



Spring into Action for Happiness & Health

with Marti Erickson, Ph.D. & Erin Erickson, MPH

A Night Out for ME™

May 1, 2012, 6 – 8 pm

Crave Restaurant, Galleria, Edina, Minnesota

With summer just around the corner, this is a perfect time to reflect on the choices we make each day and how those choices contribute to our own health and happiness and that of our children. This also is a great time to try out some small changes that can make a big difference, leading to healthy habits that will become part of our family's ongoing lifestyle.

Our mission with Mom Enough is to bring you research-based information to support you in being the mom your children need and the woman you want to be. So, we've pulled together what we call **five key steps to happiness and health**, all supported by a wealth of research, that we invite you to consider each and every day in the coming months. We are going to do the same in our own lives, posting these five steps where we will see them each day (our bathroom mirror, our refrigerator, in the basket with the remote controls for our TV). We intend to be mindful of making these five actions part of our everyday experience. Then we will let you know how it's going for us, and we encourage you to do the same by posting a message on our website (momenough.com) or Facebook page. Tell us about your successes, your failures and your clever ideas for overcoming barriers to healthy choices. That way we all can learn and grow together!

As you will see, there's nothing brand new or surprising about the five steps we identify here; you've heard them all before. What *is* surprising is how easily we can forget to implement these five simple steps in the midst of our busy lives as moms – and, therefore, how easily our children can grow up without developing these healthy habits. So let's start now and spring into action for happiness and health!

Five Key Steps to the Happiness and Health You & Your Family Deserve

1. Breathe (yes, really – just breathe!)

Sure, we breathe all the time. But how often do we find ourselves with tightened muscles, taking little shallow breaths that don't begin to give us the oxygen our bodies and brains need to thrive? How much better to become mindful of our breath, place a hand on our belly, feel it expand as we take a slow, deep breath and then feel our belly go soft as we slowly exhale. Especially at times of stress – when we're feeling the pressure of a deadline at work or seeing our toddler begin to wind up for a tantrum – stopping right where we are to take three big belly breaths can ease the tension. This is true not only for us adults, but also for children of all ages. So let's teach our children to really breathe, just as we are learning ourselves.

To learn more about how to use our breath effectively to manage stress and promote health and happiness for ourselves and our children, check out the following links on the Mom Enough website:

- Breathing for Health and Joy: Conversation and Practice with Therapist Linda Nelson, <http://momenough.com/?p=326>
- Teaching Children Mind Body Skills: Evidence and Strategies from Children's Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota, <http://momenough.com/?p=263>

2. Get outside

In recent years, numerous studies have documented links between outdoor experience and both physical and mental health for children and adults. Richard Louv's groundbreaking book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, brought this issue to the forefront in 2005 by documenting the extent to which children have become disconnected from nature and the cost of that disconnection in terms of childhood obesity, Type 2 diabetes and other preventable illnesses, anxiety, depression and attention problems. There are many reasons children today don't get outside like earlier generations did, including parental fear and the seductiveness of technology (with school-age children spending an average of 53 hours a week in front one kind of screen or another!). And if our children are not getting outside, chances are neither are we! But this is something we can change if we decide to. Let's make a commitment to unplug and get outside (and get our children outside) every day, even if only for a few minutes. Work in the garden, sit under a tree and read, take a walk around the neighborhood or a nearby lake, gather rocks or leaves for a nature display, ride a bike or paddle a canoe. Get out and get going until it becomes a habit!

To learn more about why it's so important to get outside – and to discover fun, easy ways you can do so – check out these links:

- The Nature Principle: A Practical Framework for Enhancing the Health and Well-being of Our Children, Ourselves and Our Communities, <http://momenough.com/?p=1952>
- Into the Woods, Into a New Life: Reflections from a National Youth Leader and New Dad, <http://momenough.com/?p=315>
- Children and Nature: A Natural Attachment handout, <http://momenough.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Children-Nature-Article.pdf>
- Shared Nature Experience handout, <http://momenough.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Shared-Nature-Experience-Family-Bonds.pdf>
- Connecting Children and Nature: Practical Tips for Parents & Other Caregivers, <http://momenough.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Connecting-Children-and-Nature.pdf>

3. Eat right, eat fresh

There is no shortage of information about the importance of healthy eating. If you're like us, sometimes you probably want to shout, "Enough already!" But what if we just made one change in our eating patterns by adding more foods that are simple and fresh? Take your kids to a farmers' market, grow some plants in your own back yard or even a pot on the balcony of your apartment and make a smoothie out of fresh berries and some hi-protein Greek yogurt (a favorite at our houses). If a packaged food has more than three ingredients – or has ingredients you can't pronounce – leave it on the shelf and go for something simpler.

Also keep in mind that it's not only *what* you eat that matters, but *how* you eat. Remember your mom always reminding you to chew your food completely before swallowing? Well, a recent study at Iowa State University (Marti's alma mater) backs up Mom's wisdom. Using a metronome to prompt groups of people how many times to chew before swallowing, researchers found that participants who chewed their food 40 times rather than 15 times felt less hungry afterward and were less preoccupied with food and a desire to eat. Sounds like "mindful eating," relishing the taste and texture of each bite, allowing digestion to start in your mouth (as it's meant to) and feeling more relaxed and satisfied at the end of the meal.

For more helpful and inspiring information about eating well, visit the following links:

- Building a Healthy Feeding Relationship with Your Child: A Conversation with Dr. Katja Rowell, <http://momenough.com/?p=372>
- Combating Childhood Obesity: Steps for Raising Healthy Children, <http://momenough.com/?p=300>
- Feeding Your Children, Tots to Teens: A Conversation with Feeding Expert Nancy Entgelmeier, PNP, <http://momenough.com/?p=317>
- Different Strokes for Different Folks: Discovering What Will Help Your Child Develop Self-Regulatory Skills, <http://momenough.com/?p=2616>
- How to Keep Food Fun handout, <http://momenough.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Keep-Food-Fun.pdf>
- Ways to Change Foods handout, <http://momenough.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Ways-to-Change-Foods.pdf>
- Problem Feeder Warning Signs handout, <http://momenough.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Problem-Feeder-Warning-Signs.pdf>
- Suggestions for Picky Eaters handout, <http://momenough.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Suggestions-for-Picky-Eaters.pdf>

4. Get informed

We all need good information to help us understand our children’s behavior, to help us know what’s normal or when something calls for a closer look or special help and to help us figure out the most effective way to soothe a fussy baby or respond to a sassy teen. These days, information on any aspect of child development or parenting is only a click or a touch away for most of us. But in a technological world that allows anyone to create a website or start a blog, contradictions, confusion and outright quackery abound. In the marketplace of ideas, thoughtful evidence-based information competes with parenting ideas driven by commercial interests, ideology or celebrity opinion. So it’s up to us parents to choose carefully the sources we use to help us make the healthiest decisions possible for our children and ourselves.

Thankfully, research-based information about child development often will lead us to breathe a sigh of relief; think, for example, of what research shows about the importance of play to children’s learning and development – or the evidence that babies can develop good, secure attachments with their moms whether or not their moms are employed outside the home. Those important findings reassure us that we don’t have to work so hard at being a “perfect” parent, but that we can support our child’s health and development by relaxing and having fun together. (A relaxed mom means a healthier mom – and healthier, happier kids!) Fortunately, there are solid, trustworthy places we can turn for the most recent and credible information on child development and best practices in parenting. Trustworthy sources include the state-funded Minnesota Parents Know website (www.parentsknow.state.mn.us), the Help Me Grow section within that website and our own weekly Mom Enough shows: all resources that have been reviewed and approved by Tufts University’s Child & Family Webguide, a system developed to help parents identify information they can trust.

For more about getting informed, visit the following links:

- Ensuring Strong Beginnings for All Our Children: Essential Information from the Minnesota Department of Education, <http://momenough.com/?p=2987>
- What We Need and Want As Parents: A Conversation with Working Family Resource Center’s Beth Quist, <http://momenough.com/?p=3052>
- Tufts University’s Webguide, <http://education.state.mn.us/ParentsKnow/acrossTheNet.jsf?ageGroup=newborn>

5. Get connected

Whether you're dealing with a newborn's sleepless nights, a 6-year-old's difficulty making friends or a pre-teen's video game addiction, you probably have felt alone with your problems at times. And what if your marriage seems to have lost its spark or you feel like you're slipping into a funk – maybe even to the point of having a clinical depression? Whatever challenges you face (and we all face them!), being socially isolated only magnifies them. Countless studies document the importance of connectedness – social support – to good parenting and healthy living. Positive social connections can improve our physical health, our mental health and our resilience in the face of difficulty. As moms, sometimes we feel like we're being selfish if we take time away from our children to hang out with our friends, our partner or other family members. But we need to reframe that connecting time as something we do not only for ourselves, but also for our kids – restoring the emotional energy we need to care well for our children and also giving our children a healthy example of living a full and balanced life surrounded by people who support us and let us support them. Consider weekly date nights to keep your relationship with your partner strong and zesty; an occasional spa day with your mom or sister or friend; a monthly book group with friends (something both of us have done for years – 38 years in Marti's case!); regularly-scheduled walks with neighbors (being connected and getting outside at the same time); attending an ECFE class or a moms' group through your faith community (often a great way to strengthen your own connections and help your children begin to build their connections as well). Although it may seem difficult to make time for social outings when we are feeling overwhelmed with the demands of parenting, that usually is the time we need those connections the most.

For more about getting connected, check out these links:

- What Happy Women Do: Insights from Professor and Author Carol Bruess, <http://momenough.com/?p=275>
- Keeping the Spark Alive: How a Passionate Relationship Benefits You and Your Children, <http://momenough.com/?p=259>

So, there you have five things to think about and take action on each day – **five key steps to the happiness and health you and your family deserve**. Remember that small changes will have a big impact over time.

Hmmm, I think I'll start right now by calling my neighbor and her kids to join us for a walk, try out these yummy peaches my grandkids and I bought at the farmers' market (chewing each bite 40 times of course!), stop and take a few deep breaths while the kids dig in the dirt along Minnehaha Creek and chat about all we learned from last week's guest on Mom Enough!

There now, wasn't that easy?

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