.

**Monitor your children's "media."**

Monitor what your children see and hear on television, in movies and in music. If you feel that a movie or TV program is inappropriate, redirect them to more suitable programming.

**Become more involved in your child's school and education.**

Whether you become active in the parent-teacher organization or volunteer in the school, parent involvement matters. Your child will notice how important education is to you.

**Make your children feel loved and important.**

Kids develop a sense of self-worth early in life. Listen to what your children have to say. Assure them that they are loved and safe. Celebrate their individuality, and tell them what makes them special.

**Sidebar: Making Resolutions Make Sense to Kids**

When setting resolutions, tailor the tactics and language to what's age-appropriate for your child. Jonah Green, clinical social worker and family therapist in private practice in Kensington, shares some pointers:

**Using the right language can help you get your message across.** For example, when talking about a resolution with a kindergartner, call it a "promise." When talking with teens, tie in a word like "commitment."

**The younger the child, the shorter the time frame needed.** Younger kids need to see progress and achievements happen more quickly. In other words, don't wait until December 31, 2007 to celebrate keeping those resolutions!

**We could all use more specifics.** Kids and adults can benefit from specific, action-oriented steps to get those resolutions moving. For example, rather than saying an abstract statement, like you're going to "spend more time together as a family," describe how you'll do that, such as having three family dinners together a week, playing a board game every Sunday night, visiting a museum together or cooking a new recipe together each month.