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How to help children develop healthy habits

While often fairly harmless, childhood habits can be hard to break. Why does it seem so easy to pick up bad habits but so difficult to develop healthy ones? Here we look at the science to find out how to break bad habits and help our children develop healthy behaviours.

Whether your child is a nose-picker or hair-twiddler, it's common for children to develop bad habits as they grow up.

Breaking bad habits

Helping your child to break a bad habit can be tricky, but offering understanding and patience can help.

Unpick the habit knot

The first thing to do is to think a bit more about the habit. Whether nail-biting or nose-picking, these behavioural habits are usually the combination of lots of 'micro-behaviours' and triggers that need to be carefully unpicked.

"Think about what happens when your child has a knot in their hair," advises behaviour change specialist [Dr Heather McKee](#). "You don't attack the knot itself. You go for the easy wins, and gradually tease it out."

When we're trying to help our child with a habit, we need to look at it in a variety of ways. "Look for clues," advises McKee. "Is the habit a [stress](#) response or a coping response? Are there certain circumstances where your child engages with this behaviour? Do they do it more in the car, or when they're talking to you?"

Replace with a healthy alternative

Once you've worked out the triggers, you can help your child to cope with the trigger situation differently. "Often with a nail-biter for example, you can get them to play with a fidget toy instead which breaks the habit of putting their fingers in their mouth all the time."

The important thing is to make sure whatever you try to replace the habit with is something that gives your child a similar reward. If your child nail-bites when they're bored or stressed, try to find something that will entertain or relax them at the crucial moment.

Don't stress

While not that hygienic, most of these behavioural habits do disappear over time. You don't see many adults picking their nose in the office, or biting their nails in front of an audience. "If the habit isn't too harmful, try not to focus too much on it," advises McKee. "When the child reaches the stage when they see the value of not doing it as the value of doing it, this tends to help."

Encouraging healthy habits

Understanding habit forming can also be helpful when you're trying to encourage your child to develop good habits - perhaps improving their [diet](#), or taking more [exercise](#). Once we understand how habits are formed, we can use this information to help encourage more positive behaviours too.

Reward

You might not see your child's unhealthy habits as particularly 'rewarding' but whatever they are engaging in will have some sort of reward. This might be relief from boredom or stress. In the same way, any new habit you'd like to encourage needs to have its own reward.

"If you want to get children into good habits, it's about making it joyful," agrees McKee. "For example, if you want them to [eat more vegetables](#), perhaps take them out to an allotment so they can see things grow."

If you start a particular activity and your child fails to embrace it, it's OK to move on to something else. "It's important to find something they really love," says McKee. "Perhaps find something they can do with friends, for example."

Repetition

One key thing about habits is that we repeat them over and over. If you've decided to start a healthy activity with your child, try to get into a routine – scheduling it for the same day, or time of day as much as possible. "Habits are formed by context and repetition," agrees McKee. "Doing the same things at the same time."

Modelling good behaviour

It's no good [encouraging your child](#) to take up jogging if you're constantly moaning about having to hit the gym. Whether we like it or not, children pick up on cues from their environment, meaning if you moan about exercise, they'll start to see it in a negative light too.

"Don't underestimate the contagious nature of habits. Instead, try to find something you can engage, and even share, with your child," advises McKee.

So whether you're breaking a bad habit, or encouraging something positive, it's important to remember that habits are formed by lots of 'micro-actions' rather than something bigger. Taking small steps towards your goal can make a big difference in the long run.

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