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COOPERATIVE EXTENSION WORK
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1928

U. of N. Agr. College & U. S. Dept. of Agr. Cooperating
W. H. Brokaw, Director, Lincoln

SIGNS OF HEALTH IN CHILDHOOD

(Taken from booklet "Signs of Health in Childhood" by Hugh Chaplin, M.D.)

What is Optimal Health?

Optimal health for the child is the physical ideal of childhood.

While the ideal represents a far higher standard than that attained by the average, it is nevertheless one that can be reached by parents and children working together, provided they begin early enough to build for it.

The optimal child belongs to a small but increasing group of children who are best able to meet the needs of childhood because their bodies are well built and work efficiently.

We Need to Keep a Picture of the Optimal Child Clearly Before Us

Because there are so many undernourished and "just average" children; we are likely to be satisfied with an "average" standard of health, which means a low one. We need a standard of "optimal" health to show us how far the average falls short of what we might easily attain.

Because comparison of the actual physical condition of a child with a good standard often reveals slight deviations that would otherwise go unnoticed; it impresses the parents early with the importance of good food and health habits and with the need of regular examinations by a physician.

Because such a standard challenges children to make the most of themselves and interests them in habits of right living as a means to this end.

Because the surest way of making each generation an improvement over the last is to have before it a clear picture of the optimal child and to build intelligently toward it.

Outward Manifestations of a Well Built Body

Hair. - Plentiful, with a lustre due to sufficient natural oil.

Eyes. - Bright and clear, moving normally, no squinting nor dark fatigue rings under the eyes; mucous membranes pink and free from inflammation.

Unobstructed Nasal Breathing. - The ability to breathe deeply and easily thru the nose with mouth closed, especially when exercising and sleeping.

Color of Skin and Mucous Membrane. - The color of the skin of white children is generally a ruddy pink. Certain nationalities and families naturally have paler skins even when the blood is normally rich in iron. The black skin of the negro offers no indication of the richness of his blood. Nevertheless, nearly always in health, whatever the race, the color of the mucous membranes of the lips and eyes and also the color of the finger nails is definitely pink.

Quality of Skin. - Slightly moist, clear, soft and smooth.

Subcutaneous Tissue. - Fat beneath the skin plentiful, and so fine that the skin can not be raised in deep, thin folds between the fingers.

Muscles. - Fine and strong. It is more important that there should be a general muscular development than that certain groups of muscles should be exceptionally developed.

Shoulders. - May be sloping or squarely built but should not be rounded forward.

Chest. - Broad and deep, with good expansion. From two to three inches is normal expansion, depending upon the age of the child.

Arms and Legs. - The long bones are straight. The legs are neither bowed outward nor inclined inward so that the knees knock together. The joints are not enlarged out of proportion with the rest of the limbs and are strong, indicating well developed ligaments and overlying muscles.

Ankles. - Inner and outer sides equally prominent; the inner not projecting abnormally as when the arches of the feet are weak.

Feet. - Arches strong and limber. Some are normally higher than others. Inner borders straight from heel to tip of great toe.

Weight. - Suitable to height and age.

Outward Manifestations of a Well Functioning Body

Alert, Happy Expression. - The close relationship between bodily and mental health can not be too strongly emphasized. It is the reflection of good physical health in a child's character which makes the effort to improve his health most worth while.

Tongue. - Moist, red and clean.

Breath. - Sweet.

Good Posture. - (See discussion on page 3)

Prompt, Efficient Muscular Coordination.

Bodily Repose. - Freedom from constant unnecessary activity.

Endurance - Ability to indulge in all ordinary exercise without undue fatigue.

Ages at Which Improvement of Sub-optimal Characteristic May be Effected:

Functional imperfections, except when there is a diseased condition can be improved at any age by proper food and health habits and by correction of defects.

Structural Imperfections. - Many of these can also be improved at any age.

Bony Deformities can often be improved during the child's first two years by good diet, sunshine, cod liver oil, massage and sometimes by braces.

What is Good Posture?

Good posture is one of the most essential manifestations of a well built and well functioning body.

Indications of Good Standing Posture.

Body is balanced equally upon the ball and heel of the foot.

Feet are parallel, great toes pointing forward.

Abdomen is held flat in its lower part. It may be somewhat rounded where it meets the ribs. After the first two to four years it should not extend further forward than the chest.

Normally the spine curves slightly forward at the neck, slightly backward at the shoulder level and again slightly forward at the waist line. None of these normal curves are exaggerated if there is good posture.

Shoulder blades are held flat across the back.

Head is held erect, chin in and shoulders level.

Posture should be judged not merely by a child's standing position when he feels he is being watched, but even more by the way he stands, sits, and walks when not conscious of being observed. We must remember also that when a child is very tired his posture is often temporarily abnormal. It is the habitual, unconscious posture of the rested child which we are discussing.

Good and Poor Bone Growth

Good Bone Growth is Shown by:

A well formed head with sufficient width of jaw to prevent crowding of the teeth.

Well formed and enameled teeth.

A normally shaped chest.

Straight arms and legs.

Absence of enlargement of wrists, knees and ankles.

Poor Bone Growth is Shown by One or More of the Following:

Bow-legs, knock-knees, enlarged ankles and wrists. These deformities are the most noticeable indications of bad bone growth but are among the least serious.

Narrowing or fattening of the chest, which prevents proper lung expansion, narrowing of the jaws, resulting in irregularly placed teeth, which again cause improper closure of the jaws and thus difficulty in chewing; small irregular, pitted teeth with thin enamel; shortening of the front to back diameter of the pelvis in girls, making future childbirth often dangerous, these are the really serious results of poor bone growth.

Good bone Growth May Generally be Assured by Providing:

A proper diet and plenty of sunshine for the expectant mother, and later, for her child.

Pure cod liver oil for the child.

Be sure to build early for strong, straight bones and healthy teeth.

Points in Which Optimal Children may Differ

Children may differ in many details of physical structure and development and still be optimal.

They May Differ Because of the Effect of Age Upon:

Body proportions.- During infancy the front-to-back and side-to-side chest measurements are about equal. After the eighth year the chest is only about three-quarters as deep as it is broad.

From about eleven to fourteen years of age the arms and legs may for a time outgrow the trunk. After this period the trunk lengthens and broadens and restores the normal body proportions.

The long arch of the foot is, during the first year or two of life, normally almost flat. Later on it may continue low or develop into a high or medium arch.

Muscular Development, Muscular Coordination and Posture

A child in optimal physical condition will have well developed muscles which work together like a well trained team. There are, however, two periods in a child's life when we do not expect to find this thoro muscular coordination.

During the first two or three years it is unusual to find powerful muscular development or good coordination. Because young children's muscles are rarely powerful, and perhaps also because of difference of body proportions, their posture differs from that of their older brothers and sisters in that the abdomen during the first few years often normally protrudes in front of the line of the chest.

From eleven to fourteen years of age muscular strength does not always keep up with the growth of the limbs. Also because the arms and legs grow so much more rapidly than the trunk, the normal body proportions are temporarily disturbed, and awkwardness is natural. Advancing manhood and womanhood, on the other hand, are marked by a definite increase in the size and power of the muscles and consequently a return of good muscular coordination.

(Prepared by Florence J. Atwood, State Extension Agent, Foods and Nutrition)