



white-coat confessions

Pediatric experts reveal the one thing they wish every parent knew—and spill the beans on where they slack off with their own kids.

When your child leaves the doctor's office, it's usually with a lollipop. When *you* leave, it's with a list of questions you meant to ask but forgot. What if you could corner your child's pediatrician—and a sleep specialist, a dentist, and a child psychologist—and ask each to share his or her single best tip for keeping your kids healthy? Well, *Real Simple* did just that. And since these experts also happen to be parents, we asked them to admit where they struggle. Because even their own medicine can sometimes be hard to swallow, which should make you feel better already.

written by
Liz Krieger
photographs by
Yunhee Kim



"Toys can be simple."

—Maia Magder, a speech-language pathologist in private practice in Washington, D.C.

What I want you to know: A colleague of mine gives a box of tissues to one-year-olds as a birthday present. It teaches great fine motor skills and language skills—"In," "Out," "All done," "More." Really, the most important piece of equipment you need to foster language and communication in a baby is you. Just play with your child.

Where I slack off: For infants, "tummy time" (when you place the infant on his stomach) is something you're supposed to do to encourage increased trunk tone (think Pilates for babies). I knew I was supposed to do this, but my son hated it, so I never did.

"Don't give up on brushing your child's teeth."

—Mark Hochberg, a pediatric dentist in New York City

What I want you to know: When parents say that they haven't been brushing their child's teeth because "he won't let us," I tell them it might not be pleasant, but it's much preferable to having cavities later on. So let this be the last thing you let slide to keep the peace. And start early with visits to the dentist. Kids should see one by age one.

Where I slack off: Every Halloween, all bets are off when it comes to candy. No limits on sugar intake!

"Kids don't always need an antibiotic."

—Diane M. Straub, an associate professor of pediatrics and the chief of the division of adolescent medicine at the University of South Florida, in Tampa

What I want you to know: Viral infections, despite being very annoying (think missed work for you and school for them), need to run their course. They do not get better with antibiotics, and using antibiotics when they are not necessary promotes resistant bacteria. If you aren't sure what your child has, check with her doctor before giving her any medication.

Where I slack off: I don't remember to give my daughter vitamins consistently at all.

"If you have time to read one book after the baby is born, let it be about sleep."

—Alexandra Barzvi, a child psychologist in private practice in New York City

What I want you to know: Parents spend a lot of time reading about pregnancy and childbirth but don't pay enough attention to what happens afterward. That's understandable, given the time limitations. But learning about sleep—and coming up with a sleep plan early on—will make life much easier. I recommend *Healthy Sleep Habits, Happy Child*, by Marc Weissbluth (Ballantine, \$25).

Where I slack off: Even though I specialize in behavior issues, I admit that I sometimes laugh when my daughter does something she shouldn't do, despite the fact that I know that's just reinforcing a bad behavior.

"A few ear infections a year aren't a big deal."

—Nina Shapiro, an associate professor of pediatric otolaryngology at the Mattel Children's Hospital at the University of California at Los Angeles

What I want you to know: This is quite normal and not a cause for alarm. A child's

immune system is simply still developing, as is her anatomy. Some parents worry that several infections will be the cause of speech delays, but that's not a problem. Kids will catch up.

Where I slack off: My kids have eaten food off the floor. Just the other day, my six-year-old son's toast hit the floor—butter-side down, no less—and I picked it right up and handed it to him.



"When it comes to eating habits, practice what you preach."

—Kathleen Hart, a child psychologist in Portland, Maine

What I want you to know: The concept of three well-balanced, well-portioned meals a day should be an automatic. It is something kids will carry with them through their childhood, and it will help prevent eating problems (and disorders) down the line. So be firm—and a good role model. Mommy can't slug back six-packs of soda or subsist on fat-free yogurt. Kids notice.

Where I slack off: I never remember to pack basic over-the-counter medicines when we travel. Which inevitably leads to a mad scramble for ibuprofen at 2 A.M.

“If you want your child to sleep well, get the electronics out of the bedroom.”

—Jodi Mindell, an associate director of the Sleep Center at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia and a coauthor of *Take Charge of Your Child’s Sleep* (Da Capo Press, \$16)

What I want you to know: TVs, computers, handheld games, iPods, and cell phones are stimulating, making it hard for kids to settle down for sleep. They’re also engaging. Kids want “five more minutes” to finish the game, pushing back lights out. With younger children, turn off the electronics an hour before bed. For teens, 30 minutes. And don’t leave them temptingly on the bedside table.

Where I slack off: As a family, we’re not very good about exercising regularly. My daughter swims for school, but other than that we don’t enforce physical activity.



“Play doctor before going to one.”

—Tanya Remer Altmann, a pediatrician in Los Angeles and the author of *Mommy Calls: Dr. Tanya Answers Parents’ Top 101 Questions About Babies and Toddlers* (AAP, \$13)

What I want you to know: Buy a play doctor’s kit and let your toddler get used to the equipment. Teach her where her heart and ears are and explain that the doctor is going to look at them. Let her listen to your heart

and examine your ears. Make it fun. And be honest. Don’t tell a child a shot won’t hurt, but let her know that it’s a little poke designed to keep her from getting sick. If prepared, she’s more likely to get a thorough exam.

Where I slack off: When my husband isn’t home, my kids eat cereal for dinner. At least they get whole grains, fiber, and protein.

“Remember who’s in charge.”

—Traci Pitts, a clinical psychologist in Reno

What I want you to know: I’ve seen three-year-olds running the household, where the parents are so overly attentive to the child that the kid gets an “I’m in charge” complex. We’re part of a generation that communicates with our kids a lot more, and kids become the center of family decisions. The downside to this is that you can forget that you’re the parent and not the friend.

Where I slack off: I let my kids listen to and watch some things that are more explicit than what might be recommended for their age. I figure that they will see it anyhow, so it’s futile to keep them away from it.

“Never let up when it comes to safety measures.”

—Steve Shelov, the chair of pediatrics at Maimonides Medical Center, in Brooklyn, and the editor in chief of *Caring for Your Baby and Young Child: Birth to Age 5* (AAP, \$20)

What I want you to know: Be as rigorous as you can with car seats, seat belts, and child-proofing, and update your equipment as your child ages—moving older children to car seats that fit their height and weight ranges, for example. There’s no need to be over-protective, but there are simple things you should always do.

Where I slack off: The American Academy of Pediatrics rule is to keep kids away from the television before age two, but I let my children watch before that age. An hour of Fred Rogers wasn’t so bad.



“Don’t potty train too soon.”

—Alanna Levine, a pediatrician in Tappan, New York

What I want you to know: Parents often decide it’s time to toilet train because of a school deadline or because they are sick of changing diapers. You’re better off waiting until your child approaches you. The goal is to transfer the responsibility from the parent (noticing a full diaper) to the child (deciding she needs to go to the bathroom). If you become the “potty police,” asking every 10 minutes, “Do you have to go to the bathroom?” then you might as well keep her in diapers. If you wait for the child to be interested, she’ll tell you when she needs to go.

Where I slack off: I have a major sweet tooth, so I’m lax when it comes to sugar. I can’t remember the last day that my kids didn’t have a cookie or candy.

“Sunscreen works only if you use it properly.”

—Paul Horowitz, a pediatrician in Valencia, California

What I want you to know: A good amount of total lifetime sun exposure happens before age 18. Make sure you put on sunscreen ahead of time—not when you get to the beach or pool. And don’t go five hours without reapplying. Spray sunscreens are great for kids (the less goop, the better). But don’t spritz once, then rub the mist all over a leg or a belly, because when you spread it out, you dilute the effect. Instead,



make sure you spray every nook and cranny thoroughly and leave it. And if it's a windy day, the spray can go everywhere before it reaches your child. So go inside if you need to reapply.

Where I slack off: My children don't wash their hands before every meal, even though I know they should. And every single night after dinner, I let them have ice cream!

"Houseplants can remove up to 90 percent of certain pollutants in your home."

—Alan Greene, a clinical professor of pediatrics at the Stanford University School of Medicine and the author of *Feeding Baby Green* (Jossey-Bass, \$17)

What I want you to know: According to some research, the air in your house has more environmental toxins than the air outside. Yet your family spends a lot of time indoors, so having fresh air should be a focus. A houseplant is the easiest solution to make your home healthier. Try something low-maintenance, like a peace lily.

Where I slack off: I have backed off from how I was raised when it comes to cleaning your plate. I'm not going to bribe them with dessert to finish their vegetables every night.

"Shop around before you settle on a pediatrician."

—Sue Hubbard, a pediatrician in Dallas and the host of *The Kid's Doctor*; on kidsdr.com.

What I want you to know: Your pediatrician is your parenting partner for up to 24 years. I like rules, strict bedtimes, routines. If you you're loosey-goosey and want more autonomy for your kids, find someone who agrees. Ask questions about the pediatrician's parenting philosophy. In the end, most doctors treat illnesses with the same amount of strictness they use for behavioral issues.

Where I slack off: I never stressed when one of my children learned at a different rate than other kids, even though I'll tell parents to have their children tested if they're worried the kids are falling behind.

growing bodies



“Know the difference between a true food allergy and a less serious reaction.”

—Subhadra Siegal, a pediatric allergist and an immunologist at Westchester Medical Center, in Valhalla, New York

What I want you to know: One often cited study showed that only one-third of children suspected of having a food allergy actually

do. A true allergy will cause hives or facial swelling, vomiting, diarrhea, or wheezing, usually within 15 minutes to two hours of eating a food. Much more common are adverse food reactions, which can include any type of food intolerance, like an upset stomach, gassiness, or headache. Don't jump to the conclusion that your child is allergic to his food. Check with your pediatrician. And relax: Food allergies aren't necessarily a life-long curse. A large proportion of kids out-grow allergies to milk, eggs, and wheat.

Where I slack off: I don't treat my daughter's fevers with medication unless they're high enough that she's irritable or uncomfortable. Fever is an immune response to infection. It's not dangerous on its own; you just need to find out what's causing it.

“There is such a thing as too much information.”

—Laura Jana, a pediatrician in Omaha and the author of *Heading Home With Your Newborn: From Birth to Reality* (AAP, \$16)

What I want you to know: People can read too many books and too much online. This breeds parents who have no confidence in themselves. Instead, use what you read to make your own judgments. And when shopping for a parenting book, look for one that combines the practical with the medical, like *American Academy of Pediatrics Baby & Child Health*, by Jennifer Shu (DK Adult, \$13).
Where I slack off: I can admit to leaving my first born in a dirty diaper for too long. My husband and I would each think the other one had taken care of it.