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Family Resource GUIDE



Volume 6

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Children's Connection

Family Resource Guide

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Introduction

The decisions that parents make everyday affect the well-being of their children. If these children are in other care during the day, the caregivers or extended family members also make decisions affecting the well-being of the children. For infants and very young children, the decisions focus on the physical and emotional needs. With the recent information concerning brain development, the first months and years of a child's life have become more crucial to parents and caregivers in the decisions they make. For older children, the decisions focus on developing responsibility and independence. Our highly mobile society adds complexity to problems and parents and caregivers feel stress in finding the information they need to make good decisions. Eventually these parents' decisions will be felt by all of us, as their children grow and reach out to make our world into their world.

The Austin Child Care Council decided to be pro-active in meeting parents and caregivers needs to access information that would help them find solutions to child rearing and group care problems. It formed a partnership with the Child Care Connection of Austin, Inc. to seek funding that created the "Children's Connection" a question and answer column on parenting and children. With support from the Austin American Statesman, RGK Foundation, Austin Community College, Texas Department of Human Resources, and Texas Work & Family Clearinghouse, the column appears in Austin and syndicated throughout the state.

In answering the questions, the "Children's Connection" recognizes the need for reliable information and seeks answers from a variety of professionals who are associated with caring for children. Experts in child psychiatry, dentistry, nutrition, and child care, many of whom are parents themselves, have contributed advice and information to help us all be better parents in the 90's.

The column's success can be measured by the increasing number of questions that arrive daily. We felt a broader audience could be reached if questions could be compiled into a publication. Thus, the *Family Resource Guide* was created, published and distributed. The *Family Resource Guides*, Volumes 1-5 have proved to be extremely popular, and the variety of ways in which they are being used indicates that we are meeting our goal of improving parents' access to reliable information. We are pleased to continue this public awareness effort by offering Volume 6.

We hope that you find this booklet to be a helpful resource and that the questions and answers respond to your needs. Our desire is for the *Family Resource Guide* to have a positive impact on the lives of children, and ultimately, our world. Please join us in our effort and share the Resource Guide with families and others who care for children.

If you have a question you would like answered in the "Children's Connection" column, please write or call:

P.O. Box 26798
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(512) 454-4020

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Family Resource Guide
Volume 6



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Writer:
Cheryl Coggins Frink

Index to Questions

(The information is referenced by question number not page number)

Abuse	3
Adolescent Issues	27, 40, 52
After School Care\Activities	6, 29
Attention Deficit Disorder	1, 13, 29
Behavior Issues	10, 18, 21, 23 33, 36, 37, 48, 54
Books	50
Car Seats	8, 32
Child Care	45, 51, 53, 55
Chores	12
Dental Concerns	15
Diet	19, 38, 63
Disabilities	39
Divorce	34
Family Communication	14, 16, 62
Grandparents	58
Guidance/Discipline	4, 7, 11, 14, 16, 25, 27, 31, 33, 36, 37 54, 59
Handwriting	52
Health	2, 9, 20, 30, 38, 47
Meals	43, 46
Music Lessons	60
Pets	28
Play	21
Puberty	50, 56
Safety	17, 22, 24, 25, 32 35, 41, 44, 49, 64
School	4, 5, 46
Siblings	61
Sleep	42
Speech	57
Stepfamilies	34
Summer Activities	1
Swimming	2
Travel	8
Volunteering	26, 48

Q My 7-year-old son has mild Attention Deficit Disorder. Because of an excellent teacher, he has done well in school. However, now that school is almost out, I'm concerned he will get in trouble over the summer if he isn't in a structured program. I can't afford most summer programs, and I also can't do much with him myself because I have a baby and limited transportation. Are there summer programs that offer financial assistance for low-income families?

A Regardless of your son's special needs, he is like most children in that he probably functions better in an environment with some structure. That doesn't mean every spare moment of his summer needs to be scheduled, but you are wise to recognize that endless hours of unorganized time can lead to boredom and trouble.

Although your options are somewhat limited because of your baby and transportation needs, some parents add structure to a child's summer by working with other families to arrange a schedule of "play dates" at each family's home. Perhaps you can set up activities an afternoon or so each week for your son and another child. Then the other child's family will also have a turn each week arranging activities. This approach is sometimes difficult for families in which both parents work outside the home, but if you can find a family whose child is compatible with yours, this will provide your child with

yours, this will provide your child with activities at no cost to you.

In addition, you should check with churches near you for information on their summer programs. Often, church-sponsored programs offer scholarship assistance to low-income families. You also may want to look into vacation Bible school, which is often provided by many churches for free or at minimal cost.

While many summer programs fill quickly, it's also probably worthwhile to check into summer day camps provided by the YMCA or your city's Parks and Recreation Department. These programs provide scholarships in certain situations, but it helps if you apply for these financially assisted slots during the spring. The YMCA also may provide financial aid for full-day summer programs held at various schools around the city. For information on Parks and Recreation programs, call or visit the city recreation center nearest you.

Q My sister told me she read an article that said infants should not take swimming lessons. Why is this a problem? At what age should children begin swimming lessons?

A While some babies do develop health problems while "swimming," perhaps the main consideration in taking lessons involves what you expect your child to get out of them.

For example, if you expect your infant to be able to swim across the pool by the end of his lessons, you will be disappointed. However, if you simply want to enjoy playing with your baby in the water, you may find an organized swimming activity to be a rewarding parent-child experience.

"For children from 6 months to a year, swimming lessons should be just for them to get introduced to the water, for them to feel the water on their skin and for stimulation," advises pediatrician Juan Guerrero. "But I do not feel (children) can learn to swim until they are a lot older. And even when they do learn to swim, parents should never feel a child is completely water safe. Children always require adult supervision while swimming."

If you do play with your baby in the pool, it's wise to keep his head out of the water as much as possible. Babies should not be "dunked," says Dr. Guerrero. This can bring on an outer ear infection known as swimmer's ear.

"At any age and at any time, a child can get water in the ear canal and, if it doesn't drain properly, it can then sit there and irritate the outer ear canal," he says.

To guard against such problems when a child — regardless of age — goes under water, Dr. Guerrero suggests that parents put a couple of drops of alcohol or a half-and-half mixture of vinegar and alcohol in the child's ear after swimming.

Parents should also be aware that some babies tend to swallow a lot of pool water when they are submerged. Taking in pool water — especially that found in an unchlorinated wading pool

that may harbor bacteria — can pose problems for young children.

"Wading pools are the biggest 'no-no' for children who tend to swallow pool water," says Dr. Guerrero. "Skin to water contact is no problem. It's mainly the drinking of the water that is going to bring on parasitic infections or any other (health) problem."

Choosing the best time to start a child's more serious swimming lessons will depend on the child. "Some have an instinctive dog paddle. And if the child has been in the water a lot, by the age of 3, he probably can learn how to swim," says Dr. Guerrero. "However, if the child has never been in the water, it may take a lot longer because the child will not feel comfortable in the water."

3

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Q Recently, I read where a child died as a result of being shaken by his mother. I'd like some information on this subject.

A Sadly, babies and young children have been severely injured or killed as a result of being shaken vigorously by an adult who is caring for them. Yet, even though this practice is dangerous, it is not uncommon.

In fact, in 1974 the term "Shaken Baby Syndrome" was coined by a doctor who defined it as "the vigorous shaking of an infant or child by the arms, legs or shoulders," according to the Children's Trust Fund of Texas Council, a state agency which has targeted this problem as one of its many

efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect.

Such “shaking, jerking, and jolting” may result in torn or burst blood vessels in the child’s head. “This whiplash motion can result in bleeding inside the head with no outward signs of abuse,” advises the trust fund in its brochure, “Shaken Baby Syndrome — the Facts You Need to Know.”

While caregivers may think shaking a baby is relatively harmless, “vigorously shaking a very young child can cause irreversible brain damage, blindness, cerebral palsy, hearing loss, spinal cord injury, seizures, learning disabilities and even death,” according to the trust fund.

Although serious injuries can result from a vigorous shake, “some doctors suspect that many school children with learning difficulties were victims of casual, regular shaking when they were very young,” according to the trust fund.

Certainly every child can be frustrating at times. But if parents and caregivers will take just a moment to think about what they are doing before they shake or strike a baby or young child, they will most likely stop themselves.

“It takes less than a minute and only three simple steps” to avoid hurting a child, the trust fund suggests. “Stop. Sit Down. Calm Down.”

“These three easy steps can prevent injury and tragedy,” advises the agency.

4



Q I am teaching Sunday school to a class of 4 year olds. It is very important to me to keep things

upbeat and positive, yet it seems I’m always having to tell the kids not to do something. I’d like a more positive approach to controlling the kids in my class.

A At one time or another, most parents and teachers have probably slipped into the “don’t” routine. “Don’t throw your clothes on the floor.” Or, “don’t sit on the coffee table.” Or, “don’t be so loud.”

But if we can remember to tell children what to do rather than what not to do, it is much more effective in helping them understand which behaviors are appropriate. That means when you find yourself using a lot of “don’ts,” rethink how you are approaching the children and their behavior.

“Instead of saying ‘Don’t . . .,’ use positive statements,” suggests Dr. Elizabeth Morgan, program coordinator for Connections, Austin’s family, early care and education resource center.

It may help get things off on the right foot if you explain to the children what you do want before you begin an activity. For example, to help the children focus on an activity, you might say, “I’ll know you are ready for the game when you are sitting up, listening quietly and looking at me,” suggests Dr. Morgan.

“In new situations, children may not know what is appropriate behavior,” she adds. “Telling them what is expected will allow them to feel in control and successful.”

When the children run into problems, again try to approach the situation with positive words. For example, instead of saying “Don’t yell like that,” you might

want to say, "Please talk quietly; you can yell outside." Rather than "Get your feet off the table," you might try "Please keep your feet on the floor," suggests Dr. Morgan.

Such statements help a child know what to do and will help keep him out of trouble.

"Young children sometimes get stuck in their current behaviors and may not be able to think about alternatives," adds Dr. Morgan. "Positive statements supply them with one or more acceptable behaviors."

While it's a good idea to use a positive approach when directing children, try to avoid tagging "OK?" or "All right?" at the end of your statements. For example, if you say — "It's time to pick up your toys, OK?" — the children will think they have a choice about picking up the toys. And you may run into problems if they choose to say "No."

If this happens, explain you made a mistake, and then add something like, "I'm sorry I confused you. What I meant to say was that it's time for everyone to clean up now so we can have snack," says Dr. Morgan.

5

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Q My son is 14, and, as might be expected, school has become more challenging. I know some parents "pay" their children for good grades. My son is doing fairly well, but is paying him for good grades the best way to encourage him?

A While many parents do provide financial rewards for high grades, this is not really the best approach for supporting your child's hard work in school.

"Parents should not offer their adolescent money or other material rewards for good grades," advise Dr. Laurence Steinberg and Ann Levine, authors of *You and Your Adolescent, A Parent's Guide for Ages 10-20*.

Although parents may not realize it, rewarding a teen-teenager for good grades can indicate a lack of trust in the child, say the authors.

"If you believed (your child) wanted to do a good job, you wouldn't feel you had to bribe" him, say the authors. By bribing him, you deprive him of the "satisfaction of doing a good job freely, by (his) own choice, purely for the satisfaction of doing something well."

In fact, parents who "pay" for high grades may do more harm than good. "Studies show that grades tend to decrease, not increase, when parents pay young people for grades," say Dr. Steinberg and Levine.

While you don't want to reward a child with money or material goods, some school counselors suggest that it's fine to celebrate a child's hard work. A special dinner or some other fairly low-key, but meaningful, response is not an inappropriate way to honor your son's work. And it's the work you want to honor, rather than the grades. A hard-fought "B" may be more worthy of tribute than an easy "A."

In general, you may be able to encourage positive attitudes by focusing on ability when your teen-teenager

does well. For example, you might say something like "You've always been good at science" or "You have a real flair for writing" when your child exhibits hard work in those areas, suggest the authors.

When a child does poorly, you may want to discuss effort. You might ask, "What can you do to improve?" or "Could you have studied harder?"

In addition to responding to hard work and ability, parents can help a child in school by promoting learning and academic achievement at home. One way you can do that is by showing interest in what your son is studying. For example, you can try to talk about what is going on in the classroom with your child.

"... see what you can learn from your child," the authors suggest. "The more genuinely interested you are in the adolescent's studies, the more interesting they will seem to the student."



Q I have a mature 12 year old who will be staying home alone about an hour after school every day this year. While she wants to do this and I think she is ready, I'd like some sort of safety check list to go over with her before I leave her alone.

A Even if your daughter has indicated she is mature enough to care for herself, you are wise to go over key points — such as safety measures and house rules — with her at the outset as well as periodically

after she takes on this new responsibility.

After all, she is still a child, and children often need reminders about important rules and telephone numbers and other information. It may help if you occasionally play "What if?" games with her to jog her memory — such as "What if you lose your key?" or "What if someone comes to the door?" suggests Project Home Safe, a national program set up to support children who are home alone. This recent safety project was a program of the American Home Economics Association and the Whirlpool Corp.

Before you begin this arrangement, sit down with your daughter and make sure she knows how to contact you and other helpful adults (post these numbers by the phone). She will also need to know your schedule, how to lock and unlock the doors to your home, which appliances she may use in your absence and where to go for help.

In addition, you can help your child succeed in self care by discussing the following issues, according to Project Home Safe:

*How your child gets home safely after school — If she walks, discuss which route she will take. Advise her to let herself in the house quickly once she gets home and lock the door behind her. On the other hand, if your child notices something unusual about your house before she enters or thinks she has been followed, advise her to go directly to a designated neighbor for help.

*How your child will check in — Once in the house, your child needs to phone you or another adult to report that she is safe.

*How to answer the phone — Your daughter should never tell callers that you are not home. Instead, she can say something like, “My mom/dad is busy right now. May I take a message?”

*What to do if someone comes to the door — Your daughter should first ask who is at the door and only open it if you have approved the visitor.

*What to do in case of a fire, injuries, or other emergencies — Discuss escape routes and emergency numbers. Basic first aid skills will help your daughter deal with minor problems. And talk about what to do if the electricity goes out or if there's a severe weather warning.

*What to do if routines are changed unexpectedly — Talk about whom your daughter should contact if school lets out early or if neighbors aren't home. In addition, “children should be taught to contact an adult and report a problem even if they feel they can handle it on their own,” advises the Project Home Safe.

7

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Q My 10-year-old son recently took my wedding rings from my first marriage to school to show his friends. I grounded him for two weeks, but his father (we are divorced) said I was overly harsh. The problem is I can't think of the best response every time my son misbehaves. How do you

figure out what is the appropriate punishment for a 10 year old?

A Every thoughtful parent has run into the same problem you face. While you know your child better than anybody else and you're supposed to be the “expert” on everything in his life, things happen in every family that leave parents frustrated and confused about how to respond.

“I think it's very appropriate sometimes for parents to realize that they're not always the expert” even though they are always on the front line when these incidents occur, says social worker and play therapist Iris Ramos.

When these incidents occur, parents should feel they can delay their response until they do some research. “They may want to talk to the child's teacher or a good friend . . . or a therapist about what to do in a situation like this,” suggests Ramos.

When you decide you need more time to develop an appropriate response, be frank with your child about what you're doing. “It's perfectly OK to say, ‘I need to think about this. There needs to be some consequence for this, and I'm not sure what it is, but I will be back to you,’” says Ramos.

Try to come up with a response within 24 hours, suggests Ramos. And younger children will need a more immediate response.

It's also a good idea to ask your child to take his own time to think about what he did and what he feels is an appropriate consequence. You can make it clear that you will consider his suggestions along with other possible

solutions, but don't promise to do just exactly what he wants on this issue.

Children often are quite severe with themselves when put in this situation, says Ramos. And because children often feel great remorse, it's wise not to heap more guilt on them. When you are ready to discuss the consequences, "you need to give him two minutes for regret, then come up with a consequence and a solution so that it doesn't happen again," she says.

In this particular case, you may need to establish clearer boundaries for your son. Talk with him about your right to privacy, and try to show respect for his. You may want to make your room off-limits for a while until he shows that he understands your boundaries and respects your privacy.

8

Q I have friends with a baby who will be visiting soon. The family is flying in from out of state and will not be bringing a car seat for the baby. Where can I obtain a child's car seat for a short period of time?

A You're smart to plan ahead for the visit from your friends and their baby. Not only will you provide what can be life-saving protection for the baby by finding her a car safety seat, you also will be following the law.

"Until two years ago, out-of-state visitors were not required to buckle their children according to our laws, but they are now," says Steve Anderson, coordinator of the Texas Department of Health's Safe Riders program. "For

example, if you're traveling from Oklahoma, and you are not aware of our law, you can still be fined" for failing to follow Texas laws regarding child automobile restraint.

In general, that law requires that children under 2 be protected in federally-approved car safety seats while traveling. Children between the ages of 2 and 4 are required to be restrained with a seat belt or to be buckled into a child safety seat while traveling. Drivers who do not adhere to the law can be ticketed and face fines ranging from \$25 to \$50 plus court costs.

Fortunately, it's neither expensive nor difficult to borrow a car safety seat for a visiting youngster. "The best way to handle this is to contact our 800 number (1-800-252-8255) to find out if the location your guests are flying into has a program known as Airport Assistance that will loan them a safety seat," says Anderson.

These programs generally require a \$5 to \$10 deposit that is refunded when the car safety seat is returned to the airport, says Anderson.

During certain times of the year when airport use is especially high, these assistance programs occasionally loan out all their car safety seats. "If it happens to be a very busy time and the safety seats are all gone, people can call our 800 number and we'll find another program that can help them with a short term loan situation in their location," says Anderson.

If a city does not have an Airport Assistance program, travelers can contact the Safe Riders 1-800 number for information on other programs in the area that can supply them with a child

safety seat, says Anderson.

9

Q I have seen parents with small children at loud concerts. I'm always concerned that the volume of the music will damage the baby's hearing. Could this be a problem?

A Your concerns are right on target. Whether it be rock concerts or stock car races, long, loud events can affect anyone's hearing — including the youngest members of the audience.

That's because prolonged exposure to certain decibel levels can damage the ear. "It definitely does decrease the hearing," says pediatrician Juan Guerrero. "A component of our hearing in the inner ear known as the hair cell is killed by loud noises. We've got billions of them, but after repeated exposure (to loud noises), there is some damage to the hearing."

The good news is that while loud, raucous events can pose problems for a baby's hearing, protecting those little ears is easy and inexpensive. "You can go to any grocery store or drug store and get earplugs for under \$5, which is a lot less than most toys and provides long-term benefits," says family physician Neal D. Johnson.

Even soft, pliable materials like Silly Putty can be molded to cover the opening in the ear and provide protection, says Dr. Guerrero. Parents just need to make sure the piece they use to protect the child's ears is large enough to

keep from working its way into the ear.

While such simple approaches are helpful, parents can also shop around for more sophisticated (and more expensive) means of protecting their children's ears. As with all medical concerns, it's helpful to talk to the child's doctor for advice on this issue. And parents are cautioned to keep an eye on the earplugs or whatever devices are used to protect the child's ears to make sure the youngster doesn't pull them out and put them in his mouth. Parents may even want to have the child wear earmuffs or a hat that covers the ears to keep the child from playing with the earplugs, suggests Dr. Johnson.

If parents really want their children to wear earplugs when they are in those places that can damage hearing, the grown-ups themselves should wear ear protection. Not only will they protect their own hearing, these parents will be setting an important and hearing-saving example for their children.

10

Q My daughter, who will be going to kindergarten in the fall, is very grumpy when she gets up in the morning. I know some people just wake up in bad moods, but I have a hard time with her when she is so ugly to everybody the first thing in the morning. She generally cheers up, but sometimes the situation gets worse if I don't handle things well. What is the best way to handle a cranky child in the morning?

A While it's never easy to deal with people who aren't exactly their best the first thing in the morning, try to remember that this is, as you say, probably a matter of personality. And because your daughter often mellows as the morning progresses, you'll do everyone at your house a favor if you give her extra time every morning to adjust to the new day while you remain positive and relaxed.

"A child who cannot wake up easily should not be called 'lazy' and he who does not rise and shine instantly should not be labeled 'sourpuss,'" writes the late Dr. Haim Ginott in Between Parent and Child.

Children who aren't full of sunshine and smiles when they wake up do not need ridicule from their parents, advises Dr. Ginott. And scolding a child for a cranky disposition early in the morning only adds fuel to the fire, many parents will advise you.

"Our statements should convey empathy rather than anger or scorn . . .," Dr. Ginott writes. For example, parents might greet a child who meets the day with a frown by saying something like, "It is hard to get up this morning." Or you might try, "It's such a pleasure to lie in bed and dream," suggests Dr. Ginott. "Take another five minutes."

Of course, you — or better yet, an alarm clock — will need to awaken your child early enough on school days so that she can have those extra minutes she needs to get used to the new day.

Those additional minutes also may help you avoid the early-morning rush that is hard on all children, regardless

of their demeanor. A few extra minutes and a pleasant but low-key breakfast often help a cranky child adjust her outlook.

"In general, breakfast is not a good time for long conversations," advises Dr. Ginott. "Often the parent or the children are sleepy and grouchy, and arguments may easily degenerate into tantrums."

11

Q My son has just begun to walk and is getting into everything. I need some advice on how to discipline him. Can you also recommend books on this subject?

A The challenges of parenting a newly mobile child who is eager to explore the world around him sometimes seem overwhelming. So you are wise to look for positive ways to guide your child through this exciting time of discovery.

One of the best ways to keep your toddler safe and out of trouble is by childproofing your home. This means putting cherished objects away, plugging electrical outlets, and securing cabinets that contain dangerous items so that your son has fewer opportunities to hurt himself or something else as he toddles from one new activity to the next.

Many child guidance experts also suggest that parents redirect their young children when their play becomes dangerous or inappropriate. To do this, you may want to say your son's name in a firm and friendly way

when he begins an unacceptable activity. Once you have his attention, "then you can redirect him," suggests Helen Weicker, director of the St. Luke's Infant Care Center. "Show him an appropriate way to do what he is doing."

For example, offer a toddler a soft ball to throw when he begins tossing around more fragile or inappropriate items.

"Children at this age are certainly not malicious and are not doing premeditated things" to cause problems, says Weicker. "And putting children in time out or slapping their hand when they have so little personal control" is ineffective, she says. Instead, acknowledge their anger when they are frustrated and then substitute an acceptable, but similar activity for the one that is causing problems.

Many child guidance books are available in the public library and book stores. Among those you might want to consider are Parents' Guide to Understanding Discipline: Infancy through Preteen, by Mary Lee Grisanti; Your Child's Self-Esteem, by Dorothy Briggs; and Raising Good Kids: A Developmental Approach to Discipline, by Louise Bates Ames.

12

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Q I can't get my children to help around the house on a regular basis without scolding and yelling. I need ideas for a positive, consistent approach to chores.

A It may help you to know that stormy power struggles over household chores are not uncommon in many families. Yet, such struggles are also unnecessary, especially in families that understand that a child, as well as a home, can benefit significantly when everybody is expected to pitch in and help.

"I believe that all of us, children as well as adults, need to be needed, to feel valued," says Beverly Childress Harkey, a former pre-school teacher who now provides after-school care in her home.

"If the children are helping, they become an integral part of making a household run smoothly . . . and that helps with their self-esteem as they become more self-reliant and responsible," explains Harkey, who has developed a system for household chores that requires daily help from her own children.

Because her system works so well, Harkey says friends often ask her advice on this issue. She suggests that parents consider some of the following ideas when devising a family job plan:

*Let your children know what you expect from them. "I used to make the mistake of letting house cleaning go on and on and on. Of course, the children's attitudes became bad because they couldn't see an end in sight," says Harkey. So explain to your children they will need to complete a specified number of jobs and then they will be finished for the day.

It also will help if your children can participate in choosing their jobs. Harkey has compiled a master list of

jobs for her children. On job days (everyone is off on Sundays), she will designate seven or eight chores from the list and allow her children to select five jobs from that specified group. "Give them a choice, and they'll have a better attitude," she says.

*Make the jobs interesting. Jobs can range from reading books to a younger sibling to carrying cookies to a neighbor. Picking up trash in the car, walking the dog, or watering the plants can all be interesting, yet helpful.

*Limit unpopular jobs or make them more appealing. If your children dislike vacuuming, perhaps they could vacuum only part of a room. Or you could let them use tools — such as the vacuum attachments — that make every job more enjoyable.

*Make jobs fun. "I've been known to drop a few coins in the cushions of the couch that can be found when the children vacuum under the pillows," says Harkey. "I never say anything is going to be there, but if they find a few nickels, they get to keep them. This is now one of the most popular jobs."

*Provide reasonable incentives. If jobs go undone during the week, they pile up for Saturday morning.

*Appreciate what children can do rather than criticize imperfections.

13



Q My son has Attention Deficit Disorder. We are new to Texas and I need to know where I can go or call to get information about services that are available to him.

A You are a wise and loving parent to look for resources to help your son. Research has shown that children with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) can benefit significantly from specific modifications in the classroom as well as other services, says Linda Classen, a consultant in ADD for the Austin Independent School District.

In fact, even if your son will attend school outside the Austin district, you may want to first call Classen (512-414-3762), who also serves as the Austin school district's Section 504 (of the Federal Rehabilitation Act) coordinator. Classen will be able to provide information on federal laws affecting public school services for children with Attention Deficit Disorder.

The first law that may apply to your son is Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. This law — which forbids public schools from discriminating against students with disabilities — requires modifications in the regular education classroom to meet special needs.

The second federal law affecting ADD services is known as IDEA, or Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. "This is special education, and under certain circumstances our ADD kids are eligible for services through this," says Classen.

It's important to understand the laws that may pertain to your son's special needs when you talk to the counselor or principal at the school he will attend. In addition, make sure you bring all diagnostic information you have on your son's ADD when you talk to your school representative. "Bring every piece of paper you've got on this,"

advises Classen.

You also can find out about services for children with ADD by contacting a parent support group organized around this issue. One such group, the Attention Deficit Disorder Association, Southern Region, Austin Chapter, can be reached by calling 512-794-8268. "Other parents (in the group) will know what is available. They will have done a lot of the homework," says Classen.

It's important, perhaps critical, that you find the resources to help your son, says Classen. "There are any number of kids (with ADD) who are doing very well — accessing college and going into professions — whose (needs) were recognized and interventions were put in place and kept in place," she says. "Now they have a good shot at life."

14

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Q I have four children, including a 3-year-old with behavior problems. My older children, who are teen-teenagers, didn't act like he does, and I know he is different. The main problem, however, is my husband who refuses to recognize that we have a problem with this boy. My husband works a lot and thinks the boy is just fine. How can I get more support from my husband on this issue?

A Like many busy parents, you and your husband may find it almost impossible to sit down and talk about the day's events without interruptions from your children, work or other obligations.

But without time to talk, parents sometimes find it difficult to understand their partner's point of view. "It really is a communication thing," says Kathy McWhorter, social work coordinator for the Austin Community Nursery Schools.

"I would definitely say with four children, the parents need to take some real steps toward making time for themselves just to talk," suggests McWhorter.

It may help your husband hear what you have to say if you can try to empathize with his point of view. "If she (the mother) could understand that this is hard for him to hear, that he would like not to have to deal with any problems, . . . that may help her approach him in a way to help him understand what she's telling him," says McWhorter.

In addition to empathy, approach your husband with positive feedback on his parenting skills. For example, if the 3 year old behaves better when his father is around, you may want to point out your husband's positive influence and explain that you would "like to learn some things from him that will help you have that same kind of influence," advises McWhorter.

Before you talk, it's important to convey to your husband that you don't plan to dump the family problems in his lap and expect him to come up with a solution. Explain your need for a partner to work on problems together, says McWhorter.

It also may help if your husband can observe your son's behavior on a typical day. Because some children behave differently around each parent,

it would be best if your son does not know that his dad is home observing him. That means your husband may need to stay in another part of the house while he does this.

If your son attends pre-school and is also experiencing behavior problems there, it may open your husband's eyes if you and he sit down with your child's teacher — who is a neutral, third party — to discuss the situation, suggests McWhorter.

Along with improved communication and additional information on your son's behavior, both of you also may find it helpful to refresh your memory on what to expect from a 3 year old. Child development literature, available at book stores or at the library, may provide you the structure to help in your discussions about your son.

15

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Q Although I try to be careful with my teeth, I've had dental problems throughout my life. Now that I have a baby, I really want to do whatever I can to help her avoid the pain and expense I've had to put up with. Can you find some general dental health guidelines for new parents like me?

A Your efforts to take care of your baby's teeth really can't begin too early. And you're smart to take preventive steps that will help keep your child's smile healthy throughout her life.

"With your help, in combination with their own efforts and regular professional care, your daughters and sons can grow up cavity-free and keep their teeth all their lives," according to the American Dental Association.

The association, which publishes pamphlets dealing with various aspects of oral health that are available in many dentists' offices, suggests the following for promoting good dental health in children:

*Make sure you take your child to the dentist on a regular basis, with the first visit scheduled before the baby's first birthday. The early visits not only allow the dentist to make sure the child's teeth are problem free, but also help a youngster feel more at ease over what should become routine medical care.

*Do not let your baby drink from a bottle of milk, formula, sugar water or fruit juice over an extended period of time, such as during a nap or at night. Even allowing the baby to hold a bottle in her mouth while she leisurely crawls or walks around the house can lead to what is known as "baby bottle tooth decay." "If these liquids pool around the child's teeth," advises the dental association, "the teeth will be attacked by acids for long periods of time, and serious decay can result."

*Clean your child's mouth after every feeding by wiping the baby's gums and teeth with a damp washcloth or gauze pad.

*Start brushing when your child's first tooth erupts.

*Make sure your child gets enough fluoride for decay-resistant teeth, advises the dental association. Even if your drinking water contains fluoride, you

should talk to your dentist about any additional fluoride treatment your child may need.

*Brush and floss your child's teeth daily until the child can do this alone. And, as most parents will tell you, you will still need to oversee or monitor your child's brushing and flossing to make sure those little teeth get the care they need to remain healthy.

*Provide your child a well-balanced diet with a variety of foods from the five major food groups. And be extra careful about cleaning the teeth after your child eats sweet or starchy foods.

16

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Q Sometimes when my 4-year-old daughter is just across the room, she won't respond if I tell her to do something, such as pick up her toys. I usually find myself barking at her when she ignores me, yet she still won't respond or do what I ask. I know her hearing is fine, so I need to figure out a better approach.

A While your frustration is understandable, it may help you communicate more effectively with your 4 year old if you remember how it feels to be yelled at or given orders from across the room.

In fact, try to put yourself in your child's place the next time you find yourself getting angry and scolding when she doesn't do as you order. You might ask yourself how "you feel when someone yells at you from across the room — annoyed, embarrassed, perturbed?" suggests Dr. Elizabeth

Morgan, program coordinator for Connections, Austin's family, early care and education resource center.

If your child has friends over and you find yourself feeling the need to scold or criticize, again ask yourself how you feel "when someone in authority criticizes you in front of your peers," suggests Dr. Morgan.

Because this kind of approach tends to make everyone — children as well as grown-ups — uncomfortable, Dr. Morgan suggests that it is more effective to simply go over to your child and speak directly to her whenever possible rather than calling across the room. Because you want to protect your child's dignity, this individual approach is especially important when she is playing in a group of children and is in need of guidance.

"When reminding a child of a limit, do so in quiet tones to avoid embarrassing the child and to avoid reinforcing the behavior through excess attention," advises Dr. Morgan.

While it's important to speak directly and individually to a child — even getting down on your knees to be at the child's level, if necessary — it's also wise to remember that your voice is a tool.

"How you speak . . . has as much, or even more, of an impact than what you say," advises Dr. Morgan. "Children tend to focus on the most outstanding aspect of a situation and to become overwhelmed by loud voices and angry facial expressions. If your voice is raised and angry, the emotion rather than the content of your statement is what the children will remember." That means if you are using a harsh tone of

voice, your child is likely to hear only your anger and miss your message altogether.

"Use the 'minimal sufficiency principle' when working with children," advises Dr. Morgan. "This principle entails using just enough firmness in your voice and body language to capture and hold the child's attention. Being firm and friendly will help the child tune in to and remember your message rather than become overwhelmed by the emotion."

17

Q My 5-year-old daughter will walk to kindergarten this year. The school is nearby and she will walk with her older brother and a friend. However, my daughter is nervous around dogs, and I'd like to give her and all the children some advice on how to deal with stray animals. Do you have any tips?

A You're smart to look ahead on this issue, especially if your child is anxious around animals. But even children who feel at ease around animals and love to pet them need to know how to deal safely with stray animals they are likely to encounter on their way to and from school.

One of the most widely used animal bite prevention programs was developed by Ohio veterinarian, Dr. J. Michael Cornwell. The program, sponsored by the American Animal Hospital Association, is often used in animal safety presentations by local veterinari-

ans, such as Dr. T.C. Arand, who visits Austin and other area schools to discuss bite prevention.

Among the points Dr. Arand stresses to children in his school visits are:

*Leave stray cats and dogs alone.

*When you see a stray animal, tell the nearest adult so animal control authorities can be notified.

*If a stray dog approaches you, "stand still and be a tree," advises the animal bite prevention program. "Stand straight with the feet together and fists held under the neck and elbows into the chest. Don't look the dog directly in the eye as this angers some dogs."

*If you are knocked down by a dog, you should "act like a log." Lie face down with your legs together. Cover the back of your neck with folded fists and let your forearms cover your ears.

*Leave all dogs — even yours — alone when they are eating.

*Never go into a dog's territory — such as his yard, home or car — if it growls at you. Back away slowly when the dog growls.

*Leave all wild animals alone. They may be cute, but they also may bite if you touch.

18

Q I have a 19-month-old grandson who bangs his head against the wall, arm of a chair, or whatever is nearby when he is frustrated. He is a large child, almost as big as a 3 year old, but he is so young that he doesn't have the words to explain himself. Does he have an emotional disorder or developmental delay?

AYour concern for your grandson is understandable. And because you worry about emotional or developmental problems linked to this habit, it would be wise if you or the boy's parents talked to the child's doctor about how and why your grandson bangs his head so frequently.

Fortunately, while head banging is worrisome, it is unlikely that this behavior stems from any medical problem, according to pediatric neurologist Jeffrey S. Kerr, who is with the Austin Diagnostic Clinic. Still, this would be another issue the boy's doctor could discuss with you.

Your grandson's doctor will be able to discuss developmental milestones associated with the boy's age when you or the child's parents discuss the head-banging problem. It may reassure you to know that your grandson's somewhat limited ability with words does not necessarily signal a developmental delay. "If the child is 19 months old, you don't expect him to have that many words," says Linda Collins, director of First English Lutheran Child Development Center. "Unless there are other reasons to suspect (developmental delays), I wouldn't worry about it that much."

If you are really concerned about his speech development, a speech-language pathologist can evaluate your grandson to see if his language skills are on target.

In addition to obtaining more information from medical or speech professionals, you also should take steps to protect your grandson from hurting himself when these head-banging inci-

dents occur. "He can injure himself," says pediatric nurse Susan Clarke. "When a child is out of control, one suggestion is to try to carry or hold the child in order to protect him from self-injury. Usually, you should hold him for one to three minutes until you feel him start to relax. You want to be firm but comforting."

When he has calmed down, you or your grandson's parents can show him ways to vent his anger or frustration. You might say, "I know you're mad about not being able to go outside," and then suggest he hit a pillow with his fist or make loud noises and strong faces or yell that he's angry, suggests child development specialist Claire Flynn.

It's important that the adults caring for your grandson remain low-key during these head banging incidents. Excessive attention or giving in on what has triggered the child's anger will reinforce this habit.

19

Q My grandmother died after a heart attack and heart disease has been diagnosed elsewhere in our family. I am trying to be careful with my children's diet because of our family history. But, naturally, my children like a lot of higher-fat foods. I'd like some advice on how to ease them off these high-fat foods.

A It's important that you are taking steps to monitor your children's diet. Children from families with a history of heart disease are at greater

risk for similar problems in adulthood, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics.

To help guard against heart disease, you are wise to help your children develop healthful eating and other lifestyle habits early, the academy suggests.

But it's also recommended that you wait until after your children are 2 years old before you try to cut back on fat, saturated fat and cholesterol in their diets. "As children begin to eat with the family they should be encouraged to choose from foods that are lower in fat and saturated fat. These goals for fat are NOT for children under 2 years of age, who have special dietary needs," according to the publication "Growing Up Healthy," a project of the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Dietetic Association, and the Food Marketing Institute.

Depending on the age of your children, you may want to take steps to increase the consumption of some lower fat items while decreasing the intake of those foods with a higher fat content. "Balancing food choices over time is what counts," the brochure advises.

For example, try serving baked potatoes more often and french fries only on occasion. Low fat frozen yogurt should be offered more frequently with ice cream being an occasional treat. Chicken should be baked or grilled rather than fried for the most part. Bagels or English muffins should appear on your child's plate most often, while donuts and other sweet rolls be limited to "special treat" status. While chocolate chip cookies and cupcakes

are fine for an occasional snack, graham crackers, animal crackers, fig bars, vanilla wafers and lady fingers should be a more common snack offering. And potato chips should be limited, with pretzels and plain popcorn a more frequent snack offering.

In addition, try these ideas for improving your child's diet:

*Make plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables available for snacks.

*Routinely serve whole grain breads and cereals.

*Buy low-fat milk and yogurt and lower-fat cheeses.

*Try angel food cake, frozen fruit bars or low fat frozen yogurt in place of rich, creamy desserts.

20

Q I recently met a woman with a 6-month-old baby. Although the baby weighed 7 pounds when he was born, he had only gained three pounds since birth. The woman said the baby just didn't like to eat much. I am very concerned, and I was wondering if you could find out about "failure to thrive." I don't know this mother well, so I don't know about the baby's medical care, but I think the mother needs more information on this condition.

A You are to be commended for caring so much about this baby. However, without more information on the baby's medical situation, it is impossible to determine if he is healthy or if he is experiencing "failure to thrive."

"Failure to thrive is a diagnosis you utilize until you figure out why a child is not growing. It can be applied to a lack of gain in either height or weight," says Linda Payne, a pediatric nurse practitioner with the Austin Diagnostic Clinic.

"Obviously, this child needs to see a physician to be evaluated. A lot of other factors would have to be taken into consideration before we would know if he is growing properly," says Payne.

Even though your concerns are understandable, you simply don't have enough information to know if this child's growth rate is appropriate or his development normal. Since you don't appear to know the child's family well, it could be that the parents haven't shared with you information about the child's condition that would explain his weight. For example, if the child is ill, this may not be information they want to share with everyone they meet.

"The most important thing is if you can talk to the family, make sure they are receiving adequate medical supervision," says Payne.

If you can determine that the family has failed to obtain medical care for their child for financial reasons, you "may even want to steer them toward some options that are available," suggests Payne. "The health department has clinics that do a good job of assessing growth."

For information on health department services for young children, call the health clinic nearest you. Those numbers are listed in the "Helpful Numbers" section of the phone book. Check for listings under "Health Services and Organizations."

Q My 5-year-old son likes to play a game in which he is the baby animal and I play the mother animal. This is always part of his bedtime routine and sometimes he likes to do it at other times. My concern is that the only time he seems comfortable with affection is when we're playing this mother-baby animal game. Should I be concerned?

A Your game with your son sounds delightful, and based on your description, it appears that the two of you have a close relationship.

But it's also understandable that you are curious about his lack of affection unless he is playing the game. However, the fact is, at 5, your son is working on his independence. And his developmental changes may affect his need for affection.

"Five year olds are more physically independent," says Gale Spear, director of the Austin Community College Children's School. "They like to know you are there, but their need for hugging and kisses begins to diminish."

If your son is entering kindergarten soon, he is about to "take a huge step forward," where he'll find expectations and his routine somewhat different than what he may have experienced in preschool. While it's unclear how your son feels about kindergarten, his baby animal game may be his way of going back to the time when he was a baby and more dependent on his parents. "This may be a safe way for him to regress, and that's OK," says Spear.

While you want to respect the variety of conflicting emotions your son may be experiencing, you can also talk to your son about your need for affection. You might say something like, "I really like it when you're affectionate with me, and I'd like it if we could hug sometime during the day when we're not playing the game," suggests Spear.

"It's fine to talk to him about what he needs and what you would like, but then (the parent) should follow the child's cues and respect his needs," says Spear.

"As long as he doesn't recoil" when he is hugged or kissed, you probably needn't be alarmed by this behavior, adds Spear.

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Q Can you find out about a possible recall of a pop-up toy for babies that features Mickey Mouse and several other Disney characters? My daughter has a toy that sounds similar to the recalled toy.

A You may be referring to a recall of 200,000 portable Disney Play 'N Pop Activity Toys that were manufactured by a Mattel Company in Westbury, N.Y.

The company, Arcotoys Inc., recalled the toy after receiving 13 consumer reports that the toy's small, purple key, shaped like Mickey Mouse's head, had broken off from the toy, causing a potential choking hazard, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

Although none of the children involved was injured, several consumers told the company their youngsters started to choke on the toy pieces.

While the toy complies with Consumer Product Safety Commission and industry standards, Arcotoys recalled the toy to prevent future problems.

The toy in question is designed for children ages 9 to 36 months and involves five brightly colored cartoon figures — a baby Mickey Mouse, Pluto, Donald Duck, Minnie Mouse, and Goofy. Children activate the pop-up characters with various panel controls, including the Mickey Mouse key, according to the safety commission.

The recalled Disney Play 'N Pop toys are model number 66004 that were produced in China. These toys were sold nationwide throughout 1994 for about \$13. They can be identified by the word "China" molded on the bottom of the toy.

Toys affected by the recall should be taken away from children immediately, advises the safety commission. The toys can be returned by mail to Arcotoys, Attention: Nancy Nelson, 15930 East Valley Blvd., City of Industry, Cal., 91744.

Consumers who return the toys will receive a full refund along with postage costs and a discount coupon toward the purchase of another Arcotoys product. For more information, call Arcotoys at 1-800-442-2664.

To report a dangerous product or a product-related injury, call the Consumer Product Safety Commission hotline at 1-800-638-2772.

Q I am the mother of a 15-month-old son. I am concerned because he seems closer to his father and grandmother than he does to me. Is this normal?

A Without more details, it is difficult to get a clear picture of your family situation. However, it should reassure you to know that, in general, children your son's age do sometimes show preference for one parent over the other. And most of the time, this most favored status swings back and forth between mom and dad or other important caregivers in a child's life.

"In the broad scope of things, it is not unusual for a child around 1 1/2, and I don't think 15 months is too early, to have that kind of favoritism," says Helen Weicker, director of St. Luke's Infant Care Center.

"What we see here at school (when a child shows favoritism) doesn't have anything to do with who is the better parent. It has to do with what the child's preference is at that point. Sometimes children prefer mom when they are feeling sick or injured, and when they feel feisty or strong, they feel a strong preference for dad," says Weicker.

Sometimes a child will seem to favor a parent for several days or even a month or two, yet these feelings can switch back and forth within a 24-hour period. "It does seem to go back and forth, and it doesn't necessarily seem to have anything to do with what the

parents are doing differently. I just think as children become more conscious of the differences between people . . . they have a preference for one parent's style over another from time to time," says Weicker.

While it is unclear how frequently your son visits his grandmother — or, perhaps she even lives with you — his bonds with her are likely to be strong if she helps care for him. For example, if the child's grandmother cares for him while you work every day, it is quite natural that he is close to her.

Although your son's parental preferences probably will shift from time to time, talk to your child's doctor about the situation if your son's current feelings remain extremely intense over a long period of time. If needed, your doctor can refer you to a counselor to help you evaluate your family dynamics and develop a better understanding of the situation.

Q My 5-year-old son is starting school this year and will ride the bus to and from school. We know which bus he is to take, but I would like to talk to him about bus safety. Where can I get some good tips on this?

A Many children in the Austin and surrounding school districts learn about bus safety through presentations made by representatives of the Region XIII Education Service Center. The visit to the schools by the region's bus driver safety consultant

includes a discussion of safety tips described in an easy-to-read pamphlet handed out to students.

However, since your son will be attending elementary school for the first time, he may not have had access to this information. So you may want to call Region XIII at 512-929-1367 or 512-929-1309 and ask for the student handbook, Come Ride With Me.

Among the tips included in the book you may want to discuss with your son are:

*Make sure your child knows his bus number. "Just knowing your driver is not good enough, because some days you may have a substitute driver," the booklet advises children.

*Make sure your son understands his school bus driver has been trained to drive the bus and help the passengers so it is important that students obey him or her.

*Because the school bus must follow a timed schedule, it's important that students be at the bus stop waiting when the bus arrives. ". . . plan to be there five minutes before your bus is scheduled to arrive," advises the student handbook. "If it is rainy or cold, wear the right clothes for being outside."

*Tell your son he should never play along the roadway while waiting for a bus.

*When he sees his bus coming, your son should line up with other children who are waiting, stand still, and wait for the bus to stop. "Stand a safe distance from the edge of the roadway and do not move toward the bus until the driver has opened the door," the booklet advises. Students should never push or

shove.

*Once on the bus, your son should take his seat immediately. The bus driver will not start the bus until everyone sits down.

*When getting off the bus, your son should wait until the bus stops to get out of his seat and go toward the door. After getting out, he should quickly move at least three steps away from the bus. "If you can touch the bus, you are too close," advises the booklet. "This is important, because as the bus pulls away from the curb, the rear of the bus swings around and could hit you."

*Your son should never cross the street behind the bus.

*If he must cross the street after getting off the bus, your son should walk 15 steps in front of the bus and wait until the driver tells him to cross. He should then move to a point in the street where he is aligned with the left front fender of the bus and check for traffic before crossing the street.

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Q My 3 1/2-year-old grandson refuses to listen to us when we tell him not to run away. He will run across the street and you can't catch him and he won't stop. Recently on a trip to the Riverwalk in San Antonio we had to use a wrist harness on him so he would not run away. How can we get him to stop doing this?

A Your grandson sounds like he is fascinated by the world around him, yet has developed little

impulse control when he sees or hears something that catches his interest. So until he matures, this child will need close supervision to make sure his curiosity and lack of control don't team up to lead him into danger.

While a positive approach is always important, your top priority with this child is protecting him. That means when your grandchild runs toward the street, be very firm with him, advises Dawn Leach, parent educator with the Parents as Teachers program at Austin's Widen Elementary. "This is not something to negotiate because the consequences (of running into the street) are too terrible to think about," she says.

Before the boy goes outside, he should be told that he must stay in the yard and may not run into the street. Keep your explanation simple, but discuss how he can get hurt if he runs into the street. And make sure he knows beforehand that if he tries to run into the street, he will have to go inside.

You or another adult will need to go outside with this child when he plays in the yard. When you do, remain close enough to catch him if he starts for the street. But you also need to give him enough space to demonstrate that he can control himself, advises Leach.

If he runs away, you must be ready to stop him, and with your demeanor, let him know his behavior is unacceptable. Use a sober tone of voice and change your facial expression to make it clear to the child that you are serious. "They (the adults) need to be really firm. The child needs to know this is not a game," advises Leach. Then follow through on the consequences you

have discussed — he will have to go back inside.

Since this child also tends to run away in public places, it's wise to think ahead before planning an outing with him. Some places are big and overstimulating and inappropriate for a child who loves to run free so he can see and touch everything. Instead, try to help this child learn to control himself by arranging for outings in secure, confined places where his need to explore won't pose a danger. Let him know what you expect ahead of time. And once he succeeds in that setting, you can try another, more open setting to see how he does.

26

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Q I do not have children, but I enjoy them and would like to work with them in some structured way. I'm also especially concerned about violence in our society and would like to find some way to make a change. How can I offer my time to children and families in a way to make our world a little safer and saner?

A As always, your compassion, concern, and time are greatly needed by many organizations that have been set up to provide families and children with support, education, and sometimes just a regular dose of positive and loving attention.

Even if you don't have children enrolled, many schools would welcome your help in the classroom, lunchroom or on the playground. Churches are

always in need of help with youth programs. And organizations that deal specifically with young people — agencies such as Big Brothers-Big Sisters and CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) — are almost always short on volunteers.

Because you are interested in working in a program that not only helps young people, but also tries to counteract violence, you may want to check with Parents Anonymous (512-459-5490). While Parents Anonymous is known for its telephone crisis support through the 24-hour HEARTline (1-800-554-2323), it also offers parent training, parent support groups and play and support activities for children. Volunteers are needed to answer the 24-hour phone line and to work with the parent and children's groups, which focus on helping parents and children learn to handle conflict and work together more positively as a family.

"It's been said that the strength of a nation derives from the integrity of the home," says Mary Taylor, who began as a volunteer with Parents Anonymous 10 years ago and now works as the Austin program coordinator. "One of our goals is to help parents develop the best skills they can so they can in turn help their children develop the skills they'll need to meet all that's going on in the world."

While their parents attend classes or support groups, children also meet with volunteers. "It's sort of a way to give parents a time out so they can work on their skills," says Taylor. "In the mean time, the kids are getting

their needs met."

As with many programs involving children, Parents Anonymous requires volunteers to undergo training before working with families.

27

Q Recently, my 15-year-old son broke a house rule about having friends of the opposite sex over when he is home alone. Although my son told us about the incident afterwards, I still felt there should be some consequence because he broke the rule. He argued that he should get credit for voluntarily telling us what he had done. I think he has a point, so I'm not sure what to do.

A Your dilemma is understandable because you do want to encourage your son to remain honest and open with you. However, he also needs to understand that his honesty doesn't mean he can do anything he wants as long as he tells you about it later.

So, if you and your son had discussed the consequence for breaking this rule before the incident in question, you should "go ahead and follow through on it," suggests licensed family therapist Gay Klinger.

"You may want to lessen it (the consequence) a bit for his being honest, but you don't want to give him the idea that every time he breaks a rule, you'll forgive the consequence because he came to you and said he broke the rule and he is sorry," says

Klinger.

It's also important to make sure your son understands that if he breaks the rule again, he will have to face the full consequence.

If you had not set up a clear consequence for breaking the rule beforehand, your son may not have understood the ramifications of his actions. In this case, it may be appropriate to let this incident pass with a warning only. But make sure you set a consequence now so that he will know in the future what to expect if the rule is broken.

When deciding on a consequence, it will be helpful to enlist your son's help. "Brainstorm with him for some possible consequences," advises Klinger, but do so with the understanding that you "have the final decision as to what is appropriate."

Because your son abused his privileges by breaking the rule, a logical consequence might involve "some kind of grounding from normal privileges," suggests Klinger. The amount of time you restrict your son should vary depending on the severity of his actions, she advises.

28

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Q Our 10-year-old son really loves our dog, but he has lost some of his enthusiasm for feeding the pet every day — although he promised he would do this when we got the dog. On the other hand, I really find it easier to feed the dog myself instead of reminding my son. How firm should I

be about making my son feed our dog?

A As a parent, you've probably discovered many times that it's easier to go ahead and do something for your child rather than make the youngster do it himself. But this approach really doesn't allow your child to develop a sense of responsibility or provide him the feeling of accomplishment he earns when he completes a task himself.

For these reasons, it's important that you try to step back from assuming your son's duties to his pet.

"A pet is totally dependent on others for its feeding and care and provides an ideal opportunity to teach your child about responsibility," writes Dr. Marianne Neifert in her book, Dr. Mom's Parenting Guide. And at 10, your son is old enough to handle more responsibility for a pet than a youngster who is only 3 or 4.

Dr. Neifert agrees that assuming a child's responsibility for tending a pet may seem easier in the short term, but that "it runs the risk of conveying to children the unrealistic message that others will cover for them when they shirk their responsibilities, that someone else will look after (the dog) even if they don't," she says.

In fact, it probably is a good idea for your son to take part in other aspects of the pet's care — perhaps walking the dog or helping groom it on a regular basis. When he is unable to complete his jobs with the pet — perhaps when he spends the night with friends — he should know to arrange for oth-

ers in your family to take care of the dog's needs.

"Initially, you should expect to closely supervise your child until it is clear he independently can perform each step involved in his pet's care," writes Dr. Neifert, a pediatrician and mother of five. When your son does his job well, it's also important to compliment him on how well he handles his responsibilities.

While an adult will need to be in charge of the pet's medical needs, try to involve your son in visits to the veterinarian so that he will come to understand the importance of having a pet immunized, licensed, and spayed or neutered.

Children who successfully honor their commitments to pets often experience "enhanced self-esteem" from knowing they can care for an animal that depends on them, says Dr. Neifert. And if your son develops a sense of responsibility for his pet and its care, he will be better equipped to handle the more complex responsibilities he will encounter as he grows older, says the author and doctor.

29

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Q My fourth grader, who has Attention Deficit Disorder, works hard in school and does fairly well, thanks to a good teacher and much effort on his own part. My question is whether we should encourage him to participate in after-school activities or do children with attention problems need

more "down" time after school?

A Like all children, youngsters with Attention Deficit Disorder can benefit from after-school activities — as long as they are not forced to participate in programs or on teams in which they have no interest.

In fact, an organized activity in which a child with Attention Deficit Disorder enjoys success outside of school can be especially good for these youngsters. Just make sure you recognize that your son may be tired when he comes home from school and that he has plenty of time to unwind each afternoon before beginning his extracurricular activities.

"It's true that these children do better with structure. Even their weekends go better if they are structured," says Linda Classen, ADD consultant in the Austin Independent School District.

"But when they come in from school, they are tired. For them it takes so much more energy to focus and get through school, so it's important that they have therapeutic down time they may get just hanging out after school, playing, or even watching TV," says Classen.

Some parents find that their ADD children are especially surly or cranky when they get home from school.

"Some do beautifully in school, and when they get home, they let it all hang out, so you need to let them rest," says Classen.

If your son has not selected an after-school activity, you may want to consider a number of options before you sign up for a program. "Often, as an after-

school activity, these children do well in swimming. It's just themselves participating, and it's very relaxing," says Classen. "And a lot do well in karate because of the self-discipline required. And a lot do well in soccer because of the constant running."

However, unless it seriously interests your son, baseball is not often the best activity for a child with attention problems. "Unless it's their particular passion, these children don't do well in Little League baseball. There is too much down time and these kids will drift off into the clouds," Classen advises.

If your son has not indicated an interest in any activities after school, be sure to talk with him to see how he feels before signing him up for something. You might say something like, "I know you're tired after school. But if there is something you're interested in doing, let me know," suggests Classen, who advises parents to find a "balance between structured time and just play time."

30

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Q My daughter, who is 4, complains of mild headaches maybe once a month. She has just had a check-up, and she is otherwise healthy. Recent tests also indicated her vision is normal. Should I be concerned about these little headaches, even though she seems healthy?

A While your daughter's headaches may not signal any serious medical problem, you are wise to be concerned about recurrent headaches in a child her age.

"I would definitely go in and have a child that age examined by a doctor," advises pediatric neurologist Jeffrey S. Kerr, who is with the Austin Diagnostic Clinic.

"It is unusual for a child at 4 to consistently complain of headaches," says Dr. Kerr.

To get a clearer picture of the significance of your daughter's headaches, first talk to your child's primary care physician, says Dr. Kerr.

Although "often there is no identifiable cause for childhood headaches," a medical evaluation is recommended. The physician will examine the child to determine the need for further evaluation. Such procedures as blood tests, X-rays, or a brain scan may be necessary before deciding that no specific source — sinus infection, acute illness, or brain tumor, to name just a few — is present.

While young children can be affected by the same factors that cause headaches in other age groups, it's important that you be more suspicious of significant illness in a younger child with recurring headaches, Dr. Kerr suggests.

31

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Q I am the mother of a 6-year-old boy. We seem to be in a power struggle constantly. For example, during the school year when my

son has reading assignments, he won't let me look at the book while he reads. I know he is making up words, but I can't help him because he won't let me see the book. I'm frustrated because he is so uncooperative.

A Power struggles between parents and children are often exhausting, frustrating, and fruitless — yet altogether common.

But actually, when a child consistently refuses to cooperate and parents find they are in constant argument with the youngster, the power struggle has already been won.

"Obviously, the child is the one in power," explains Pam Johnson, counselor at North Oaks Elementary School in the Round Rock school district.

What you may want to consider is whether your son is acting as he does because it automatically provides him "attention and power from the mother," says Johnson, adding, "I would not get in that sort of push-pull situation."

Instead of arguing, it will help reduce these conflicts and increase cooperation if a parent will offer a child acceptable choices, perhaps two or three, explain the consequences for lack of cooperation, and then "walk away from" the situation causing the conflict, advises Johnson.

If the parent is "calm and consistent and does not make a big deal out of it," it will leave little room for those familiar parent-child arguments to start, advises Johnson.

For example, if you find that you frequently argue with your son about getting dressed in the morning, you may

want to say something like, "This is what I expect. You may either wear this or that, but I expect you to be ready in 10 minutes. If not, then this is the consequence," says Johnson.

The consequence may be that your child will be late to school if he doesn't make his choice within the limits you have set. Of course, if it is not possible to permit your son to run late because you and others in the family must get to work or school by a certain time, you will need to come up with another consequence for his lack of cooperation.

"In that case, the consequence might be something like for every minute the child is late to school, he will have 10 minutes less time for television that evening," suggests Johnson.

As for the reading situation, you may want to talk to your son's teacher about his progress. In addition, when he reads at home, you can offer your son choices that are unrelated to where you sit while he reads. You might say, "This is a book that needs to be read. We can read it before supper or after," says Johnson. Or you might suggest a plan that incorporates his needs and yours by saying "I'd like you to read the first and last page with me, but you may read the middle page by yourself." Or he could read alone at first, and then read with you toward the end of the book.

32

Q My grandchild has outgrown her car seat, and I'm thinking about giving it away or putting it in a garage sale. Is there anything I

need to do first to make sure it passes current safety standards?

A Your question is very important because whether you are selling, giving away or buying a used child safety seat, it's essential that you be aware of a number of safety issues, advises Steve Anderson, coordinator for the Texas Department of Health's Safe Riders program.

First, before passing on a seat or buying one that has been used, it's critical that you find out the history of the child safety seat. "Every major safety seat manufacturer and the federal government recommend that all safety seats involved in collisions be destroyed," says Anderson. "That would include even a minor collision, one that happens at 5 miles per hour."

Knowing the collision background of a car seat before recycling it back into use is necessary because any accident can cause stress fractures or cracks that may not be visible but can seriously affect the integrity of the safety seat. "We would recommend not passing the seat on unless you can actually verify the seat has never been in a collision," says Anderson.

It's also important that any used child safety seat include the original or a copy of the original instructions for the car seat. Without these instructions, a parent or caregiver "is on his own" in trying to figure out how to properly use the seat and therefore is at much greater chance "of misusing the seat and putting a child at risk," says Anderson.

Before you give away, sell or buy a used a car seat, you should also check with Anderson's office (1-800-252-8255) to find out if the seat has been involved in a safety recall. Because testing procedures for child safety seats are "so sporadic and varied," a car seat can be on the market for more than a year before it undergoes testing. In fact, Anderson suggests that any owner of a child safety seat check with his office frequently to determine if the seat has been involved in a recall.

Before calling Safe Riders, you will need to obtain the name of the manufacturer, the model number of the seat and the date of manufacture. This information should be available on a sticker that is on the side or back of the child safety seat. "It gets a little more risky if you are looking at a safety seat that has been used and you can't find the model number or the manufacture date because the sticker is gone," says Anderson. "Then it's kind of 'buyer beware.'"

If you determine the car seat has been in an accident, destroy it by separating the pad and harness straps from the plastic shell. These items should be discarded in a separate place from the shell to eliminate the chance that someone will find the various parts and put the defective seat back together, advises Anderson.

33

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Q Sometimes when I drive my 4-year-old daughter and one of her classmates to pre-school, they will start whispering and giggling

about another friend at school, almost like they are planning to team up against her. I don't think they carry out these little plans, but I'm concerned. Should I say something to the girls when I hear them whispering about their other friends?

A Often it's difficult for parents to know if and when they should discuss inappropriate behaviors with a child, especially if other children are involved.

But it may help with this decision if you consider a couple of factors when these whispered conversations or other worrisome behaviors start up. First, if your child realizes you have heard what she and her friend have been whispering, you need to respond.

"If they (the children) know you are watching and you don't say anything about it," you're tacitly approving their actions, advises Pat Jolley, an early childhood educator at Austin Community College. "If you don't want to be one of the conspirators, you have to say something."

Secondly, if what you're hearing really bothers you — whether or not the children know you have overheard them — it's important to speak up. Otherwise, your feelings probably will continue to build and eventually, instead of discussing the issue in a calm and positive way, you may find yourself snapping angrily at the girls when the whispering starts, Jolley says.

Before the children get into any more of these whispering incidents, it would be wise to talk with the other child's

parents. Let them know you plan to talk to your daughter so she will understand how hurtful it feels when children are excluded from playing with their friends. Along with the other parents, you can decide whether to talk to the girls together when they begin to whisper about their friends or wait and do it one-on-one with your own child.

If you talk to both children when the whispering starts, "your end goal is to get these two to take the other child's perspective," says Jolley. "I would share with these kids how it would make me feel to be left out."

Or you may want to talk alone to your own daughter about how hurt she felt when she was not invited to a birthday party or otherwise rejected by her classmates. Even talking about your personal experiences when you felt left out by friends may help a 4 year old begin to see things from another person's perspective.

While the children's whispering may seem fairly harmless, it's important to realize that they probably are in fact acting on their plans once they get to school. After all, three is a hard number socially for children as well as adults. "Probably if these two are whispering in the back seat, they are feeling more secure with each other and this gives them the power to exclude the other. I wouldn't be surprised if they were trying it," says Jolley.

34

Q My stepson lives with his mother most of the time, but stays with us every other weekend.

My children, who are much younger than their half-brother, are very close to him and have a hard time understanding why he gets to spend so much more time with his mom than he does with us. It's hard to explain this arrangement, which seems unfair to them.

A Your children's questions about the time their brother spends with his other family versus how much he has with yours are understandable. And if you can use very simple terms, you may want to explain the legal basis for your stepson's living arrangements.

But it's important to understand that explaining how your stepson's living arrangements have been approved by a court trying to act in the boy's best interest may not satisfy what your own children really want to know about this situation.

"Try to figure out what the children are really asking. They may have some other questions they have a hard time putting into words," advises licensed family therapist John Young, who worked with Stepfamilies Austin for 10 years before his recent move to Brownsville.

For example, your children may have questions if they see that the rules in your house apply differently to them than to their brother, who may be treated like a guest. They may wonder why their brother gets so much attention when he visits and feel they are taken for granted, suggests Young.

"It may be that they look up to him and love him, but feel left out of his life," says Young. So they ask questions that may trigger a discussion on the whole issue of your stepson's visits.

What may help everyone is if you can sit down with your children and your stepson and talk about these issues. "Ask them what questions they have about what's going on," advises Young. In addition, perhaps you could encourage your stepson to contact your children by phone or maybe with a brief postcard when he is with his mother.

While you want to encourage your children to ask the questions that will help their understanding of the stepfamily arrangement, try to avoid saying things that "would reinforce any idea that the world is unfair and they're not getting something that's owed them," advises Young.

35

Q I am very concerned about a recent recall of bunk beds. I understand that it is a fairly large recall, and I need to find out if my children's furniture is involved.

A Yes, the recall of wooden bunk beds involved a substantial number of beds — more than 320,000 — and 11 manufacturers that jointly announced the recall with the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission.

The recall was issued because the bunk beds have openings on the top bunk that may present a potential

entrapment hazard to young children.

"The spaces can be large enough for a child's body to pass through, but small enough to entrap the child's head," according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission. "This recall program is being conducted to prevent the possibility of injury and death."

From 1990 through 1994, the federal safety commission received reports that 24 children died after becoming trapped in bunk beds with openings in the top bunk similar to the spaces in the recalled beds. Nineteen of those children were 2 and under, and four were 3 years old. Companies participating in the recall are now placing permanent labels on their beds to warn that children under 6 should not use the upper bunk.

The federal safety commission and the manufacturers of the recalled beds reported that neither is aware of any injuries or deaths associated with the recalled beds.

The beds involved in the recall were sold nationwide through furniture and specialty stores. The following manufacturers and importers are participating in this recall — Backwoods Design, Brill Furniture, Dover Furniture, Fine Pine, H & H Furniture, Houston Wood, Lexington Furniture, MAFCO Inc., Sumter Cabinet Co., Tech Designs, and Woodcrest Sales. Some of the beds involved in the recall were distributed as far back as the early 1980s. To obtain model numbers and descriptions of the beds involved — as well as additional information about the recall — call the Consumer Product Safety Commission's Hotline at 1-800-638-

2772.

Bunk beds currently made by these companies meet voluntary safety standards for spacing established by the American Society for Testing and Materials. Those standards require that, in addition to having guardrails on both sides of the top bunk, any spaces between the guardrail and bed frame and in the head and foot boards on the top bunk be less than 3.5 inches.

If you determine that you have one of these bed, stop using it immediately and call the manufacturer or contact the retailer for a replacement guardrail, retrofit kit, or instructions that will eliminate the spacing hazard. If you are unsure of the manufacturer or need information to locate the companies involved, contact the Consumer Product Safety Commission Hotline.

36

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Q My 2 1/2-year-old daughter is in that stage where she says "no" to everything. I have tried to be tolerant, but finally I told her I didn't want to hear her say "no" anymore. Now, she's going "un-unh" instead of "no," but it's still very annoying. What should I do?

A Like many good parents, you understand that your daughter will go through various stages as she tries out her new verbal and social skills. All the same, it can get rather annoying to hear "no" every time you say something to your child.

"I think this is real typical of this age," says Dawn Leach, parent educator with the Parents as Teachers program at Austin's Widen Elementary. "I think with 'no,' they're really asserting their independence. This is a way for them to feel powerful."

To accommodate your daughter's need to flex her newly developed verbal powers — and to accommodate your own need for a break from them — try to avoid questions that can be answered with a "yes" or "no."

"Give your daughter choices as much as possible, but instead of saying, 'Do you want to get dressed?' ask her, 'Would you rather wear this outfit or that one?'" advises Leach.

Make sure the choices you give your daughter are all acceptable to you. "Many times I've said my rule of thumb is, 'Don't ask a question if you can't live with the answer,'" says Leach.

In fact, if you succeed in phrasing most of your questions so they can't be answered with a "yes" or "no," you can occasionally ask your daughter something that does require a "no" answer. "Ask her some questions that will let her say 'no,' as long as you can live with the answer," says Leach.

In addition, you may want to encourage your daughter to participate in problem solving when issues come up concerning her activities. For example, you might say, "Oh, it's raining today and we can't go outside, but let's think of other things to do on a rainy day," suggests Leach. You may have to help your daughter along with some ideas, but you'll also provide her with a sense of control if she gets to contribute to the decision that is made regarding her

activities.

If your daughter feels a sense of control in some situations, she may relax just a bit at other times, and you may see some of the "nos" drop from her conversation, says Leach.

37

Q For the past couple of weeks my 3-year-old daughter has been ignoring her father and has become very clinging to me. She and her dad have a good relationship, but since she started this "mommy-only" phase, I'm the one she wants to help her dress and get her food and help her get ready for bed. While I recognize this will probably pass, what's the best way to respond? Should I indulge this?

A Your understanding of your daughter's "mommy" phase is one of the best ways you can support her journey through this particular developmental stage — which is both common and natural.

"The preference for one parent over another that your child is demonstrating is a normal developmental phase that most children exhibit," explains Diane Goyette, an Austin child development specialist and pre-school consultant.

While children, and that includes both boys and girls, often go through clinging stages, a couple of issues may be involved in your daughter's need for her mother's attention. First, your child "is developing an understanding of herself as an individual, so she has a need to assert control over her own behav-

ior," explains Goyette.

At the same time, your daughter is probably beginning to link her gender to sex roles. She is simply trying to figure out what it means to be a girl, and clinging to mom may be a way of exploring exactly what that entails.

"Since she is just learning what it means to be a girl, she may insist on stereotypically feminine toys or chores, but will relax this rigid thinking as she develops," adds Goyette.

If you can allow her control over some appropriate issues or activities, you can nurture her efforts to learn about herself. For example, you "can give in to the requests for help with bathtime, reading the bedtime story, etc.," says Goyette. "However, it is also important for your daughter's development if you maintain other limits to your individual attention."

That means if her need to control begins to affect family interaction at meals, it's appropriate for you to step in and explain that "mealtime is a time for all of us to be together and talk," suggests Goyette.

Or if you have other obligations that require your attention, tell her in a positive way — and without apology — that her father will help her instead of you. You can say something like, "Daddy will need to get you ready for bed when Mom is working," advises Goyette. "Be sure to state your expectations clearly and calmly, and, of course, follow through with your limit."

With this approach, you may be able to balance your daughter's need for attention with your other responsibilities.

"And remember that her developmental needs are changing," adds Goyette. "Soon she may clearly prefer her father's attention over yours."

38

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Q Because heart disease is present on both sides of our family, my husband and I are trying to provide a low-fat diet for our family. However, I am confused about whether margarine or butter is preferable in a child's diet. Which is better?

A Your confusion is shared by many diet-conscious families who are trying to reduce the factors that may contribute to heart disease. In finding the best answer for your family, you may want to consider a number of issues in the butter-margarine controversy.

First, it's important to understand that "butter and margarine are both fat," says registered dietitian Anita Ramos, a nutrition training specialist with the state's Bureau of Nutrition Services.

So you'll be better off if you can find an acceptable alternative to either margarine or butter. For example, jelly is preferable to butter or margarine when you're looking for something to spread on your children's toast. "The carbohydrates in jelly are easier for the body to break down than the fat in butter or margarine," says Ramos.

Peanut butter or cheese also are more healthful options than butter or margarine when you're selecting a bread spread or topping. Each contains fat, but is rich in nutrients, says Ramos. And, if your children can adapt to the taste, no-fat or lower-fat products can reduce the fat grams on your daily menu.

If you do decide to use either butter or margarine, it's important to understand that butter is made from animal fat and that margarine is made from vegetable fat. "You will get cholesterol with the butter because cholesterol comes from the animal fat," says Ramos.

However, because of the way margarine is manufactured, substances known as trans-fatty acids are produced that do not occur naturally. "The body digests the trans-fatty acids with equal difficulty as it does the saturated fatty acids" found in animal fat, says Audrey Denman, a registered and licensed dietitian who teaches nutrition at the University of Texas.

Because of problems with both margarine and butter, it is difficult to say with certainty which is preferable for a family with a history of heart disease, according to the dietitians. "The overriding concern is that you should keep intake of fat low, regardless of the source," advises Denman.

Still, if you must use butter or margarine, some dietitians say margarine, particularly soft margarine, may be the better choice if you have family members who suffer from heart disease. "Butter is not some-

thing that is advisable for a person who is concerned about heart disease," says Ramos.

39

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Q I am perplexed as to how to explain disabilities to my 5 1/2-year-old daughter. Within a two-week period, she met a great uncle whose arm had been amputated and two children with facial deformities. She became afraid and wanted to leave when she saw these people. How can I handle the situation in the future?

A Because youngsters often are limited in their exposure to others with these kinds of differences, many parents find themselves in situations such as yours. And it's difficult to know how to calm a child's fears, yet do so in a way to help her understand that a person with a disability or deformity is first and foremost simply another person.

Perhaps the best approach in these situations is to acknowledge your child's fears in a calm and comforting way. You might say something like, "Yes, this person or child is different from you and it's OK to ask questions about them. You should always let me know when someone or something makes you feel afraid," suggests Chris Dietche, executive director of Open Door Preschools, a group of Austin schools that supports and actively practices the inclusion of children with special needs into the general classroom.

After reassuring your child, it may help to offer her a specific description of the difference or confirm what she has noticed. "Yes, Uncle Ben has only one arm," you might say. And, if possible, provide your child with a background of the disability, perhaps something like, "Your uncle lost his arm in an accident." Of course, when discussing such details about another person, it's important to be matter-of-fact rather than judgmental or pitying. And if you know you are going to meet someone with a disability, explain to your child beforehand what to expect.

When you encounter a person with disabilities, you may even want to ask your child if she would like to go with you to talk to that person, especially when he or she is a family member or friend, suggests Dietche.

It's important to use your judgment as to whether it is appropriate to approach the person with the disability. An adult might be more offended if you shush your child and move away than if you talk openly about his difference. And if your child sees another youngster with a deformity or special need on the playground, you may find that the two children will learn about each other's differences, as well as their similarities, by simply playing with one another. On the other hand, going up to a youngster with disabilities at a mall and asking a lot of personal questions is not the way to approach this issue.

Of course, in the long run, the more often your daughter is around people who have special needs, the more relaxed she will become in their presence. In addition, she will start to learn the valuable lesson that we are all

more alike than different.

"Most of us have special needs — some of which you can't see," says Dietche. "So this contact with people who are different could be a wonderful opportunity to teach children about the complexities and depth of the people around them."

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Q I am the mother of a 13-year-old daughter. We have had a good relationship, but I recently started a demanding full-time job, and she is sad and upset that I don't have as much free time as I once did. I think she may feel her needs are secondary to those of my job. How can I reassure her and make her feel better about my work arrangement?

A Balancing family needs with job responsibilities is a tough challenge for any parent. And with a 13-year-old daughter — who may be dealing with the challenges of puberty and its emotional fluctuations — your concerns are especially understandable.

What may help ease your daughter's sadness and help her accept the changes in your lives is an honest discussion about the positive and negative effects of your job on the family.

Let your daughter know she is still No. 1 in your heart and that you share her feelings about the demands on your time. You can acknowledge her feelings by saying something like, "I can understand why you're upset and angry about not getting to spend as

much time with me. I feel the same way," advises licensed family therapist Gay Klinger.

Then suggest that the two of you sit down, look at a calendar and plan specific times when you will do things together. "Plan to do something — go out for a burger, go to the mall, or go on a bike ride," says Klinger. Look at what you enjoyed doing together before you started working and determine "how you can fit those things in now," Klinger advises.

Children, even teen-teenagers, also find comfort in a routine that provides for a daily dose of one-on-one time with their parents. For example, you may want to make a point of spending time alone with your daughter every evening just before she goes to sleep, says Klinger. A nightly bedside chat to talk about the day may help retain or even enhance the good relationship you've had with her in the past.

When you talk to your daughter, don't feel you need to apologize for working hard and trying to do a good job. "Explain how you are an adult who is interested in developing professionally and you are trying to balance a professional career with being a mom," says Klinger. You can explain that at times you'll adjust your work schedule to be there for your daughter's needs and then there will be times you make adjustments at home to meet your professional obligations.

In addition, it may help your child if you point out that she will grow more independent as she matures, and that you are trying to prepare yourself for that time when her need for you changes.

You might say something like, "A part of my job is to find ways to fill my time because you will need me in a different way as you get older. There probably will be times when you don't want me to be as involved, so we have to communicate so I'll know when I need to move in and when I need to pull back," suggests Klinger.

41



Q My 10-year-old son has agreed to wear a bicycle helmet when he rides his bike. While I'm glad we don't have to argue about using the helmet anymore, I'd like to make sure his fits him properly and that he's wearing it the right way to offer the most protection.

A If all parents and children were as conscientious as you and your son, we'd have far fewer injuries — and tragedies — stemming from bicycle accidents. So pat yourself on the back for getting that helmet on his head.

Bicycle helmets, which are made of shock-absorbent material, are essential for biking safety because they offer protection to the brain in a fall or crash. Proper use of a helmet "can reduce the risk of a serious brain injury by 88 percent," according to the safety guide, "Get into the Helmet Habit," which was produced by the Baylor College of Medicine and the Institute for Rehabilitation and Research.

Of course, "proper use" — meaning using a helmet that fits and wearing it properly — is key to safety. "If the hel-

met doesn't fit or is not adjusted correctly, its ability to prevent head injury will be compromised," says Doug Ballew, who heads the safety program known as Helmet Power, a project of the Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department.

In looking for a proper fit and adjustment, the following tips may help:

*The helmet should feel snug on the head yet comfortable. "Never buy one larger than necessary," according to the safety guide. "Heads do not grow very quickly."

To determine the proper size, measure the circumference of your child's head about an inch above his eyes, suggests Ballew. Then check for information on his helmet or on the box in which it was packed to determine if it is designed to fit the circumference of your child's head.

The next time you shop for a helmet, be sure to take your son with you. "It's a good idea to take a child with you when you purchase the helmet so that he can try it on and help pick the style. If he has some say in the color and style, he may be more likely to wear it," says Ballew.

*Helmets come with several sets of pads of different thickness to be placed inside the helmet for improving the fit, according to safety experts. Place the pads in the recommended places in the helmet. Any spare pads should be saved to readjust the helmet when needed. "The pads inside the helmet should be lightly touching the head all the way around," says Ballew. "There shouldn't be any space between the head and the pads."

*The helmet should fit squarely on top of the head. It should be secured in such a way that it does not slide around. The front border should reach the forehead about one inch over the top of the eyebrows and the V formed by the straps should be located just beneath the earlobe, advise the safety experts.

For more information, contact Ballew at the Helmet Power project (512-322-2310). Or you can obtain the free brochure, "Get into the Helmet Habit," by contacting Daisy Ruiz at the Brain Injury Research Center, 4007 Bellaire Blvd., Suite EE, Houston, Tex. 77025.

42

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Q My fourth-grader likes to drink a Coke when he comes home from school. This is a treat for him, and I want him to feel rewarded. However, he sometimes has trouble falling asleep, and I was wondering if the caffeine from the Coke would still be in his system at bedtime, which is about six hours after he gets home from school.

A While it's important to limit your son's caffeine intake in general, an after-school soft drink probably isn't affecting his ability to go to sleep several hours later.

"Everybody is unique, but usually the amount of caffeine from a 12-ounce drink will have cleared from (a child's) system by bedtime, if that is 9 or 10 o'clock," says Audrey Denman, a registered and licensed dietitian who teaches nutrition at the University of Texas.

Body weight and individual metabolism are factors in determining how long caffeine lingers in the body, but Denman suggests a "no caffeine after supper" rule "to minimize the stimulant effect" of the substance. As added protection, some child development specialists suggest you serve your son non-caffeine drinks with supper and offer him a variety of healthful beverages when he comes home from school so that his afternoon Coke doesn't become a habit.

Along with limiting caffeine in the late afternoon or evening, you may want to try a few other approaches when your son has trouble falling asleep. For example, a quiet talk when he is sleepless to reassure him that everyone has a hard time falling asleep on occasion may help him relax. In fact, if you can help him accept, rather than fight, his sleeplessness, it will reduce his anxiety about the situation. You may want to suggest that he read a book or do something else quiet in his room until he becomes sleepy, suggests Pease Elementary School counselor Lisa Stuckey.

If your son is worried about something, perhaps problems at school or with friends, chat with him about his concerns. Whatever the cause of his sleeplessness, "try to help him solve the problem as much as he can and then help him learn to give himself permission to put it away until the next day," suggests Stuckey.

A fairly routine schedule in which your son goes to bed and awakens about the same time every day may enable him to fall asleep more easily in the evening. Many children and adults

also benefit at bedtime by practicing relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, muscle stretching and positive thinking, says Stuckey. A warm, relaxing bath before bedtime also may help.

As your son grows older, try to monitor how many hours of sleep he actually requires. Sleep needs change as children grow, so it's important to reschedule bedtime periodically, says Stuckey.

43

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Q My 2-year-old son makes a terrible mess when he eats. Yet when my husband and I try to help him, he gets very upset. What can we do?

A While this may be difficult — and all parents will tell you it's a struggle — try to let your 2-year-old work through his need to master his eating utensils and control his meal without too much parental interference or direction at this point, suggests Dr. T. Berry Brazelton in his book, Touchpoints, the Essential Reference.

Children at this age are what many parents would term "slobs" when it comes to eating, says Dr. Brazelton.

"The child will drop food off his fork and get frustrated. Then he may smear it around or throw the whole dish on the floor. If he is in control of the meal, he won't let parents help him. If they comment or try to suggest anything, he falls apart," writes Dr. Brazelton.

Parents, he advises, simply "have to ignore him."

Allowing your child the freedom to surmount this developmental task on his own is understandably hard to do. But your interference, your instructions, even your effort to cook special foods to please him are likely to backfire. "The more trouble taken to 'fix something special,' the more he may balk. He must establish the fact that he's in control," advises Dr. Brazelton.

Parents who persist in trying to step in and gain control of the situation when the child is this age "are asking for feeding problems," the pediatrician says. Those problems can last a lifetime if the parents insist on feeding the child themselves instead of allowing him to learn this on his own, he adds.

If parents can honor the child's struggle as he tries to learn to eat like a grown-up, if the child is allowed to make choices, and if everyone understands that things will be a bit messy as the 2-year-old learns to use utensils, "meals will eventually be a pleasure," says Dr. Brazelton. "Waiting for table manners is a must."

While you can help your child develop table etiquette after he is older, your tolerance and patience at this point are essential to providing him enough space so that he can know the feeling of success in this important developmental task. "While this may seem like forever, it will not be more than a year or two," says Dr. Brazelton.

44



Q I understand that a toddler toy with wooden balls and a mallet has been recalled because it is

dangerous. My 2-year-old son recently received a similar hand-me-down toy. I don't know how to find out if this toy is involved in the recall.

A Because of the great number of toy and other product recalls, it is often difficult for busy parents to keep up with which toys or children's furniture may pose hazards. One way to stay abreast of this information is to check routinely with the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission through its toll-free hotline at 1-800-638-2772. In addition to obtaining recall information, consumers can report dangerous products or product-related injuries through this number.

In the case of your child's toy, you can look for several identifying factors to determine if it was involved in the Tuesday Morning, Inc., recall of about 1,200 wooden cobbler bench toys. The wooden cobbler set, item PO-418, contains a bench, a mallet, and four different color balls. The toys were sold in boxes labeled in part, "POLO TOYS cobbler bench — PO-418 — MADE IN CHINA — Ages 1 to 3 years." Tuesday Morning, which is headquartered in Dallas, sold the toy nationwide between Oct. 12, 1995, and Dec. 1, 1995, for about \$6.

The toy is considered a banned hazardous substance under the Federal Hazardous Substances Act because it may present a choking or asphyxiation hazard. That potential hazard relates to the size of the toy's balls, which measure less than 1.75 inches in diameter, as well as the fact that small pieces of wood may splinter off if the toy is

dropped. Both the small balls and the splintered wood could be dangerous for youngsters under 3, according to the safety commission.

If you think your child's toy is involved in the recall, keep it away from your son and return it to the store where it was purchased for a full refund. Consumers can also send the toy to the firm's headquarters at 14621 Inwood Road, Dallas, Tex. 75244 for a full refund plus mailing costs. For more information, consumers should call Tuesday Morning, Inc., at (800) 457-0099.

Tuesday Morning voluntarily recalled the product in cooperation with the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission.

45

Q I recently found out I'm expecting my first child. I will have to return to work when the baby is 2 months old. I live in Northwest Austin, and I need to know how to start my search for a good child care center for infants near my home.

A Many parents-to-be find it tough to face the issue of child care so early in a pregnancy, but you are wise to start working on this issue now. Infant care of high quality is often difficult to locate. And when you do find it, you'll also find a waiting list.

"Infant care is precious," says Gwen Logan, parent counselor at Austin Families Inc., a child care resource and referral center. "Parents need to

educate themselves on what is available and on what is best for their child and try to make the two things fit. That's difficult."

To start educating yourself, talk to friends and co-workers with young children for their advice and recommendations. In addition to this informal, but often quite helpful, approach, you may want to find out if your city has a service similar to Austin Families (512-834-0748). This agency, which maintains a data base of registered and licensed child care providers in Austin, can provide callers with a listing of child care facilities that offer infant care in a preferred area of the city.

In many cases, Austin Families services are provided by companies as an employee benefit. But even if you aren't working for one of these companies, your cost will be based on a sliding fee scale.

You also may want to obtain a list of child care facilities that have been accredited through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) by calling the organization's national office at 1-800-424-2460. The accreditation list, which is free, includes child care providers that have voluntarily met a set of national standards that exceed minimum state standards.

In addition, you may want to request a free copy of the brochure, "Finding the Best Care for Your Infant or Toddler," from the NAEYC national office. The issues raised in the brochure, which range from staff interaction with your baby to the cleanli-

ness and safety of the facility, will provide you a starting point for evaluating centers when you begin visiting potential child care providers.

46

Q My daughter starts kindergarten this fall and will have to be at school much earlier than in the past. I'm concerned because she is never hungry until mid-morning, and I don't know how I'm going to get her to eat breakfast so early once school starts. What are some ways to get her to eat a little something before school?

A While no parent feels comfortable sending a child to school on an empty stomach, some moms and dads will tell you they have no choice. Like many people, their child simply isn't hungry the first thing in the morning. And forcing a meal down a child who doesn't want to eat can really start the day off on a negative note.

Rather than making your child eat before her body is ready, provide her with something nutritious when hunger does set in, which may be an hour or two after she gets to school. This means you will need to talk to her teacher about sending a snack to school, especially if her class is not scheduled for an early lunch.

"Then you will need to send something to school that is nourishing. Your child will need a mixture of protein and carbohydrate, something like a peanut butter sandwich and a

boxed drink. She needs something more substantial than just cookies and water," suggests dietitian Alexa Sparkman.

Some children enjoy cans or boxes of liquid nutrition such as Resource or Ensure. Instant Breakfast is another drink that can provide the nutritional boost a youngster may need before lunch. Breakfast or cereal bars are also an easy way to handle a child's hunger that doesn't hit until mid-morning.

"I would look for something that has seven grams of protein," says Sparkman, who advises parents to study package labels for nutrition information. "That just gives a child enough protein for brain power."

One thing to remember in packing a snack is that if your child eats an early lunch — and most kindergartners do — you may need to keep her snack nutritious but not overfilling.

You also want to continue making breakfast available to your child. "It's important to have it out and available," says Sparkman. "But I don't believe in forcing food down a body that is not ready for it."

As the year progresses, your daughter's body clock may adjust to the earlier schedule and she may be able to eat a little something before school, says Sparkman. But you'll probably want to continue with your snack routine for quite a while.

"Some days she may be hungry (for breakfast) and some days she may not," says Sparkman. "But if she takes a snack to school, the parents won't have to worry."

Q Is there a new test for tuberculosis? A friend told me her daughter just had a test and the nurse used a needle. This is a different test than my pre-schooler used to get, and I need to prepare him since he will be getting tested again for TB fairly soon.

A Although the test for tuberculosis your friend's daughter underwent may be different from what you are used to, the testing method using a needle and syringe is not actually new. In fact, it is an older method that is in use again because of its reliability.

"We used to do something called a tine test in which we used a prong-like device to poke the skin. But this proved to be somewhat unreliable, especially with the increase in tuberculosis across the country," says Linda Payne, a pediatric nurse practitioner with the Austin Diagnostic Clinic. "So we went back to the old way."

The "old way" involves the use of a needle, but differs from a typical injection in that the needle does not go into the fat or muscle layer of the arm. Instead the needle is worked between the layers of skin. When the substance for testing for the tuberculosis germ is released between the layers of skin, a small bubble forms on the child's skin for a brief time. "The parent then checks the area in 72 hours to make sure there is no redness or a bump," says Payne. "It is similar to a skin test

for allergies.

"If a person has been exposed to the tuberculosis germ, the place will react," says Payne. "It doesn't mean you are sick — it just means you've been exposed to the germ."

Payne says the test in which a needle is used to get between the layers of skin is not as quick and easy as the tine test. "It's hard for the child to remain still sometimes, and getting the needle between the layers of skin with a wiggling person is not easy. And it is more painful and it takes a little longer," she says. "But it's a more reliable test."

The accuracy factor is one reason this method for TB testing is favored by the health department, according to Dan Pickens, spokesman for the Austin-Travis County Health and Human Services Department. "We use it and we recommend it," Pickens says of the test in which a needle is used.

Before you take your child in for another TB test, talk to your doctor or nurse about the procedure. Then prepare your child just as you have in the past for immunizations. You probably won't need to explain that his TB test is going to be different — in all likelihood, he won't remember the tine test. But help him be the best patient he can be by offering him an age-appropriate description of what will happen in the doctor's office.

"Prepare him in the same way you prepare him for an immunization, whether it's on the way to the office or five minutes before the test is done," advises Payne.

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Q My 4 year old has a difficult time when I volunteer for activities at her school. She often gets angry at me, cries and pouts, or even shouts at me, and most of the time I can't figure out what I've done to irritate her. When I'm not at school, her teacher tells me she does fine. Should I stop volunteering?

A Participating in your child's class is a gift you give your child as well as yourself. But sometimes your best effort backfires when your child finds your presence too stimulating or seems to have a difficult time sharing you with the other children in the class.

In addition, some children aren't emotionally mature enough to have mom or dad visit for a short time and then leave. The break in the routine and the additional "good-byes" sometimes are just overwhelming.

Before you decide to stop your volunteer efforts, talk to your child's teacher. She may suggest that you curtail your visits for a while. But she may advise you to continue to volunteer, perhaps on a limited basis, to give your child a chance to develop the maturity and social skills to enjoy your visits.

Before you visit again, talk with your child in a calm, non-punishing way about how she feels when you visit. You might help the conversation along by saying something like, "When

mommy comes to school, does it make you feel different? For some reason, you seem to act different," suggests Sandy Hanna, director of First Presbyterian Day School.

You may want to talk about some different feelings your child could be experiencing. If she mentions a feeling, then address that feeling specifically. For example, if she says she feels angry, you might ask her if it would help her stop feeling angry if you stayed away from school for a while, suggests Hanna.

Your child may tell you no, that she doesn't want you to stop coming to school. Then you can tell her you need some assurance that she will try to behave in a more positive way when you do visit her class again, suggests Hanna.

"Before the next field trip, this all will need to be gone over again with your child. Ask her again if she will be able to behave if you come to school," suggests Hanna.

Your daughter may be able to improve her behavior after you talk. But she may not be able to just yet, in which case you will probably need to stop volunteering for a while. You may not even want to discuss the decision with your child — it will only make her feel guilty and sad. Just explain that you have other things you have to do for a while. And then, after a period of time, try again.

The good news is that many children outgrow this phase and eventually learn to relax and enjoy their parents' help in the classroom.

Q Last year about this time you did a column on school bus safety. I am a certified school bus driver, and since school is about to start again for many children, I would like to offer some additional tips that have an immediate impact on the daily safety of the children and the driver while the bus is in operation.

— D.R. Weems, Dripping Springs

A Since thousands of school children will begin boarding buses again within the next few weeks, a bus driver's point of view on school bus safety is especially important just now. Weems suggests that parents talk to their children about the following before they board their first back-to-school bus:

*Once a youngster has taken a seat on the bus, the child should remain in that seat for the entire bus trip. "Do not move from seat to seat or up and down the aisle while the bus is moving," says Weems. "Should the driver have to make an emergency stop, the standing or moving child becomes a missile and would be thrown around in the bus or could be thrown through the windshield."

*When seated, the child should face the front of the bus with both feet on the floor. Once again, if an emergency stop is necessary, a child can be thrown forward, Weems says. "If facing sideways or to the rear while talking with friends, (the child) could suffer severe spinal injuries or neck injuries,"

he warns.

*Children should never throw anything inside or outside the bus. The thrown objects "become missiles that hurt others and take the driver's attention away from the driving, thereby possibly causing an accident," says Weems.

*Children should never eat or drink while riding the bus. "Spills can cause problems or arguments and fights that take the driver's attention away from the driving and can cause an accident," suggests the Dripping Springs bus driver.

*Children should not play with toys on the bus "because other children want to see them or play with them and (the children) get out of their seat," says Weems. "Round objects usually end up under the driver's foot and brake pedal as (the driver) is trying to brake and can cause an accident because of the inability to depress the brake."

*Children should keep all pencils and other sharp objects in their backpacks while on the bus. "Puncture wounds to the body or eyes can occur if the bus makes a sudden stop," Weems advises.

*Children should never "jump the steps when getting off the bus" nor "skip steps when getting on the bus," says Weems. "Leg injuries can occur."

For additional information about bus safety, you may want to obtain a copy of the student handbook, Come Ride With Me, which is available through the Region XIII Education Service Center. For information, call (512) 919-5361.

Q My 10-year-old daughter is starting to go through some developmental changes and I know that the time has finally come to talk to her about how her body is changing. Can you recommend any type of a simple book that may help me explain to her what is going to happen?

A Your sensitive and gentle approach to the physical changes your daughter is beginning to experience is sure to lend her a positive attitude as she heads into puberty.

Fortunately, resources are available to help parents provide accurate information on this issue to their children in an age-appropriate manner.

Perhaps the best place to begin looking for books and other resources on this issue is your school nurse's office. Many school districts, including the Austin and Round Rock districts, offer presentations on this subject beginning in the fourth grade.

"The Austin Independent School District has a program called 'Making Healthy Choices' that actually begins in pre-kindergarten. At that level, it's mainly about things such as making good food choices, but in fourth grade, we start talking about the physiological and developmental changes of puberty," explains Ava Wood, a school nurse with the Austin school district.

"We divide the kids into two groups, boys and girls, and talk about changes in their bodies. We teach

them the reproductive system just as we would teach the cardiovascular or any other (body) system, in a very matter-of-fact way," she says.

During these sessions, the girls are given books such as Julie's Story, Kate's Diary or Andrea and Friends that are written in a "Dear Diary" format and provide information in a friendly, sensitive manner.

"These books are gender specific, meaning they don't have the male reproductive system in the ones we use for fourth grade girls," says Wood.

Along with the books for the girls, the Austin district provides parents a companion publication to help them talk about this issue with their children, says Wood.

Most likely, your school nurse will be familiar with these books or others that are similar regardless of your school district's approach to this subject. She may have copies on hand or can help you find the books elsewhere.

In addition to the school nurse's office, you may want to check with book stores or the public library for books on puberty and reproduction. Among those that may be helpful are Outside and Inside You by Sandra Markle, How Babies Are Made by Andrew C. Andry and Steven Schepp, My Body by Patricia Carratello, and Did the Sun Shine Before You Were Born? by Sol and Judith Gordon.

For older children, especially young teen-teenagers, Asking About Sex and Growing Up by Joanna Cole may be appropriate.

Q Recently, you did a column on where to get a list of child care facilities that offer infant care. What I need now is advice on what to ask or how to evaluate the facilities I plan to visit.

A Finding good child care for an infant is a time-consuming and challenging goal. But as you seem to realize, any time or effort you put into researching what is available for your baby will pay off in better care for your child and more peace of mind for yourself.

While many factors are important in judging the quality of care in a facility, probably nothing is more significant than the ratio of adult caregivers to children.

"The ratio is at the core of everything," says Helen Weicker, director of St. Luke's Infant Care Center. "I think the fewer children per grownup, the better."

Early childhood experts "recommend that no more than six or eight babies be in a group with two teachers," advises the brochure, "Finding the Best Care for Your Infant or Toddler," a publication available through the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Maintaining an adult-child ratio of one-to-three or, at most, one-to-four is important so that "personal attention can be given to each child," advises the infant care brochure, which is available for free by calling the NAEYC national offices at 1-800-

424-2460.

In addition to questions about a facility's adult-child ratios, Weicker suggests the following as some of issues parents should raise when evaluating child care facilities:

*What does the child do all day?

Although tiny babies do sleep quite a bit, they also need stimulation and play. "They're processing everything, every sight, sound and feeling, and that's how they learn about their world. If interesting things are going on in the world to process, that gives them the will to learn and explore, to eventually crawl and sit up," says Weicker.

In general, that means when babies are awake and not being changed or fed, they need to "be on the floor with the teacher" so that they can see interesting things in the room and have the opportunity to try out new body positions, says Weicker.

*What is the staff consistency and what are the teachers' credentials? "With the youngest children, the relationship they develop with the teacher during the day is so critical that if it is a different person every month or every six months, it can be stressful for the child," says Weicker.

*How does the center manage staff breaks? Who cares for the children?

*Does the center have a written health policy? Parents need to know to keep their children home when they are ill and have the reassurance that the other children at the center are not sick.

Q My 13-year-old son has terrible handwriting. It definitely affects his grades, since his teachers have difficulty reading it. For home writing projects, he uses the computer, but this doesn't help classroom work. Do you know of anyone in Austin who can teach him handwriting skills? Would an occupational therapist be the person for this re-learning process?

A Poor handwriting, especially when it diminishes a child's ability to express himself, is frustrating to both the child and his parents. And you are smart to consider talking to an occupational therapist — perhaps the one assigned to your son's school who may be familiar with his particular needs.

What you may find, however, is that you've already taken one of the more positive steps in handling this problem by providing your son a computer for his home writing projects. You've given him a positive and effective tool for communicating, which, in general, may be preferable to trying to retrain a 13-year-old boy to write more clearly.

"I do not support training/retraining programs for kids in this age group, nor does the current research," says Jackie A. Kemmy, an occupational therapist with the Austin Independent School District.

As Kemmy points out, most of us take handwriting for granted, but it involves a complex interplay of various brain operations. "It's difficult to master," she says. "To be honest, I don't

know of too many 13-year-old students who would be motivated to practice or relearn handwriting."

Instead of trying to retrain a teenager to write more clearly, "most research that I have read . . . supports bypass methodology, or allowing the child to utilize the most efficient method to get the job done," she says. For example, your son's use of the computer may be the most efficient method for him to get his writing jobs done at home.

Again, it's important to remember that these findings are general in nature and that consulting an occupational therapist to discuss your son's specific needs would be helpful. In your conversation with the occupational therapist and your son's teachers, you may want to discuss some of the following ideas, which Kemmy suggests as possible strategies for children with handwriting problems:

- *If the student can write better in print than in cursive, then allow him to print.

- *Give the student extra time to complete written assignments or shorten the length of the assignment.

- *Allow the student to have access to a typewriter or word processor for some of his written work at school.

- *If the student has difficulty taking notes during a lecture, let the student tape record the lecture to supplement his notes or photocopy one of his peer's notes.

It's important that educators and parents understand and accept that some children — and adults — have a very difficult time writing legibly, says Kemmy. "I believe that we would best

meet the needs of students with this particular problem by teaching them a functional and legible means of producing the written word," she says.

53

Q My 2-year-old daughter liked her pre-school, but I took her out after I arrived one day to pick her up and one of the teachers asked me, "Now, which one is yours?" My child was new to the school and had been absent frequently, but I still felt the teacher should have known who my child was supposed to go home with. Was I out of line?

A Your response to this situation is certainly understandable. Even though you were the parent and authorized to pick up your child, it appears that the teacher did not recognize you and failed to take steps to identify you or verify that you had permission to pick up your child from school.

That sort of relaxed atmosphere is not what the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services had in mind when it set minimum standards for child care facilities (including most pre-schools) requiring that they formulate and follow a plan "to verify the identity of a person authorized to pick up a child but who is not known to the staff."

That means your child's teacher should have tried to identify you based on procedures established by the school if she didn't recognize you when you came for your child.

When it appears that a pre-school or child care facility is not in compliance with state standards, you can call in a complaint to your local child care licensing office (found in the state listings of your phone book under Protective and Regulatory Services). In Austin, that number is 834-0162.

Because your sense of security as a parent (and possibly state standards for child care facilities) were violated by this incident, your actions were a "fair response" to the situation, suggests Chris Dietche, executive director of Austin's Open Door Preschools. "The parent did nothing wrong to remove or consider removing the child."

However, when problems occur in child care or pre-school facilities, sometimes it's also advisable for parents to consider the big picture before removing a child from the school. For example, if the overall quality of the school is good and the child enjoys going there, a parent may want to determine if a mistake such as this is isolated or if it reflects an ongoing problem before pulling a child out.

To make that judgment — and to help the school understand your concerns — it's wise to discuss incidents such as the one you describe with both the child's teacher and the school director.

"First, get an explanation of what happened and then consider the quality of how the school reacted to having made the mistake," advises Dietche.

"We all make mistakes. We all have moments of strain or stress and maybe that teacher did at that moment. It doesn't excuse what happened, but there are reasons to consider working

with the school" if it is a good facility otherwise, says Dietche.

54

Q My daughter, who is almost 4, has started cutting her hair every time she can find scissors. I try to hide our household scissors, but she is very good at finding my hiding places. Sometimes she will even use her children's scissors to cut her hair if I turn my back on her. How can I get her out of this habit?

A While it probably doesn't leave her with her best "look," your daughter's self-styled haircuts are not uncommon. Most youngsters can't resist the allure of seeing exactly what will happen when they try out their new cutting skills on their own hair.

"All the children I've known have done it, but usually just a few times," says Dr. Sandy Briley, director of the University of Texas Child Care Center.

However, it sounds like your daughter is more taken with this activity than many children who fulfill this need with a few simple snips once or twice. Because of this, you may want to consider several factors in coming up with a response that may help her learn to control herself when she plays with scissors.

"It sounds like she is enjoying the process of cutting and getting her mom upset at the same time," says Dr. Briley.

In addition, your child may be going through a phase in which she is particularly interested in her hair and is learning about it in a very hands-on way. Or she may actually be trying to give herself a shorter haircut.

"The parents could talk to the little girl about it and see if she wants shorter hair," says Dr. Briley.

If this is the case, you may want to offer to take her to have her hair cut very short if that is what she is trying to do with the scissors. However, before you give her this choice, be sure you can live with her decision.

If you think your daughter's penchant for this activity relates more to her interest in cutting and the attention it triggers, you may want to find your daughter something to cut that will be acceptable, yet just as enticing as her own hair.

"You may want to get the scissors and some interesting, fun things to cut and tell her, 'I'm going to let you have the scissors as long as you cut this activity, but I will put the scissors away if you cut your hair,'" suggests Dr. Briley.

Often, small children enjoy cutting and styling a doll's hair. You may have a doll on hand you can sacrifice to this activity, or you can buy dolls designed so that children can cut, style, and even color their hair.

Of course, whenever the scissors come out, try to remain calm, even if your daughter snips at her hair again. Just explain in a gentle, but firm way that the scissors will have to be put away. And when she uses control and refrains from cutting her hair, let her know she's done a good job.

"Give her a lot of attention for doing things correctly and provide for consequences if she doesn't," says Dr. Briley.

55



Q My children, ages 2 1/2 and 14 months, have never been in child care because my husband and I have worked opposite shifts so we could care for them at home. While worthwhile, this has been a very exhausting time of our lives, and we think the girls are ready for child care. We are really concerned about finding a facility with an excellent staff so the transition from full-time parental care will be easier for the girls. How do I know if a teacher or caregiver is what we're looking for?

A Your question indicates that you understand what is at the heart of good child care — and that, of course, is a good child care provider. But like any parent new to child care, you may not know exactly what to ask in order to determine if a facility's staff or an individual teacher meets your children's needs.

One of the best ways to educate yourself is to set aside time to visit child care facilities so that you can observe the interaction between teachers and children. While visiting, you may want to make a mental checklist — or even take notes if you want — of the answers when you ask some of the following questions, which are suggested by the National Association for the Education of Young Children:

*Does the staff enjoy young children and understand how they learn and grow? For example, are staff members friendly to and considerate of each child? Does the teacher vary expectations depending on a child's age, needs and interests? Do the staff members consider themselves professionals and enhance their skills through workshops and additional training?

*Does the staff foster each child's emotional and social development? For example, do the adults listen to the children? Are the teachers gentle while being firm, consistent, yet flexible? Does the staff help children feel good about themselves while respecting others' rights and feelings?

*Are there enough adults to care for the individual needs of children? Is the infant-to-adult ratio no more than eight to two? Are 2- and 3-year-old children grouped with no more than 14 children with at least two adults? Are 4- and 5-year-old children limited to groups of no more than 20 with at least two adults?

*Do staff members work together? Do they meet regularly for planning and evaluation?

*Does the teacher or caregiver observe the child and note progress and development?

You may not be able to answer all these questions with one visit to a facility. And, along with staffing, you'll have many other questions you'll want answered before choosing child care for your child. To help you set your priorities, it may be helpful to obtain a copy of the brochure, "How to Choose a Good Early Childhood Program," which is available for 50 cents by calling the National Association for the

Q You recently gave a parent advice on where to find books to help explain puberty to a fourth grader. I appreciated this help, but after I get them, is it enough just to give my daughter the books to read? I am having a little trouble with this whole area because my parents really never talked to us about these subjects.

A Many parents share your discomfort in discussing puberty and reproduction with their children. Like you, they didn't learn about these topics from their parents, so they in turn are finding it difficult to discuss this important subject in a relaxed and factual manner with their own children.

But although it would be easier to simply rely on a book to do this job for you, books may not be able to answer every question your child has. And without talking to your child, it's difficult to know if she understands enough of what she is reading to even ask questions.

"You can't say, 'Now you are 10 and here's a book to read.' Books don't cover it . . . but they can provide an opening for conversations," advises family therapist Tom Zimmermann, who suggests that children benefit from talking to trusted adults about their experiences with puberty.

While this topic can be difficult for parents, it may help if you consider the positive aspects of this time in your child's life. "It's a wonderful opening for mother-daughter communication," says Zimmermann.

Cindy Monroe, a school nurse with the Round Rock Independent School District, agrees that youngsters benefit from having talks with their parents in addition to reading books on these topics. "Children will read only parts of the book and they may not understand it or absorb it," she says.

Some school districts offer presentations on puberty and reproduction beginning in about fourth grade. As part of the presentation, students are given age-appropriate booklets on these topics and parents are provided with companion booklets to help them answer questions. You may want to talk to your school nurse for resources that will help you be more comfortable and more knowledgeable about this topic.

In addition, it probably will help you and your child talk about these matters if you can be honest about the fact that you don't discuss this topic easily. Explain to your child that you want to answer her questions, but that sometimes you may get flustered. You can even explain that this subject was not discussed when you were growing up, but that you hope to do a better job, suggests Dorothy Corkille Briggs in her book, Your Child's Self-Esteem.

You then might say something like "I'll answer the questions I can, even if I flounder, and I'll get you books for fuller details," suggests Corkille Briggs. And it may be helpful to add, "I only hope you'll be more relaxed talking

about this subject when you're a parent."

57

Q My 11-year-old son sometimes takes a while to get his stories out. He has a good vocabulary and does well in school. However, when he starts hemming and hawing around while recounting something, my husband will say, "Come on, spit it out." I'm worried my son will stop telling us things if he feels pressured to "spit it out" more quickly.

A While your husband is probably only trying to encourage your son to collect his thoughts and finish his story, his advice to "spit it out" may actually have the opposite effect.

That's because when your son is experiencing what is known as disfluency — which in general terms means a break in the fluent flow of language — pressure to speed things up may make him nervous. And when he becomes nervous, his flow of language may be affected.

"It's common to have disfluencies. Everyone has them from time to time," explains Monica Lanning, a speech-language pathologist with the Capital Area Easter Seal Rehabilitation Center.

But to help avoid aggravating what may be a typical disfluency, it's important to "remove as many time pressures as possible," advises Lanning.

"Anxiety tends to make all of us disfluent. If the child is aware he is going to have problems and he is under pressure to say something quickly, it (the disfluency episodes) can become cyclical," says Lanning.

Because it's unclear if the disfluencies in your son's speech are typical or if they are cause for concern, you may want to contact a speech-language pathologist for information on this subject. If needed, a professional can evaluate your son's speech to determine if his disfluency episodes are within the normal range. His speech would be tested "not just for the number of disfluencies in an utterance, but also for how he is reacting (to the disfluencies) and how the listener is reacting," says Lanning.

If you feel a speech evaluation would be helpful, you can contact the speech-language pathologist who serves your son's school. Or you can talk to your son's physician or contact the Austin Area Association of Speech-Language Pathologists (512-450-1074) for a referral to a licensed and certified speech-language pathologist.

If your son's disfluency is occasional and is not causing problems or frustration for him or his listeners, his speech pattern may fall within the normal range. You can help prevent his occasional disfluencies from growing into a speech problem if you are patient and calm when he is speaking.

"You want to listen to what the child says and not how the child talks," suggests Lanning. "Give the child a chance to express himself. . . . And look him right in the face when he is

talking. Use eye contact and body language to show you are listening.”

58

Q My mother, who is ill, will be visiting our family for three months soon. She needs assistance with various activities, including bathing. I also have two daughters, ages 4 and 18 months. I would like advice on how to make this time as positive and pleasant as possible for all of us.

A You’ve already taken a giant first step toward making this a comfortable and loving visit for your mother and the rest of your family by planning ahead for their needs. However, as odd as it may sound, probably the best thing you can do for your mom and your children is remember to take care of somebody else — and that, of course, is yourself.

“People in this situation need to have time for themselves,” advises Faye Gorman, a nurse with St. David’s Home Health Care Services Inc. “This mom needs time away from her children and her mother so that she can continue to provide care for them. She needs someone who can watch everybody so that she can even just take a walk.”

“From a health standpoint, a person who cares for others needs to be able to rest physically and emotionally and spiritually,” adds Kathy McWhorter, a social worker with Austin Community Nursery Schools.

Finding time to take care of you means first and foremost finding someone reliable to help you with your mom and children. You will need help when you want a break, but you will also need assistance while caring for your family. Without another pair of hands, it may be physically impossible to provide your toddler and your mother, to say nothing of the 4 year old, with the one-on-one attention they will need.

While many of us often resist asking for help, this is the time to call on friends, neighbors or volunteers from church or other organizations to assist you with your mother’s needs. You also may want to consider hiring a neighborhood teen-teenager to play with your youngsters while you tend to their grandmother. In addition, elderly respite services, adult day care services or home health care agencies provide an array of services, often at minimal costs, for older adults.

Along with finding help, it may reduce stress if you can shift your thinking and reset your priorities during your mom’s visit. “For example, it may be less important whether the house is spic-and-span,” advises Gorman. “What’s really more important is spending time with your mom and children.”

Before your mother arrives, try to prepare your children, especially your 4 year old, for what to expect. Explain your mother’s illness so that any physical problems — for example, labored breathing or lack of mobility — aren’t frightening.

And whenever possible, involve your older child in your mom’s care. Perhaps your daughter can get the towel and soap when it’s time for her

grandmother's bath or help with her meal.

"Doing something together for grandma can create a feeling of togetherness," suggests McWhorter. "It brings up the whole issue of caring for each other."

59

Q I need some general discipline advice. My husband and I don't want to spank our 4 year old, but our approach, which involves setting consequences for behaviors, doesn't really seem to have much effect on our daughter.

A As you have discovered, guiding a child toward positive behavior requires patience and wisdom that don't always magically appear once parents get their babies home from the hospital. And you are to be congratulated for reaching out for assistance with this most challenging of parental issues.

However, it may be helpful if you can recast your thinking somewhat so that your response to your child's behavior falls more under the heading of "guidance" rather than "discipline," according to some early childhood specialists.

"Discipline with punishment teaches us that our behavior is controlled by others. Guidance, on the other hand, refers to a process of learning that occurs when children are given clear limits, developmentally appropriate expectations, and adult support and encouragement," says Dr. Beth Morgan, project coordinator for

Connections, Austin's family, early care and education resource center.

"The goal of guidance is to help the child develop a sense of inner control," Dr. Morgan adds.

Of course, understanding an approach and following it are two different things. Some parents find it helps them apply this guidance philosophy to the specific needs of their children by enrolling in parenting courses, talking to parent educators or reading books and articles.

In general, you may want to try some of the following guidance techniques suggested by Dr. Morgan:

*Speak directly to your child. "How do you feel when someone yells at you from across the room – annoyed, embarrassed, perturbed? To avoid making children feel uncomfortable, speak to (them) directly and individually whenever possible . . .," suggests Dr. Morgan.

*Place yourself at your child's level. Stoop or kneel so that the child can make eye contact while talking.

*Control your tone of voice. "Use the 'minimal sufficiency principle,'" advises Dr. Morgan. "This principle entails using just enough firmness in your voice and body language to capture and hold the child's attention."

*Give reasons for limits. "Children are more likely to comply with limits that have a sound basis," says Dr. Morgan.

*Make consequences for behaviors non-punitive and concrete. "It should be easy for the child to see the link between the behavior and the consequence," suggests Dr. Morgan.

Consequences also should follow a

behavior as quickly as possible or a youngster may have trouble linking the two.

For example, if a child is playing, rather than eating, at mealtime, you can offer the choice of eating or getting down from the table. If the child chooses to continue playing, you can remove the child's plate and say something like, "You showed me you were finished with your meal because you weren't eating, so you may get down from the table," suggests Dr. Morgan.

*Be consistent.

60

Q I am the father of an 11-year-old boy who is interested in taking guitar lessons. I'm very excited my son wants to do this because I have always wanted to learn to play the guitar myself. Would it be helpful to my son if we took guitar lessons together?

A While shared guitar lessons may seem like an ideal father-son activity, it's probably wise to find other ways to show your son you support him in his musical efforts.

"There is no question that children whose parents involve themselves in their child's endeavors tend to become more engaged in those endeavors," says Kevin Taylor, founder and director of Childbloom Guitar Program.

"But there are many forms of involvement and parents must be careful not to steal the activity away from the child," he says. "Involvement can too often lead to interference."

Along with the possibility of becoming too involved in your son's activity if you share lessons, it's also important to remember that you — since you are an adult — would learn to play the guitar at a different pace than your 11 year old.

"Simply put, most adults can develop musical skills faster than their pre-teen children," says Taylor.

A youngster who watches his parent master motor and rhythmic skills, pitch discriminations, and theory much faster than he himself does may feel confused and frustrated, possibly even losing interest in learning to play, says Taylor.

"Rather than experiencing parental support, the parent's natural competence simply reminds the child what he can't do," explains the guitar teacher.

Taking lessons with your son also might affect your attitude about learning to play guitar. If the pace of instruction "is geared towards the child, as it should be, the parent who brings his instrument into the class may eventually, and naturally, cease to do so because of this slower pace," says Taylor. "When this happens, it is often construed by the child that the parent is losing interest and this will often lead to the loss of the child's interest."

Although parent-child music lessons may not be the best way to support your son's interest, you certainly want to remain involved and interested in your son's efforts. Taylor suggests the following as positive ways to be supportive:

*"Your presence at the lesson is magic," he says. "Attend the lesson if at all possible, unless the child specifi-

cally objects. Be attentive. Take notes for the student. Know the details of your child's struggle."

*If you learn to play the guitar or know how to play other instruments, play with your child at home.

*Ask your child to teach you to play the guitar.

*Let the child know you want to hear him play. Don't isolate him when he practices. "Most children will be willing to play when parents are willing to listen," says Taylor.

*"Let the teacher teach," he says. "You be the parent."

61

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Q My younger child is now a year and a half old and is walking and climbing everywhere. I am having a hard time finding a way for her older sister, age 4, to play with her toys without the baby climbing or jumping in the middle of everything. I try to keep them separated, but I don't feel right about always sending the older child behind a closed door just so she can play without being disturbed. What are some ways to handle this?

A Like many parents, you are trying to juggle the conflicting, yet natural and normal needs of two children. While this is a tough act, your obvious sensitivity to both children will help you help them through this challenging phase.

One of the first ways to help your older child handle this situation is by talking with her — in a very simple way — about her little sister's developmen-

tal process. You might tell her something like, "Your sister wants to play with you and wants to be big like you. She doesn't understand that it makes you angry when she knocks over your blocks," suggests Dawn Leach, a parent educator with the Parents as Teachers program at Widen Elementary.

You and your older daughter then could talk about making up a special "sister game," in which the older sister could get on the floor and build something specifically for the younger sister to knock down. Even if the 4 year old plays this game with her sister a short while, it may satisfy the toddler's need for her sister's attention for a bit, thereby allowing the older sister to then play alone.

After the sister game, your older daughter may be able to play more easily with her "non-toddler" toys if you can move her to an area that will be more difficult for her sister to reach. For example, the 4 year old could move her Legos or other special toys to a breakfast bar to play while you distract the toddler with a book or game on the floor nearby.

Because your 4 year old probably feels frustrated by her sister's behavior, you may need to encourage her in a sensitive way to play with her sister. "Four year olds can be very particular and, to them, letting the baby knock the blocks over can be difficult. So the mother may have to help the older child understand that playing this game with the sister may actually give her more play time on her own," says Leach.

It also will help both you and your 4 year old if you can sit down and play with her while her younger sister naps. This could be your older child's special time with mom when she can feel free to play with her toys without interference from the sister. If the girls nap at the same time, you may need to adjust the schedule slightly to work this play time in. "The mom may be trying to get the children to lie down at the same time, and the girls may both be tired at the same time, but if the 4 year old can stay up a little longer, even just 30 minutes before she takes a nap, it will give her time alone to play," says Leach.

62

Q My husband and I both work, but unless I specifically ask him to help at home, I have to do everything. I try to hide my irritation, but my sister told me recently I seemed very upset with my husband. I am worried that my son will also pick up on this tension, even though I'm trying to hide it. I don't want him to grow up around this kind of stress.

A Although many parents wish at one time or another they could hide a family problem from their children, it's often not possible.

"Children have radar. They do know what's going on in the home," says Kathy Capehart, a psychotherapist and social worker with Child and Family Service Inc.

Because your son probably senses the stress, you are wise to be concerned that your ongoing anger may

affect him adversely. "It is harmful to a child to have that kind of atmosphere, that kind of ongoing anger," says Capehart. "It's oppressive and it's scary and they (the children) often can't ask about it."

The good news is your heart is in the right place — you want a home that is emotionally healthy for your son. With that kind of motivation, you may be able to diminish the conflict that causes your resentment and anger toward your husband.

The first step toward resolving this problem involves making time to talk to your husband about this issue. Obviously, your expectations and assumptions are not being met, "but to find out why, you have to talk," says Capehart.

It may facilitate communication between you and your husband if you say something along the lines of "I feel (blank) when I have to ask you for help," suggests Capehart. Then make a suggestion about what you need. Your husband can then respond, saying whether he can or can not meet those needs. While this all sounds very simple, part of the problem may be that the two of you haven't talked directly about this issue and assumed you understood the other's feelings. And misunderstandings can lead to very negative feelings between spouses who genuinely care about one another.

On the other hand, if you and your husband can't talk to each other about this issue, you may need help from a counselor. An outside source can offer a fresh perspective that may open the lines of communication. And many couples are able to resolve issues in one

or two sessions, says Capehart.

"Just go for a session to talk to a completely objective observer to help you understand why you are stuck," says Capehart. "Go by yourself if your husband won't go. I never want to sound like I'm blaming one party in these situations, but if you're stuck, the only thing you can change is your own dance steps."

63

Q My 7 month old insists on eating and drinking whatever my other children, ages 2 and 3, are having, and he knows the difference. Can I give him skim milk with meals only (out of a tippy cup) when he gets formula at all other times?

A While it's only natural that your baby is already trying to copy big brother or sister, you may want to consider several factors before allowing him to follow their lead at mealtime.

For example, skim milk is not recommended for youngsters under 2. However, a tiny amount in a cup probably won't hurt if your baby is healthy and if he is receiving adequate formula at other times of the day, says dietitian Anita Ramos, a nutrition training specialist with the state's Bureau of Nutrition Services.

However, Ramos stresses that the baby's skim milk intake should in no way replace the formula he needs daily.

"The main thing to consider is how much formula the baby is taking during the rest of the day," says Ramos. "If the baby is taking only an ounce or two of skim milk, but he's getting at least 28 to 30 ounces of formula, it probably would be fine."

While an ounce or two of skim milk may not hurt the baby, Ramos suggests you first try diluting the baby's formula and serving it in a cup at meal time so he will think he's drinking the same "watery" milk the other children do. And if you offer all the children their drinks in the same colored plastic cups with tops, your baby won't be able to see what the other children are drinking. Yet, he will be able to drink at meals just like his older siblings do.

Before making any major changes in your baby's diet regarding formula and milk, you should talk to your child's doctor. Children under age 1 need either breast milk or formula rather than cow's milk, says Ramos. The nutrients in cow's milk differ considerably from those found in human breast milk or formula, she explains.

"For example, the protein in cow's milk is three times that found in human milk," Ramos says. Such protein-rich milk is more difficult for the infant's system to process.

While cow's milk can be given to children after their first birthday, hold off on the skim or low-fat milk until age 2 to ensure your toddler receives adequate dietary fat. "Providing whole milk before 2 guarantees the child gets the fat he needs for development," says Ramos. "This fat in the diet is critical between ages 1 and 2 because it is necessary to specific development at

that age.”

In addition to providing formula or breast milk as the main source of your baby’s milk intake until age 1, you’ll also want to follow recommendations from your pediatrician regarding the introduction of table foods. If your baby has teeth, he may be able to eat some of the same things as the older children. But always be aware of potential food allergies or choking hazards when offering any foods to your baby.

64

Q My first baby is due in five weeks, and I’m trying to get my nursery ready. I’ve never been around a little baby very much, and I need advice on making the baby’s room and the rest of my house safer for the baby.

A Although your baby experience is limited, your judgment and forethought indicate you’re going to do just fine with this new adventure called parenthood. “Babyproofing” your child’s room and the rest of the house — which will be an ongoing project as your child matures and becomes more mobile — is one of the first and best gifts parents can offer their child, as well as themselves.

Since you are so near your delivery date, you are probably already talking to a pediatrician. Most parents find their pediatrician’s office to be a rich source of written materials on child care and safety issues. In addition, when your baby is born, you will probably also

work with a parent educator at the hospital who will provide you with written materials on this subject.

While you’re likely to get more advice than you ever expected over the next few weeks, you may want to pay particular attention to some of the following tips, which are provided by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission:

In the bedroom—

*To reduce the risk of suffocation and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, put your baby to sleep on her back or side in a crib with a firm, flat mattress and no soft bedding beneath her. Never put her to sleep on adult beds.

*Check your baby’s crib to make sure it’s sturdy without loose or missing hardware. “This will prevent babies suffocating or strangling by becoming trapped between broken crib parts,” advises the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

*Never place your baby’s crib or furniture near window blinds or curtain cords.

In the bathroom —

*Keep medicines and cleaning products in containers with safety caps. Lock these containers away from children’s reach.

*Before placing your baby in her bath, check the temperature of the water with your wrist or elbow.

*“Never, ever, leave your child alone in the bathtub or near any water,” the commission stresses. “In addition, keep children away from all standing water, including water in toilets, five-gallon buckets, and pools.”

