

Spring 2019

playtimes

your expert guide to family life

★ **Mental Health**
and how
exercise helps

★ **Vegan and
Vegetarian**
diets for babies

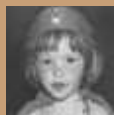
★ **Home
Schooling**
Would it work
for your family?

★ **Vitamins**
Yes or No?

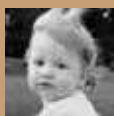


Fighting Fit!

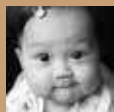
✚ Hong Kong's best sporting clubs rounded-up in one directory



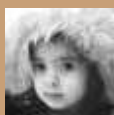
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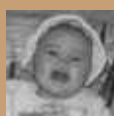
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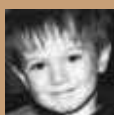
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Angela Baura

Angela was born and bred in not-so-sunny England where she spent her childhood years performing on stage, writing poetry and reading books.

Engrossed in the world of words, she forgot to apply to universities. She hastily copied her friend's application forms and found herself studying information technology for three tedious years.

After an uninspiring stint in IT consulting, she parted ways with programming and pursued a rewarding career in Public Relations. In 2006, Angela and her husband moved to Hong Kong where she now spends her adult years performing multiple roles as a mother of three, a writer and communications strategist, and a book-devouring addict.



Karen Sherwood

Karen grew up in Australia, in the seaside city of Warrnambool (she won't take offence if you've never heard of it!). After a blissful childhood of beach, books, imagination and travel, she attended university in Melbourne. Unsure of what one does with a degree in international relations and medieval history, she went backpacking until a cash shortage saw her working at an investment management firm in London. Whilst there, she interviewed the dashing British analyst who later became her husband. A travel-obsessive with a penchant for moving house, Karen jumped at the chance to accompany him to Hong Kong with their baby son in 2011. Now with a feisty little daughter to keep her son in line, Karen spends her days writing, refereeing arguments and finding excuses not to cook.



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Boost Your Child's Mental Health Through Exercise



Children should exercise for at least one hour a day; yet only 4.7 per cent of Hong Kong's youngsters achieve this, a stark statistic that Mind HK, a mental health charity, hopes to change through efforts like its recent Move it for *Mental Health Campaign*



Exercise is an easy and, more importantly, enjoyable way for youngsters to manage stress, boost their mood and self esteem, sleep better, learn important life lessons, and improve their performance at school; all of which are essential to overall mental-wellbeing. Psychologists Dr Natalie Loong and John Shanahan, and HKIS middle school counsellor Laura Cowan share their expertise to highlight why sport and physical exercise are so beneficial to children.

It can help prevent and treat mental health problems

Exercise has been associated with reduced risk of depression and anxiety and improved cognitive function in youth. Dr Natalie Loong, California Licensed Clinical Psychologist says, “organised physical activities may affect



the mental health of children and youth by preventing problems from arising in the first place, promoting positive development and, to a limited extent, physical activity can even help to treat problems once they exist - such as improving the symptoms of depression, anxiety, and symptoms related to ADHD."

It makes them feel good

When you exercise, your body releases endorphins, feel-good hormones, which give a natural high. Exercise also increases the release of other chemicals, such as dopamine and serotonin, which help regulate mood. The effects of this, in conjunction with better sleep quality and eating habits, plays a positive role in stress management and improved mental well-being for children.

It teaches resilience and increases self-esteem

It is important that children challenge themselves to reach new milestones and understand self-discipline and practice – coping with losing and facing hurdles is an important part of developing resilience, according to Laura Cowan, middle school counsellor at HKIS and former physical education teacher "being a good loser takes maturity and practice. Losing teaches children to bounce back from disappointment, to cope with unpleasant experiences and is an important part of developing resilience."

John Shanahan, a psychologist who specialises in adolescents and children, adds to this: 'Individual sports allow you to challenge yourself; to see yourself improving at something the more you practice. It enhances this idea of a growth mindset, a big predictor for future success, by showing you that effort can change outcome. It also allows some children an avenue for success if that child isn't book smart or performing well at school.'

Research suggests physical activity is linked to improved self-esteem and can assist in the development of

resilience. "When you have positive self-esteem, belief, identity and concept, then you are more likely to take risks, ask questions, and engage in the learning process more easily. You are also more likely to bounce back from failures and disappointments with resilience and have a 'can do' attitude," Laura advises.

Improved Learning

John Shanahan puts it perfectly, "a happy brain is a brain that is good at learning." Exercise plays a role in facilitating learning and accelerating students' performance at school, enhanced cognitive functioning and brain health can improve attention and other factors underlying academic performance. Youngsters also tend to burn off a lot of frustration and energy when the exercise, which improves their concentration levels at school. Physical activity is also associated with an improved quantity and quality of sleep, a crucial element for academic performance.

It supports them socially and emotionally

In many ways, team sports provide social and emotional benefits to children. Dr Loong elaborates on how: "Sport, especially team sport, provides children and youths with many opportunities for learning and socialising, which benefit them both socially and emotionally. Through team sport, youngsters learn to interact with peers and adults associated with the activity, improving their communication skills, social skills, and building their network of social support. Being part of a team with a shared goal also helps to increase a sense of belonging and purpose. Finally, when team sport involves a healthy dose of competition, it can also be a good training ground for children and youths to develop confidence through achievement and develop resilience through learning to cope with setbacks and constructive criticisms."

A sense of purpose and support system

Team sports, especially, offer children a safe space and support system, through friendships and connections. Being part of a team and having a shared goal gives children a sense of belonging and purpose; making them feel as if they are contributing to something bigger and manifesting in unique bonds. According to Natalie, this in turn helps "develop many of the social skills they will need for life. It teaches them to communicate, cooperate, and to listen to and respect each other. While being part of a team, your child learns how important it is to stay healthy and make good decisions so that they can perform optimally."

How you can encourage your child

Parents, engaging your children in sports and physical activity early is important to introducing a habit of regular physical activity. According to Laura Cowan, here's what you can do to get your child moving:

- Make sure it's a positive experience by finding sports they like – exercise should be fun!
- Don't criticise them or compare them to others; positive comments from the sideline will further encourage your children to be active
- Join in! Set an example, spend some valuable time with your child, and take care of your own physical and mental health

Perfectly summarised by Laura, "we are made to move – sport isn't just good for our children's bodies; it's good for their minds too." Exercise, be it individually; within a team; through a social outlet (such as playdates and boy scouts) challenges and benefits children in different ways - physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally. Signing up your child for after-school sports and attending those dreaded Saturday morning training sessions is worthwhile. Find a sport your child enjoys and it will help imbed lifelong habits, valuable through adulthood. 