

# PEDIATRIC MEDICINE: HEALTHIER KIDS

*From the first positive pregnancy test to graduation, parents seek to guide their children in an effort to steer them towards a healthy, productive life. To help you as a parent start your child on the right path, Christopher J. Keefer, M.D., Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, has answered the following pertinent questions that will help parents as they enter the journey of parenthood:*

**How long have you been a Pediatrician and do you have any sub-specialties?** I have been practicing pediatrics for 13 years and am board certified in both general pediatrics and infectious diseases. My training and experience allow me to provide general primary care to children while also helping diagnosis and treat children with unusual and/or serious infections.

**Why Pediatric medicine?** I have always had the desire to help people and felt that pediatric medicine gave me the opportunity to help them at the beginning. Like an elementary school teacher, if you get children going in the right directions, their future is bright.

**At what age would you recommend a parent to establish a primary Pediatrician for their child?** Ideally, during the expecting mother's pregnancy. This allows the family to get to know the pediatrician ahead of time and the doctor to learn of any health issues that may be important for the care of the baby. If not before birth, have a pediatrician chosen at the time of delivery. Since all newborns need to be seen by a pediatrician shortly after being sent home from the hospital, knowing who your new child's pediatrician is allows for this transition to be easy for all.

**How important is discussing my child's general growth and issues like discipline and social development?** It is extremely important! If you have any concerns regarding your child's physical, developmental or social development, please discuss them with your child's doctor. Early identification of growth and developmental problems is paramount to treating the issues correctly and completely. Therefore, discussing your concerns is vital. After all, the cornerstone of pediatrics is accessing and promoting good growth and development, we want to hear parents' concerns.

**What are your views on:**

- » **Bottle or formula feeding?** In most circumstances, providing human breast milk is preferred over infant formula, and better for babies. However, there are some cases where formula is a good alternative to breast milk, such as when breast milk is not an option for a variety of reasons. Thankfully, today, we are fortunate to have safe formulas to give as an alternative to breast milk.
- » **Circumcision?** At this time, in regards to what we know both medically and scientifically, circumcision is still in a grey area for most children. In my opinion, at this time, it is mostly a personal decision for each family. While existing data have demonstrated medical benefits of circumcision in certain situations, universal circumcision is not strongly recommended. I see my role as a pediatrician as helping provide parents the most current and accurate medical information regarding circumcision and letting them decide what's best of their child.
- » **Parenting techniques?** Parents should have patience when parenting, consistency when parenting, and use techniques proven effective. They also should accept help from others such as family, friends and their child's pediatrician.



- » **Alternative medicine?** I support alternative medicines, or therapies, that I know to work and to be safe for children. I do, however, prefer the terminology of supplemental or complementary medicine over alternative medicine. I feel alternative medicine denotes patients have to choose one type of treatment over another. In regards to pediatrics, there are many available complementary therapies for children. If a family is unsure about an alternative therapy or medicine for their child, they need to ask their child's physician about the safety and effectiveness before trying it out.
- » **What is your immunization policy?** I am 100 percent supportive of childhood vaccines. Vaccines are one of the most proven and effective ways we can keep our children healthy. Furthermore, I am willing to work with parents who have concerns regarding vaccines by providing them with the information and scientific facts supporting immunizations. While I feel personally vaccines as safe and effective, I want parents to be part of the decision whether or not to vaccinate their child. It is worth noting, that I would never recommend anything in way of vaccines to my patients that I would not give to my own children.
- » **Childhood obesity a major issue, do you feel its related to the lack of emphasis our schools place of physical activity, the convenience of fast foods or the combination of all the above?** Obesity occurs when more calories are taken in than are needed on a daily basis. When you apply that to children, it is often a simple matter of children taking in too many calories, such as liquid calories, often in the form of sodas and juices, and not spending enough time playing. Children consume a lot of their daily calories by drinking excessive amounts of sweetened beverages. When you combine this excessive caloric intake with the fact that kids are not getting out and playing and being physical, it is not surprising that more children are being diagnosed as overweight and obese. While I think that blaming the school for rise in pediatric obesity is misdirected, I do feel reducing the amount of required physical activities from school doesn't help the pediatric obesity epidemic.



**What's your opinion on the impact of video games on healthy children's physical activity?** I think technology needs to be integrated in a healthy, productive way. I encourage parents to find a healthy balance of technology used for both learning and entertainment with physical activity. This could mean creating a schedule that only allows a certain amount of screen time after a set amount of physical play is completed. I also encourage families who permit video games to use age-appropriate video games as a reward, so kids see them as a privilege not a right.

**How important is physical activities for my child and what types of physical activity would you recommend?** Physical activity is extremely important. There is no question that being physically active results in a longer, healthier and more enjoyable life. In childhood, we recommend kids do anything that gets their heart racing instead of trying to get a child to run or engage in "exercise." Therefore, the type of physical activity is not as important as the act of engaging in some type of physical activity.

**Are you currently working on any Children / Child studies?** I am part of a research project in our clinic that is studying pediatric obesity in the Hispanic population. We are trying to understand the role of the parent's knowledge level in regards to nutrition, physical activity and how this correlated with their children's growth during the first years of life. We hope to show that early intervention with education and guidance reduces rates of early childhood obesity.

Dr. Keefer expressed to us the importance of communication between a family and their child's pediatrician. The journey of parenthood is not to be taken alone but is instead a team effort made up of many players. Of course, the parents are vitally important, but choosing a highly knowledgeable and personable pediatrician is also crucial in ensuring a child reaches their full potential both physically and emotionally.