

Boost Your Kid's Brainpower

20 easy ways to give her smart start this school year (22 Photos)

Stacey Colino on Aug 26, 2011 at 2:31PM



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Help Your Kid Become a Better Learner

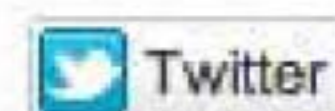
At the start of a new school year, you may feel like a spectator who's simply cheering your child on. After all, his brainpower is largely out of your hands, right? Wrong. The truth is there's a lot you can do to boost your kid's ability to learn and reach his intellectual potential. "Children are born with their brains hardwired in a certain way, but parents have a tremendous influence on the development and shaping of their child's brain and the connections that are being made inside," says child educational psychologist Charlotte Reznick, Ph.D., an associate clinical professor of psychology at UCLA and author of *The Power of Your Child's Imagination: How to Transform Stress and Anxiety into Joy and Success*. The key is to give your child's brain the TLC it needs and deserves. Here are 20 ways to do that.

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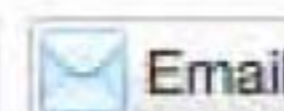
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Sign Up Your Kid for the Breakfast Club

Your mama was right: Breakfast is the most important meal of the day – so make it nonnegotiable for your kids. Researchers at Ulm University in Germany found that high school students who ate breakfast had better visual-spatial memory and were more alert than those who skipped the morning meal. Likewise, a study from the U.K. found that a breakfast rich in complex carbohydrates helps kids maintain mental performance – particularly in the areas of attention and memory – throughout the morning. "A healthy breakfast with whole grains, fruit, low- or nonfat milk or yogurt and a protein-rich food – such as nuts, eggs or peanut butter – provides the body with key nutrients as well as with glucose, which is the main source of fuel needed by the brain, and provides steady blood sugar levels, which can help a child focus," explains Elisa Zied, M.S., R.D., author of *Nutrition at Your Fingertips*.

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Ask Open-Ended Questions

You know how your kids love to ask you *why*? Well, turn the tables on them and crank up their brainpower in the process. Ask them why they like certain friends as much as they do, or why they think certain rules exist, or what's the best vacation they've ever taken and why it was the best. "Such questions will encourage your child to come up with novel ideas, which in turn will help to create new neural connections in her brain," explains Reznick. Try to involve your kid's senses in your questions – by asking what the ideal vacation spot looks like, sounds like and smells like – and you'll engage and stimulate her brain even more.

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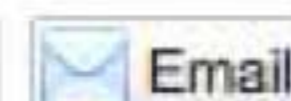
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Be Warm and Fuzzy -- But Firm

"Research suggests that a warm, emotionally stable home, in which children's decisions are monitored and age-appropriate rules and goals are set, is important for the development of executive cognitive function -- skills involving planning, abstract reasoning, working memory and emotional regulation," notes Nathaniel Riggs, Ph.D., an assistant professor of preventive medicine at the University of Southern California. "Conversely, kids with punitive or harsh parents are at risk for problems with these skills during childhood." The take-home message: Provide your child with rules and limits and guide him through decision-making processes -- with love and compassion -- so he can learn to anticipate the long-term consequences of his choices.

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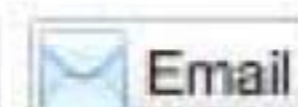
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Make Sleep a Priority

If your child doesn't snooze enough, he or she may lose precious brainpower. "Sleep impacts every aspect of a child's cognitive functioning, including attention, memory, problem-solving and decision making," says psychologist Jodi Mindell, Ph.D., associate director of the Sleep Center at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and author of *Take Charge of Your Child's Sleep*. "Studies have shown that children who don't get sufficient sleep are more likely to do poorly in school and be identified as having learning difficulties and/or attention problems." Set a consistent bedtime and wake-up time for your child, enforce an electronic curfew (no TV, computer or other device) two hours before bedtime and create a relaxing bedtime routine to set your child up for enough good quality shut-eye every night.

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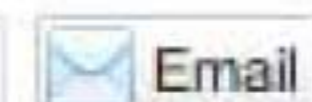
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Encourage One-Thing-at-a-Time-Tasking

A recent study by researchers at the University of Leuven in Belgium found a U-shaped curve in people's ability to multitask throughout their lifespan: At the ages of 9 and 11, kids struggled to perform a task that required naming items in certain categories while walking; young and middle-age adults did much better. There's a reason for this: While kid's brains are undergoing full-throttle development, it's easier and more efficient for them to focus on a single task rather than try to juggle several. "The research shows that when kids multitask, they do everything worse," explains Reznick. Make a no-TV-while-doing-homework rule, and encourage your child to focus his attention on the task at hand before moving on to another one.

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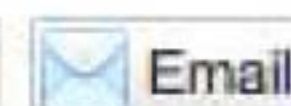
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Put Omega Power on Your Side

Whether it's because of their anti-inflammatory or anticlotting effects, or the way they improve signaling between nerve cells, this much is certain: Omega-3 fatty acids are beneficial for the brain. Research at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine found that when healthy boys ages 8 to 10 took daily doses of 400 or 1,200 milligrams of docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) – the primary omega-3 fatty acid in gray matter – they experienced changes in the activation of areas of the brain that could potentially promote improvements in attention, memory and other aspects of cognition, says the study's lead author Robert McNamara, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine. "It's critical that children get DHA in their diets to support brain development. Supplementation with fish oil [1 gram of EPA+DHA daily] is one option, and several foods are now fortified with DHA." Incorporate them into your child's diet regularly.

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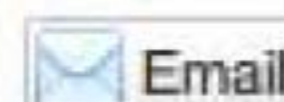
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Get Your Kid off the Couch

Regular physical activity is beneficial for every aspect of a child's health – and brain function is no exception. A recent study at the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta found that when sedentary, overweight kids ages 7 to 11 put in 20 or 40 minutes of exercise a day, after 13 weeks they experienced improvements in executive function and ability to do math; what's more, MRIs revealed that important areas of their brains became increasingly activated. (Their sedentary counterparts experienced no such increases.) Meanwhile, research at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign found that kids who are more aerobically fit perform more accurately on cognitive tasks requiring attention and control in response selection. Sign up your kid for the sport of her choice, make playground trips a regular part of the day, schedule family bike rides on weekends – anything to keep her active.

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Play Stimulating Games Together

Whether you play "I Spy" or "Geography" on a long car trip, do challenging puzzles at home, or play card games involving memory or board games requiring strategy or abstract reasoning skills, you'll be doing your child's brain a favor. "Playing is how kids learn early on," Reznick says, and all of these games will help your child's brain forge new neuronal connections. A hidden perk: Playing them together will help you appreciate different aspects of your child's intelligence you may not have noticed.

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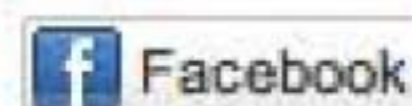
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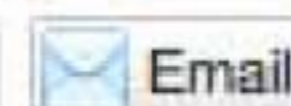
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Hit the Off Button

Too much time spent watching TV, playing video games and engaging in other forms of "screen time" has been linked with an increased risk of a child becoming overweight, eating more junk food and other health-related ills. Now you can add poor academic performance to the list. Researchers at the Children's Hospital at Montefiore/Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx examined the habits of 4,508 middle school students with regard to watching television and movies and playing video games. They found that students who spent more time parked in front of a screen and had fewer limits on what they could watch or play during the week performed more poorly in school. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends limiting screen time to a max of two hours per day, not including homework on the computer. It's also important to keep tabs on what your child watches or plays.

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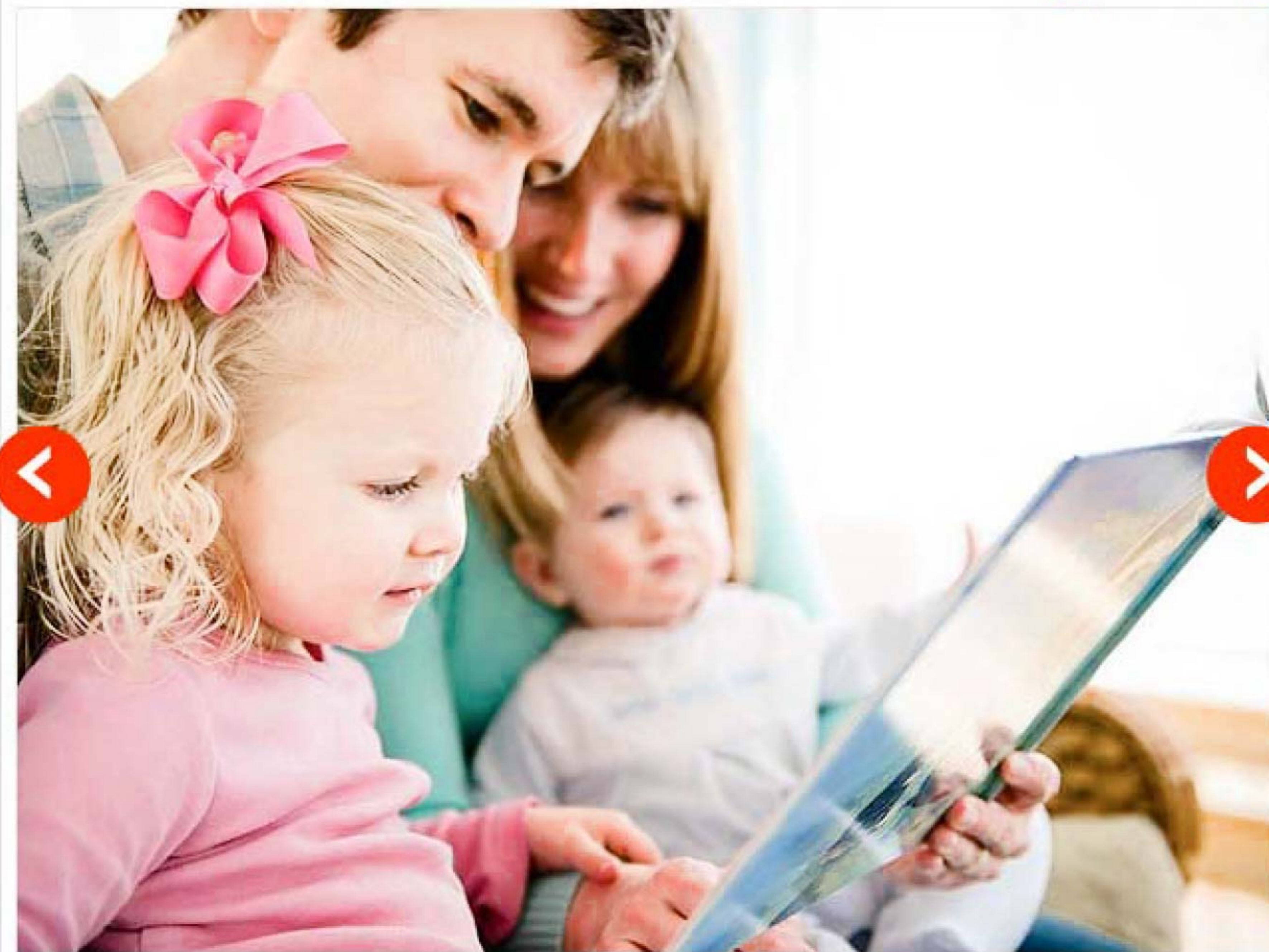
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Crack Open a Good Book

Besides being a pleasant bonding experience, reading with your child can enhance his imagination and language skills. What's more, "it opens new worlds and allows new ideas and concepts to come into your child's mind – and that, of course, increases his intelligence," Reznick says. To go the extra mile and make it a truly interactive experience, ask your kid provocative questions about the story, such as, "How does this relate to something in your life?" or, "What do you think it's like for this character to go through this experience?" That'll really get the ideas percolating.

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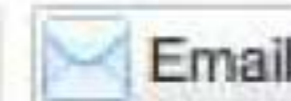
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Offer Nutritious Noshes

Snacks can be brain food (or not), depending on their nutritional content. Researchers at the University of Southern California's Institute for Prevention Research found that the proficiency of children's executive cognitive function (which includes planning abilities, abstract reasoning, using working memory effectively and regulating emotions) is negatively related to a high intake of high-calorie snack foods and positively related to fruit and veggie intake. "Kids who aren't well nourished don't have the proper nutrients for positive brain development," says Riggs of USC, "and positive brain development -- particularly executive cognitive function skills -- helps kids make better food choices." Stock up on healthy snacks for your kids to choose from and let them dig in -- in moderation.

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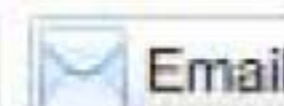
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Don't Be a Superhero Parent

Instead of being ready, willing and able to come to your kid's rescue -- whether it's refereeing a dispute with a sibling or figuring out what to do if an important piece is missing from a game -- let *her* do the problem solving. "When a child comes up with novel solutions to problems, she's making new brain connections and developing critical thinking skills," Reznick says. You can nudge the process along by asking questions like: What do you really want from the other person? What's another way you could handle this situation?

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Tap Your Kid's Inner Mozart

When researchers from France looked at how six months of musical training affected 8-year-old kids who aren't musicians, they found that the lessons improved their reading and made it easier for them to pick up on different pitches in speech. The musical training also encouraged the development of neural processes as reflected in specific patterns of brain waves.

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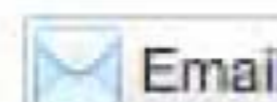
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Organize a Homework Routine

It's best if you can create a structured routine and an orderly setting in which your child can do his homework. "He'll have few distractions and will be able to focus better, which in turn will help his brain to function more efficiently," Reznick says. To that end, designate a quiet, well-lit study space as the homework zone and make sure it's free of clutter, chatter and digital devices (unless a computer is needed for the work), whether it's in your child's room, at the kitchen table or in the dining room.

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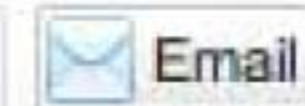
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Harness the Power of Produce

Fruits and vegetables are loaded with vitamins, minerals and health-promoting phytochemicals. And "many fruits and vegetables are rich in antioxidants, which fight free radicals -- substances in the body and the environment that can damage cells," notes nutritionist Zied. If your child eats lots of fruits and vegetables, the antioxidants in them can have a protective, growth-producing effect on her brain. In a study involving 241 children whose diet had been assessed during the first year of their lives, researchers at the University of Southampton in the U.K. found that those who consumed more veggies, fruits and home-prepped foods had higher overall and verbal IQ scores at age 4.

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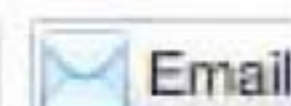
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Help Your Child Conquer Stress

Besides taking a toll on a child's health and well-being, stress can interfere with her brain function. In a study of kids ages 9 to 12, researchers at the University of Malaga in Spain found that those who felt stressed out performed significantly worse on tests involving memory speed and continuous attention than kids who weren't stressed out. If your child is anxious about, say, a big-deal school project such as book report, help her get the best of stress by encouraging her to break the assignment into small steps (five days to read the book, four days to write a first draft, three days to polish it), Reznick suggests. For acute stress, call a breathing break: Tell her to place her hands on her belly and breathe slowly and deeply until she feels her lower belly fill up like an inflating balloon, and then deflate as the air is released. Doing 10 of these consecutively will have a calming effect.

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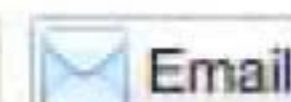
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Turn Down the Volume

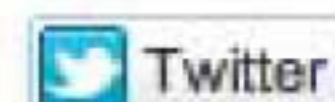
There's no denying that our world is getting louder -- and it's more than just an annoyance for children. Research from the University of London found that kids who are exposed to aircraft noise at school or at home have more impaired levels of reading comprehension. Meanwhile, researchers from Kyoto University in Japan found that kids who are consistently exposed to aircraft noise at home have lower scores on memory tests of immediate and delayed recall. If your family is affected by external noise in your home, take steps to block it out -- by installing double- or triple-pane windows, heavy curtains, weatherstripping and other noise-neutralizing aids.

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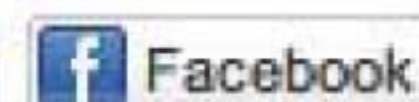
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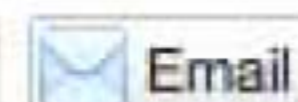
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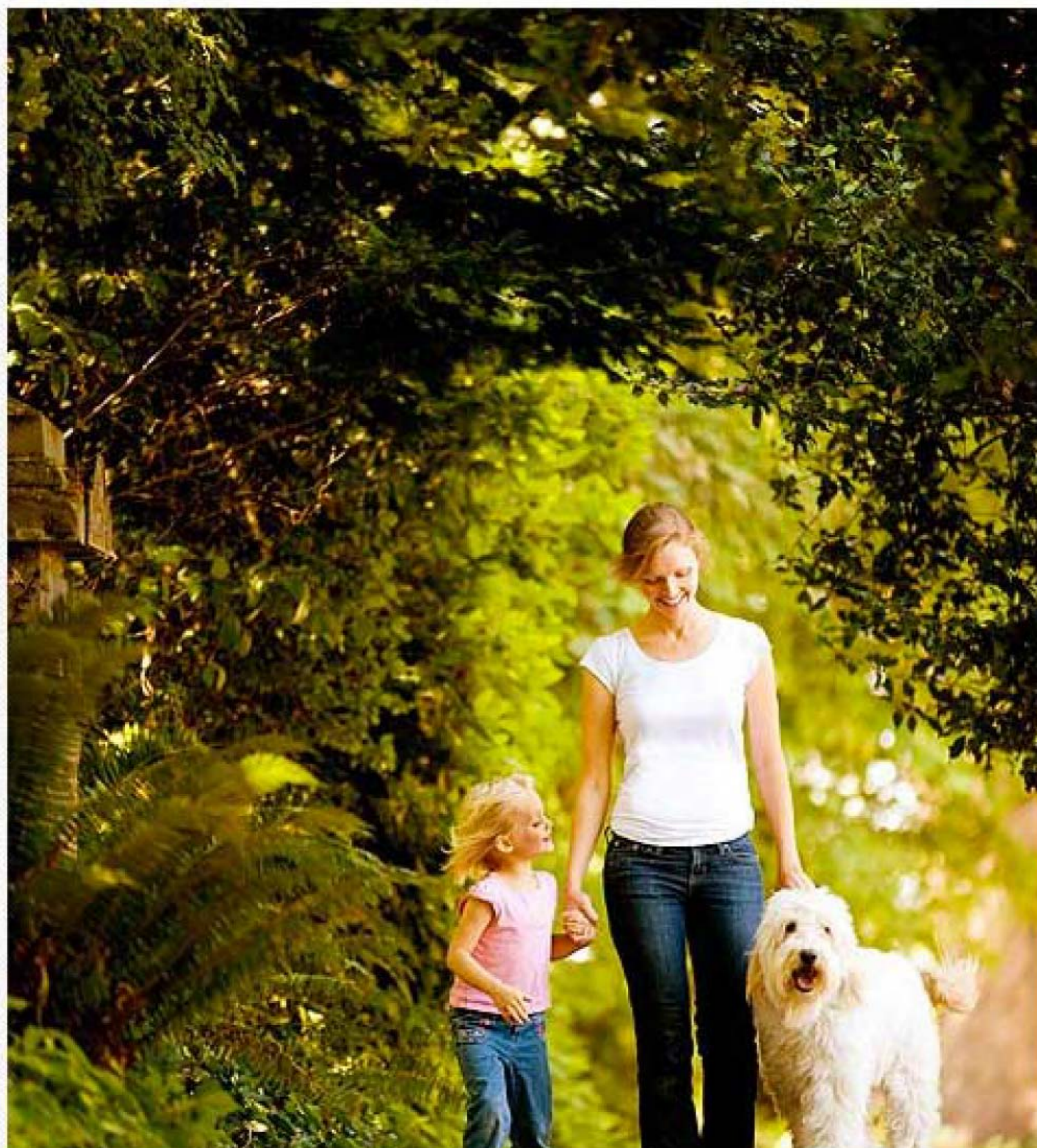
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Give Your Child Healthy Doses of Nature

Spending time outside can boost your child's brain function, especially his attention, concentration, impulse control and memory. Research at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign even found that after kids with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) took a 20-minute walk in a park, their attention and concentration were enhanced on tests that involve repeating a series of numbers backward. "Nature seems to rejuvenate us by giving our fatigued 'mental muscles' a chance to rest," explains Frances E. Kuo, Ph.D., director of the Landscape and Human Health Laboratory at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Treat your kids to at least 20 minutes a day outside, with longer periods when you can swing it. Remember: "Time in nature doesn't have to be in the deep woods," Kuo says. "Reading in a leafy backyard, biking on a tree-lined street, playing soccer, even sitting at a window looking onto a green view all seem to help."

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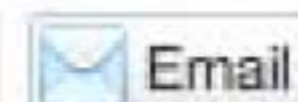
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Cut Household Chaos

In a variation of the theme that a disorganized, messy home leads to a disorganized, messy mind, research suggests that having a chaotic household may affect your child's intellectual function. A recent study from King's College London found that twins ages 9 to 12 who perceived greater levels of family chaos performed more poorly in school than their peers with more orderly households. Some of the effect may be genetic, but researchers say environment also has a profound influence. The reason: Many kids thrive in a structured, orderly environment because it eliminates unnecessary distractions and helps them to focus on what they should be doing, Reznick says.

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Encourage Kids to Name Their Feelings

When your child gets frustrated or upset while doing homework, tell him to pause and identify the color, shape or name of his feelings. Then ask him: What do you want to say to that feeling? The reason: "When a child gets upset, the feelings light up the amygdala in the brain, which shuts down the logical thinking part of the brain," Reznick explains. By playing the name-it game and helping your child face his feelings, your child's brain will calm down and he'll be able to think clearly again. "Doing this gives children a way of controlling frustration and other distressing feelings," Reznick adds, "instead of letting those feelings overwhelm them." It's a win-win situation, in other words.