

New national scheme aims to build healthy habits in children

Grow Well SG seeks to empower families to ensure kids eat, sleep, learn, exercise well

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All children from Primary 1 to 3 will get a personalised health plan from 2025, as part of a new strategy to help them make healthy choices a way of life, and stave off illnesses as they get older.

While most children in Singapore are in good health, many have already picked up poor habits, including too much screen time and junk food, and too little exercise and sleep, as large-scale studies have borne out. This could have dire consequences later on. Already, there is rising prevalence of mental health issues, especially among young people.

So, the Health, Education and Social and Family Development ministries have come together to nip bad habits in the bud.

Grow Well SG, launched on Jan 21, aims to empower families to make sure children put down their mobile devices, eat well-balanced meals, get moving and have enough sleep, with support from pre-schools, schools, healthcare institutions and the community.

In addition, there will be a focus on relationships within the family

and social connections with friends, a key component of healthy lifestyles.

The goals are to eat well, sleep well, learn well and exercise well.

At a Jan 21 press conference, Health Minister Ong Ye Kung said there is strong evidence that the first 1,000 days of life are a crucial time when children develop good habits, which have a profound impact on their health as they grow up.

The authorities have also collected enough evidence from studies showing that lifestyle habits from a young age affect the well-being of children as they grow up, he said.

These habits affect brain activity, cognitive development and executive function, which has to do with how children learn and take in information, process it and so on, he added.

Prior to this, Singapore had launched two other population health initiatives – the Healthier SG preventive care strategy and Age Well SG, which supports seniors in ageing well in their homes and communities.

Grow Well SG will start with children up to 12 years old, but will be extended to older age groups, and



Temasek Primary School pupil Lucas Wong, seven, at a lifestyle prescription session on Jan 21. Under Grow Well SG, healthcare personnel will be able to give children a “lifestyle prescription”. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

KEEPING CHILDREN HEALTHY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Eat Well

WHAT'S HAPPENING: Nearly 44 per cent of five-year-old children in the Gusto (Growing Up in Singapore Towards Healthy Outcomes) cohort study were found in 2022 to have unhealthy eating habits. They consumed more fries, processed meat, biscuits and ice cream – items with high content of saturated fat and refined carbohydrates – than children who ate healthily.

WHY IT MATTERS: Shaping the food preferences of children now will help them maintain healthy diets as they grow older. Poor nutrition can lead to health issues, such as raised blood glucose and diabetes later on in life, for instance.

GOAL: Keep eating fruits and vegetables every day, and do not forget to drink plain water.

Sleep Well

WHAT'S HAPPENING: About 65 per cent of school-age children in Singapore do not meet the recommended nine to 11 hours of sleep on school days, according to a 2022 report.

WHY IT MATTERS: Insufficient sleep in school-age children has been associated with poorer academic performance, sleepiness during the day, depressive symptoms and poor social competence, the study said. The risk of mental health conditions, childhood obesity and related chronic health conditions goes up

if poor sleeping habits persist into adulthood.

GOAL: Sleep at least nine hours nightly.

Learn Well

WHAT'S HAPPENING: Most children do not meet recommended screen time guidelines – only 41 per cent of eight-year-old children meet the recommendation of less than two hours of recreational screen time a day.

WHY IT MATTERS: Inappropriate and excessive screen use displaces other activities, such as sleep, physical activity, interactions with friends and family, and is associated with increased obesity and poorer mental health and well-being.

GOAL: Limit recreational screen use to less than two hours a day, if you are seven to 12 years old.

Exercise Well

WHAT'S HAPPENING: Only 52 per cent of eight-year-old children were involved in organised sports activity during the week. Since 2013, the proportion of school-going children under 18 years old who are overweight has risen from 11 per cent to 13 per cent.

WHY IT MATTERS: Insufficient physical activity can lead to children becoming overweight or obese, and other health issues.

GOAL: Be active and exercise for at least an hour every day.

will build on the ministries' various efforts, including the Child and Maternal Health and Well-being action plan in 2024.

For the children's health plan, parents will have to complete a questionnaire on their child's current habits at the start of the school year. Healthcare personnel will then be able to give the child a “lifestyle prescription” during the Health Promotion Board's (HPB) annual school health screening programme.

This, together with school health screening results, vaccination reports and referrals to public healthcare institutions if needed, will be in the child's health plan. It can be viewed on the national platform for digital health, HealthHub.

“By doing a health plan, the conversation on maintaining a healthy lifestyle will start,” Mr Ong told reporters gathered at Temasek Primary School, one of the 12 schools involved in a Grow Well SG pilot in 2024.

If a child watches a lot of TV and uses devices a lot, his health plan will say that he has to cut down on screen use, as the guidelines are for up to two hours of screen time outside of school, Mr Ong said.

The child can then discuss the plan with his parents, he added.

Ms Monica Loo, whose child, Emily Wong, participated in the pilot in 2024, said the plan is an opportunity for her to discuss healthier habits with her daughter, a Primary 2 pupil at Temasek Primary School.

For younger children, the Ministry of Health (MOH) will introduce a childhood health behaviours checklist later in 2025. This will be used during the seven routine childhood screenings in the first six years of life – which look at areas such as growth, and motor and language skills – to help identify children at risk of developmental delay who may require early intervention. MOH will release more details in the next few months.

A critical part of the multi-ministry strategy is getting children to use their screens more purposefully, and to limit screen time. For this, MOH has updated its screen use guidance.

Assistant Professor Evelyn Law, who gave input for the updates made to the advisory, said one of the key additions is for parents to not give their children unrestricted access to mobile devices. This will help prevent a game addiction problem, which studies have found is worse here than in many other countries.

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Schools will get more support to improve student health

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Game addiction is associated with less sleep, less participation in school work, and an increase in mental health symptoms such as low mood, irritability and low energy, said the senior consultant at Khoo Teck Puat – National Uni-

versity Children’s Medical Institute, National University Hospital.

The Early Childhood Development Agency does not currently stipulate screen use guidelines for pre-schools.

But from Feb 1, these guidelines will kick in. They include asking pre-schools to not use screens to

entertain children while they are waiting for their parents to pick them up, for instance, Minister of State for Social and Family Development Sun Xueling said at the press conference.

Furthermore, MOH and the Ministry of Education will be enhancing support for schools to enable

them to improve student health. For one thing, all primary schools will have a comprehensive Student Health Status Card that includes lifestyle data for their population of pupils. This allows them to identify the needs of their pupils.

To get canteen vendors to serve healthier food options, HPB will

step up efforts to help them buy lower-cost, healthier ingredients directly from manufacturers participating in HPB’s Healthier Ingredient Development Scheme.

Minister of State for Education Gan Siow Huang said that while schools will do their best to inculcate good values and develop good

habits in children, parents will have to be a part of this approach for it to be successful.

“We hope that parents can play a stronger and more active role in promoting healthy lifestyle habits for the students.”

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