



Speaking for Children

What's best for our youngest children is best for everyone!

The Gift of Family Time

Strengthening family ties during the holidays

We all have such busy schedules that it can be a challenge to find time to spend together as a family. However, no matter how busy life gets, it is important for families to connect regularly. Studies show that spending time together as a family boosts a child's self-esteem and promotes healthy social development and positive relationships. This quality family time is particularly important during a child's first five years—the time when his or her brain is growing the most.

This holiday season, First 5 Sonoma County encourages parents, as well as grandparents and caregivers, to give the gift of quality time to children. By planning educational and nurturing activities everyone can enjoy together, families can set up healthy routines that last through the holidays and well into the New Year.

- **Read daily.** Visit the library before the holidays (Sonoma County libraries are closed December 24–January 2) to make sure you have plenty of board and picture books for children to enjoy. Help your child's imagination and vocabulary soar by reading favorite stories together. Describe what you see in picture books and let your toddler turn the pages.
- **Host a weekly family fun night.** Set up a row of chairs and role-play as a bus driver or train conductor; enjoy a game of musical chairs; or use



everyday items like cardboard boxes, glue and cotton balls to create pieces of art. Play your child's favorite card or board games or do puzzles together.

- **Take a field trip.** Visit the parks and beaches you've never been to in Sonoma County, or local museums to learn about animals, interesting historical facts and other educational topics. Make sure to call ahead and find out if there is a kids' day, and ask if free or discounted tickets are available.
- **Make every moment count.** Above all, use every moment together to learn from and listen to your

child, even when taking care of every day errands. Young children love to help—take your kids grocery shopping and let them pick out fruits and vegetables while you ask about their favorite foods. When driving, point to colors and shapes, and ask your child to count trees or read simple signs.

Remember, spending quality time with your children this holiday season is a priceless gift—your time and attention cost nothing and mean everything.

Making family mealtime special

Taking time to eat dinner together as often as you can provides a wonderful opportunity to talk with your children about their day and show them that they are your top priority. Get kids involved by assigning age-appropriate tasks to them like setting the table, making the salad, and filling glasses with water.

Here is a list of other things you can do to make family mealtime quality time:

- Turn the radio, television and computer off
- Do not answer the phone (let the answering machine or voicemail take any calls)
- Take a moment to give thanks
- Appreciate the efforts of the cooks and helpers
- Require everyone to stay at the table until the last person finishes eating
- Take turns sharing at least one thing of importance about the day
- Look and listen and pay attention to each other
- Keep discussions and comments about each other positive
- Make clearing the table and doing the dishes part of mealtime

If grandparents or other relatives are visiting this holiday, ask them to teach children about traditional

family recipes. Children can measure and stir the ingredients while grandparents talk about the recipes and their childhood memories of cooking and eating as a family.

If family mealtime is new to your family, don't expect it to be perfect right away. Even if some family members seem not to enjoy it at first, don't give up. With practice, family mealtime will become an important and special time for each person in your family.

Spend time walking outdoors together

Teaching children about the importance of daily exercise is critical to their life long health and well-being. Walking is one of the best and easiest ways for families to spend quality time together and get exercise at the same time.

Walking is an exercise that can be done anywhere and anytime for free. Children of all ages benefit from being outside in the fresh air and sunshine and can enjoy taking a walk with their parents. If children are very young, they can ride along in a baby carrier or stroller, while older children can hold their parents' hands and walk alongside.

Walk regularly around your neighborhood to notice what is new or what has changed. Or visit different parks to walk and try out the swings and other playground equipment. Walking can be fun even on cold or rainy days when you are more likely to feel closed in and in low spirits. Put on coats and boots and go outside. Children love to splash in puddles.

Make walking more fun by adding games for children to participate in, like looking for certain colors, or naming things in nature like rocks, trees, flowers, birds, and animals. Naming and describing what you see will help your children learn new words and build skills to help them learn to read.

For more walking ideas, visit www.iwalksonoma.org.

About First 5 Sonoma County

First 5 Sonoma County funds children's health insurance and programs that improve childcare quality, help children succeed in school, and help parents provide safe and nurturing environments for their children. For more information on *First 5 Sonoma County* and its programs, please call 565-6626 or visit www.first5sonomacounty.org