

WORK & FAMILY LIFE

BALANCING JOB AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

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*Practical solutions
for family, workplace
and health issues*

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Three generations are happy (and we hope hungry!) as they share a holiday meal together.

Making your holiday celebrations less about stress and more about fun

Single or married, parents, stepparents, aunts, uncles, grandparents: we all have a vision of what we would like the holiday season to be. Our visions are not the same, because we grew up in different families, at different times and in different places—but, chances are, we share some of the same expectations.

Many of us try to recreate holidays we enjoyed as kids. As the Atlanta family therapist and author Frank Pittman, M.D., observes, we “package our expectations” of family love during the holiday season. “We want the occasions to be perfect and we want all our dreams—of connection, harmony, joy and bliss—to come true.”

Family ties tend to be tightest at this time of year, Dr. Pittman says, but so are family stresses. Holidays give us a chance to reconnect with our past, and they also provide fertile ground for conflict. Deciding whose family to visit or how much travel you can (or care to) manage are potential sore spots. When singles and couples visit their parents, instead of a happy reunion they sometimes get a replay of sibling rivalry or resurfaced grudges.

Here are some suggestions to help you anticipate these issues and add enjoyment to your holidays.

For family get-togethers

► **START WITH A POSITIVE ATTITUDE.** See the holidays as an opportunity to catch up with relatives and old friends. If you haven't spent much time with your siblings lately, you might remind yourself: “We're grown up now. We don't have to compete for anyone's affection.” And don't be surprised if college-age kids want to spend more time with their friends than with you. Just make sure they're home for important meals and holiday activities.

► **TOGETHERNESS HAS ITS PITFALLS.** If someone gets angry or something awkward happens, take it in stride. It happens in every family. Every little criticism isn't worth an argument. Try to avoid falling back into old family roles: you don't have to be the “fixer-upper” or the “kid sister” if you don't want to be. Take parental “advice” with a grain

Continued on page 2...

Making your holiday...

Continued from page 1...

of salt. And be aware that holiday visits are not the best time to repair old wounds or bring up difficult topics such as your uncle's drinking problem or your daughter's new tattoo.

► **BE REALISTIC.** Talk with family and friends about your expectations for the holidays. What's most important to everyone: fancy decorations, gifts, family dinners, visiting friends? Alert grandparents to your holiday plans, and give them a chance to do some of their favorite things too. And go with the flow: if your son falls in love at college and wants to spend time with his girlfriend's family or one set of grandparents decides to go on a cruise, it's OK.

If you try something new

► **GIVE THE PEOPLE INVOLVED** time to get used to any new activities, especially if you have shared the same rituals for years.

► **DON'T SEND MIXED MESSAGES.** If you really do want your adult children to start their own holiday traditions, don't give them an alternative that's so exciting they can't resist.

► **COMBINE THE OLD AND NEW.** Maintain important family rituals even if you are away from home. If you always exchange gifts on Christmas Eve, do that no matter where you are.

For singles who decide to stay put

► **BE ACTIVE.** If you're spending the holidays on your own, make plans. Get together with friends. Eat out, see a movie, go dancing—do what you enjoy.

► **BE CREATIVE.** Have a holiday meal with friends and coworkers. If everyone brings a dish, no one will have to do all of the cooking. Plan it together and develop your own rituals.

► **BE COOL.** If you're in a relationship, keep things on an even keel.

Don't try to achieve a new level of commitment. Many people think of the holidays as a time to change a tentative relationship to something more permanent, but it rarely works out that way.

► **REACH OUT AND BE HELPFUL.** The holidays can be difficult if you're working through a personal problem or you experienced a loss. One of the best ways to lighten your mood is to do something for someone else. Many charitable groups need volunteers at this time of year.

For reconstituted families

Divorced parents naturally want to spend the holidays with their children, but it's not always possi-



Sometimes kids need a little time and space to play quietly alone.

ble. Remarriage, kids scattered all over the country, stepchildren and ex-in-laws have reshaped the way many families celebrate. Whatever the situation, here are some things to keep in mind.

► **HAVE A CLEAR PLAN FOR ROTATING HOLIDAYS:** Mom for Thanksgiving, Dad for Christmas, for example. If you must subdivide time between other relatives, try not to make it too fragmented—and avoid last-minute juggling. Work out any disagreements away from the kids. And have your own back-up plan. So, if older kids want to be with friends or their other parent for part of the day, you won't be alone and they won't feel guilty about not being with you.

► **INVOLVE KIDS IN THE PLANNING.** Children from a divorced or newly reconstituted family often feel a loss of control. Adults seem to be making all of the decisions. Give kids some say in choosing their activities. Just be aware that younger children tend to choose options that seem the most convenient and least upsetting to others. So don't expect them to make these decisions totally by themselves.

► **LET CHILDREN KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT.** When your plans are firm, tell kids who will pick them up and take them to their parent's house, how long they'll stay, where

they will sleep and who else will be there. Make sure younger children know that they can call their other parent or contact a grandparent. Be aware that they may need help in doing this.

► **BE A FACILITATOR.** Encourage visits with the other parent's relatives: grandparents, aunts and uncles—if they want to see the child and the child wants to see them.

► **MAKE KIDS COMFORTABLE WITH NEW STEPSIBLINGS.** Plan time for them in pairs so they can get to know each other in unpressured surroundings. Board games, cards and going to a movie can help break the ice.

► **DON'T FORCE PEPPINESS.** Kids may be slow to adjust to a new family. Give them time and space to be by themselves, if possible. If a child doesn't act "happy" all of the time, don't push it. When a remarriage is recent and families hardly know each other, it's normal for children to sometimes feel a little sad.

► **HONOR OLD RITUALS.** Let everyone choose (and perhaps cook) a favorite dish. But don't be afraid to tweak your family rituals. A treasure hunt, a sing-along or a morning volunteering at a homeless shelter may work so well you'll adopt it as a new tradition. ♦

Try streamlining holiday gift-giving

In these difficult economic times, everyone will understand if you want to simplify the gift exchange. Talk to your family and friends. They too may be concerned about the over-emphasis on expensive gifts. "The best gift I ever got from my husband was his contribution of time to my favorite charity," said Joan. "And I still love the gifts my kids made for me at school."

Lots of families draw names. Some buy gifts only for the children. Others give one gift per household. And most families also put a limit on the cost of a gift. Here are a few other suggestions.

Make time for the whole family to just "hang out." Read books to kids about the holiday you're celebrating. Talk about the history and meaning of the holiday.

Be creative. Take kids to a puppet show, the ballet or a holiday movie. Give Mom breakfast in bed. Make a plan to do something for others who are less fortunate than you, such as working at a soup kitchen or contributing toys or clothes to a charitable organization. ♦

Are two-year-olds too young to become friends?

QA couple near us bring their two-year-old daughter over on weekends and she and my two-year-old seem to enjoy playing together. But they're both strong willed and don't want to share, so things get out of hand sometimes. I'd love some advice on how to help them have a good time together.

—A.J., Durham, NC

AMany people think that kids this age can only play *around* each other, not *with* each other—and that they're too young to make friends. But if two-year-olds are given opportunities to be with other children their age, they seem to prefer the company of one child over another and they enjoy play-

ing together. Here are a few tips to keep things peaceful.

Be aware that friendship takes time to develop. Two-year-olds rarely become instant buddies. But being together regularly over weeks or months will make it more likely for them to become friends.

Sharing favorite toys is hard. Put your child's favorite dolls or trucks away till the other child leaves.

Give both kids the same toy if you can. This helps cut down on the squabbling. Bring your child's favorite truck to your neighbor's, for example, if his friend has one too.

Distraction really does work. If kids are getting cranky, take them

into another room and introduce a different toy or bring on the juice and pretzels.

Give clear directions. Because we want to give kids choices, parents often ask unnecessary questions. Instead of asking "do you want to have a snack now?" just say "we're going into the kitchen for our snack now." Make your requests short and leave as little negotiating room as possible.

Know when it's time to go home. Children this age have a limit to the amount of time they can play together. Just give them some warning: "In a few minutes, Susie's going home, so let's start cleaning up." ♦



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This is your column. We invite you to send questions about work and family life or tell us how you solved a problem that you think a lot of people face. Write: Dr. Susan Ginsberg, Work & Family Life, 305 Madison Avenue, Suite 1143, New York, NY 10165. E-mail: workfam@aol.com.

RESEARCH REVIEW

Time to rethink the best ways to study

The common wisdom about good study habits does not hold up under scrutiny. In fact, cognitive scientists have found that the *opposite* of what we *think we know* about studying seems to work even better.

For example, we're told to settle into a quiet work space. But studies have shown that working in different locations actually improves retention. In one experiment, students who studied a list of vocabulary words in two very different rooms (one cluttered and windowless, the other with a courtyard view) did far better on a test than students who studied the list twice in the same room.

"When the outside context is varied, the information is enriched, and this slows down forgetting," said UCLA psychologist Robert J. Bjork, senior author of the two-room experiment.

Another popular notion to bite the dust is that the best way to master a skill is to focus on it exclusively. But the new evidence suggests that varying the material studied at one time leaves a deeper impression on the brain. In a study reported in *Psychology and Aging*, for example, college students and older adults were better able to distinguish the painting styles of 12 unfa-

miliar artists after viewing mixed collections than after viewing a dozen works from one artist at a time.

The idea that some children are born with a "left-brain" learning style and others "right-brain" is flat wrong too, according to a team of researchers who reported their findings in the journal *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*.

Indeed, in terms of learning style, it's more helpful to think of the brain as a "neural suitcase" that will hold its contents longer if it is packed carefully and gradually. An hour of study today, an hour on the weekend, and another session a week from now—a so-called "spacing" approach—has been found to improve later recall.

Frequent self-testing can also be a powerful learning tool, says psychologist Henry L. Roediger III—because, as he puts it, "the harder it is to remember something, the harder it is to forget." This is known as "desirable difficulty." The more mental sweat it takes to dig something out, the more securely it will be anchored.

This is not to suggest that using a few new techniques (alternating study spaces, mixing content, spacing study sessions and self-testing) will make anyone an A student. Motivation matters too, of course.

Even so, this is good information to have—and it's worth thinking and talking about with the students in your life. ♦

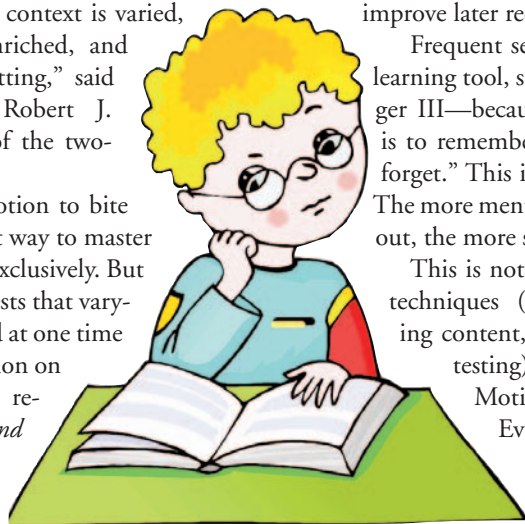
—Adapted from *The New York Times*

Too much TV viewing in toddler care

The Seattle Children's Research Institute has reported the findings of a new study showing that 70% of infants and toddlers in home care and 36% in center-based settings watch TV every day. Home-based children watched an average of 2-3 hours of TV daily and center-based kids 1.5 hours. These findings are consistent with earlier studies on children's screen time.

In 1999, the American Association of Pediatricians issued guidelines calling for limited TV viewing, citing studies that linked infant and toddler TV exposure with obesity and language delay. TV viewing also displaces a key ingredient in children's development—play.

The Seattle researchers concede that TV viewing can be educational, furthering literacy and pro-social behavior. But the positive benefits of interacting with other children and creative play have been repeatedly demonstrated in many studies. For more information, see the journal *Pediatrics*, Vol. 124, No. 6. ♦



Finding a support group that works for you

Family caregivers are pretty amazing individuals, but they still have a limit as to what they can do. And the simple truth is that caregivers too need to be nurtured. They need support for emergencies, relief from daily stresses, and advocates who understand what they're going through and can help them cope.

A caregiver's support system typically includes family members, neighbors and friends as well as medical, legal and social service professionals. Adult children, in-laws and siblings are often part of a "first team" of helpers who can step in as needed. In most cases, these people *want* to be involved.

Asking for help isn't easy

Caregivers often tell themselves: "I'm the only one who can do it" or "Asking for help is admitting I can't do the job on my own." But it's important to have realistic expectations, and caregivers need to balance the ill or older person's needs with their own.

A support group may help

Here's what caregivers say about their participating in a support group: "It gave me an outlet I would not have had otherwise." "I had no one else to talk to about the stress I was under." "I learned how to take care of myself." "I found that it's OK to ask for help and accept it when it's offered."

Groups vary widely in type and quality, but they all provide a place where people with common experiences and problems can give each other emotional support, share information and learn skills. Sometimes, after group members get to know each other, they offer even more tangible help as well.

What to look for in a group

In their book *I'll Take Care of You: A Practical Guide for Family Caregivers*, Drs. Joseph Illardo and

Carole Rothman have identified seven key questions to ask when you're choosing a group:

Is it led by a professional? Having a trained leader doesn't insure a group's success but it improves the odds. Lay people, even experienced caregivers, may not have the skills and insights that make them effective leaders in this relatively new type of support group.



It helps just talking to someone who's going through the same experience.

Has the group leader ever been a caregiver? Although there's no guarantee this will always be the case, a leader with firsthand knowledge of what group members are going through is more likely to be understanding and empathetic.

Has the group been around for some time? Ineffective groups often dissolve because members stop attending and don't recommend it to others while well-run groups constantly attract new members.

Does the group have clear goals? Look for a group with a clear overall focus. Each meeting should have a specific purpose. For example, at some meetings, members may be asked to talk about their own difficulties and be prepared to troubleshoot for each other. At

other times they may focus on feelings. Or sometime guest speakers are invited to make presentations and share information.

Who is it for? Some groups cater to all caregivers. Others are tied to a specific disability or condition. Both types have benefits.

Is the group intended to provide psychotherapy? Look for one that focuses on issues affecting care-

Judging a group's effectiveness

One way to judge a support group's effectiveness is to trust your own feelings. Ask yourself: *Do I enjoy attending sessions? Is the support helpful? Is it empowering? When I share my feelings (even negative ones), are they accepted?*

Another way is to observe what happens in the group: *Does the leader stay in control? Does the discussion wander off track? Is one member allowed to monopolize the time?*

After some time in a group, you should also find that your coping skills have improved. This is the best indication that your investment of time and energy in a support group is paying off.

Online support

Every major illness that afflicts older people especially—from

arthritis to visual impairment—has a national organization that provides online information and support.

A good place to start is at the National Institute on Aging website www.nia.nih.gov. Enter the keywords "support groups online" and you'll find a searchable list of more than 300 organizations that provide help to older people and their caregivers. Click on "view all organizations" to see or print the entire list. To find local aging and community-based organizations, go to www.eldercare.gov.

To answer specific questions, visit ask.com and about.com.

Other helpful sites include: www.cancer.org (American Cancer Society) and www.alz.org (the Alzheimer's Association). ♦

Teaching kids to say a polite 'thank you'

Children can be embarrassingly candid to friends and relatives who've just given them a gift. They say things like, "What is it?" or "I already have two just like this." Or they say nothing at all—but you can read the disappointment on their faces.

Here are some suggestions from parenting expert Nancy Samalin for what to say in a situation like this. A few quick, smart words from you could spare a gift giver's feelings and help teach your child more appropriate responses.

When your child says:

What's this?

If you know the answer, speak up: "Why it's a snow globe. When you turn it over, you'll see it snow. It's fun and pretty." If you don't know the answer, wait for a moment so the gift giver can respond.

Uncle Jim already gave me one!

Your response: "Uncle Jim and Aunt Louise both know what you like." Then you might ask Aunt Louise if she would mind if you exchange the present.

The empty stare.

You might say: "Thank you, Helen, for taking the trouble to find just the perfect book for Jamie. That was thoughtful of you." Then remind Jamie to say "thank you."

"Learning to say thank you is an acquired habit," says Samalin. "Children need a lot of practice before they start saying it without prompting." ♦

Handling a case of the holiday 'gimmies'

I want. I need. Everyone else has one... These are familiar words to most parents—and it's no wonder. In our ad-saturated media culture, it's easy for kids to get a case of the "gimmies." So we need to ask ourselves, especially at holiday time: "What can I do or say to get a handle on my child's over-the-top wish list?"

Since nobody wants a child to be insatiable and demanding, it helps to know that we as parents can do a lot to prevent it from happening.

"Setting limits is what it takes," says the well-known author and parent educator Nancy Samalin. "A combination of understanding and parental authority can help children learn to separate what they need from what they merely want."

Take age into account

Young children pretty much want to have all the exciting, glittery things they see on TV or in stores, whether or not they are appropriate to play with at their age. School-age kids may start asking for more high-tech (and expensive) things because their friends and classmates have them.

This isn't necessarily greedy. It's more a matter of kids trying to fit in. Even so, it becomes worrisome if it seems like the only way a child thinks he or she can gain acceptance is with material objects.

Saying 'no' actually works

"You can't stop kids from wanting what they want but you can say no in a way they will accept," says Samalin. "Explain calmly and honestly why you won't buy a special doll or new computer game. 'You have two very similar dolls' or 'I don't have enough money this year to get you

more games for your computer.'"

But these are trying moments for parents. You're motivated by love, but your child thinks you're being mean.

Instead of giving an immediate "yes" or "no," parents can sometimes ask questions that will get a child thinking, such as: *Who else has that toy? What do you like about it the most? How do you think you would use it? Are you afraid the other kids won't like you if you don't have it? Do your friends who have one use it a lot?*

There are lessons to be learned

Just keep in mind that reasoning rarely makes kids want something less. And if your "no" is final, your child will



It's OK to expect kids to pay for part of the cost of expensive "must have" toys.

be disappointed. But part of growing up is dealing with the fact that you may not get a particular thing that you want. Or that you may have it at some point but only if you contribute to its cost.

Encourage older kids to pay for part or all of the cost of expensive "must have" toys or clothing. Obviously, there are important lessons to

be learned by earning and saving money as well as postponing gratification.

Keeping a wish list

A wish list is useful to keep track of enticing items all year and then to share it with relatives at holiday times. It's a way to show kids the pleasure of dreaming about possibilities, in much the same way adults do when they flip through catalogs or go window-shopping, which is fun for kids too.

Lists can also teach children how to make choices. If they keep a running list of things they want to have, they will see that some things turn out to be fads that have quickly lost their appeal. And when it gets close to a birthday or holiday, kids can learn to prioritize items and decide which ones are most important to them.

More holiday tips

- **EXPLAIN THAT SOME GIFTS** come from Santa (if you still have a "believer") and others come from you—and that kids will not get everything they want or even necessarily their first choice. Some parents find it helpful to say, "You'll get a gift you want and a surprise."

- **SLOW THE PACE.** When you open gifts, try taking turns so everyone can see and enjoy each other's presents and reactions to them.

- **PUT SOME THINGS AWAY** for a month or two. Often, little kids don't even notice when you do this. You might explain to an older child, "I think you'll enjoy Aunt Sally's gift more after you've played with some of the other toys you got today."

- **INVOLVE CHILDREN IN GIFT-GIVING.** Include kids in planning and choosing gifts. Encourage them to create gifts—for their grandparents especially. Have your child write or at least sign a card to enclose with gifts to some family members and friends. ♦

When the whole world is your workplace

By Barbara Pachter

The global economy and 24/7 communications have made the world a much smaller place. Many of us are working with people in other countries. Often, this requires international travel, talks through translators and correspondence with people whose first language isn't English.

No matter where in the world you may be headed or with whom you're doing business, here are some ideas to help keep you on your best international behavior.

For successful travel

Do your homework before you go. Talk to people who have already conducted business in the country. Gain a general sense of its history, geography, major cities, main industries, popular sports, special cultural activities and most famous citizens.

Don't expect to do things your way. The U.S. business culture is typically "task oriented," but in many other countries it's more "relationship oriented." Don't be impatient. It takes time to build trust.

Be respectful of differences. Do not comment or react negatively to local customs you may disagree with or find offensive. Be aware that it's considered rude to brag about your own country or to overly compare it with the country you are visiting.

Slow down. Don't take it for granted that the person who is speaking English to you understands everything you're saying. Speak slower, not louder.

Watch for social cues. Be aware of the nuances of nonverbal communication. For example, many Americans like to look people in the eye when they're speaking, but in some cultures it's more respectful to look away. On the other hand, many Americans like plenty of space between them and another

person when they're talking. If you understand these differences, they'll be less likely to interfere with your ability to listen and understand.

Making polite conversation

Don't be too abrupt. Figure out how much introductory conversation is appropriate in the country you are visiting. In the U.S., most people like to get down to work after a few minutes. In many other countries such as Brazil and Japan, polite conversations can go on for much longer. (The book *Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands* by Terri Morrison and Wayne Conaway offers a guide to doing business in more than 60 countries.)

Avoid controversial subjects. It's OK to show your interest in the politics or religion of another culture, but don't be critical or argumentative. Avoid the highly personal: you can talk about your family but not the details of your love life.

Time travels...with an accent

Different cultures have very different concepts of time. That's why psychologist Robert V. Levine, Ph.D., suggests doing some "time studies" before you travel abroad. It will help you to better understand your coworkers from other cultures. Here are some of the questions Dr. Levine asks:

What are the culture's customs for making and keeping appointments? What social message are you sending when you break the rules?

How much of the work day is spent on tasks and how much is spent talking and being pleasant? Is it OK to schedule a working breakfast or lunch?

Do people schedule their activities by the clock? Or do things happen more or less on "event time?" Is it considered a good thing to always be busy?

What are the culture's rules about sequences of events? Play before work or work before play? And how much waiting time between? ♦



I hope it's not too late to call home.

Dining out

Enjoy the food. One of the pleasures of doing business abroad is the opportunity to sample other cuisines. Eat what is offered when it is offered—and, unless you're allergic, be willing to try new foods. Of course, if you're staying in a big hotel these days, you can probably order whatever cuisine appeals to you.

Be cool. In some countries, you may observe the separation of men and women in restaurants. Or you may sit next to a diner with her dog. Don't comment on unfamiliar customs.

Be aware that table manners differ. Here's where your homework really pays off. Be prepared to eat with chopsticks or your fingers. And if you're in Japan, feel free to slurp your soup.

Don't come empty-handed. It's an honor to be invited to dine at someone's house. Arrive with a small gift—but check the local customs before you show up with flowers. Some have specific meanings. Be careful too about praising a household object. Your host may feel obliged to give it to you.

Stay sober. Brush up on the local customs about drinking. And if you do drink alcohol, be smart about it.

Don't talk business. Unless your host raises the subject, it's best to not initiate a conversation about business over a meal. And unless your spouse has been invited, don't assume that he or she should show up with you at a business meal.

Tips for writing

Avoid confusion. If you don't know the person's gender or name order, use the full name: for example, "Dear Tan Joon Seet." And spell out the month: 4/8/10 can mean April 8 or August 4, 2010, depending on where your letter is headed.

Be clear and concise. Keep your sentences short, your style clear and your vocabulary simple. Avoid jargon, buzz words, sports metaphors and regional expressions. And be aware that sarcasm and jokes do not travel well. ♦

—The author is an expert in business etiquette and communications. Visit www.pachter.com.

Jury's out on pre-workout warm up

In theory, a pre-workout warm-up routine should improve one's performance. So why is there no consensus on the right way to warm up?

Because there's no solid evidence to rely on, says exercise researcher Andrea J. Fradkin of Bloomsburg University in Pennsylvania. Most of the research was done in the 1960s and 70s, and its quality was poor. In fact, the studies were of so little value, she said, we don't even know whether warming up is beneficial, harmful or has no effect on an individual's performance.

New York Times Health columnist Gina Kolata cited Dr. Fradkin's own decade-long study of warming up before playing golf as one exception. The study found that a seven-and-a-half-minute warm-up including cardiovascular exercise, stretching and air swings (swinging a golf club without hitting a ball) can significantly improve a golfer's performance.

But will this routine work in other sports?

Maybe and maybe not. It's hard to compare improving performance in golf with improving performance in swimming or running a marathon.

"Serious athletes place so much emphasis on warming up, yet what they do is based more on trial and error than on science," Dr. Fradkin said. For now, what to do is almost a 'he said, she said' thing."

Or whatever works for you. ♦

Top 5 over-rated and 5 under-rated foods

Some foods get too much attention and others not enough, says the Center for Science in the Public Interest. And for a good reason: the high-profile foods also tend to be highly advertised, while Grandma's old favorites are all but forgotten. Here's the Center's list of the over- and under-rated:

Top 5 under-rated foods

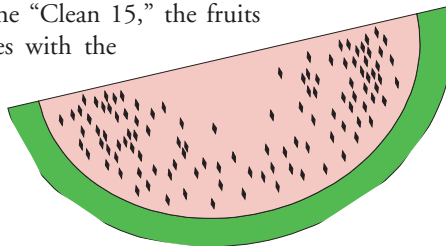


Sunflower seeds. As tasty and nutritious as most nuts and much cheaper. Toss them raw and unsalted on salads or yogurt. For a snack, buy them in the shell to slow down your munching.

Garbanzo beans. They are inexpensive canned and even cheaper if you buy them dried. Also called chickpeas, they will add nutrients to salads, stews, soups and mixed vegetables.

Unsweetened yogurt. Look for the word "plain" on the label. And for a creamier version, try one of the fat-free unsweetened Greek yogurts.

Watermelon. A two-cup serving contains a mere 85 fat-free, salt-free calories and plenty of nutrients. It's also one of the "Clean 15," the fruits and vegetables with the fewest pesticide residues (because of the thick rind).



Leafy greens. Go for the real powerhouses: kale, collards, turnip greens, mustard greens and Swiss chard. They're all good, even pre-cut in a bag.

Top 5 over-rated foods

Granola. It was a good idea in the 60s to bake a mixture of whole oats, nuts, sunflowers seeds, raisins, oil and honey. But now most granolas are high in calories and loaded with sugar.

Smoothies. If you make them at home with low-fat yogurt or milk and fresh or frozen fruit, they're just fine. But commercial smoothies tend to have a ton of added sugar. And it's always better to eat rather than drink your calories.



Vegetable juice.

V8 is basically reconstituted tomato juice with some carrot and small amounts of other vegetables added. And unless you buy the Low Sodium version, you're getting a day's worth of salt in every can.

Energy bars. The word "energy" on a product means "calories," according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. And most energy bars are nuts and oats glued together with sugar.

Pita chips. This combination of white flour, oil, salt and seasoning delivers about 130 calories and 270 milligrams of sodium per ounce (10 chips). ♦

Living healthier with a little help from our friends

Have you heard about "network science?" It's a new field that studies behavioral changes that are spread through social networks. And by "social networks," we don't mean virtual connections such as Facebook or MySpace. The researchers refer instead to real-life relationships with people we actually see every day—our friends, relatives, coworkers and neighbors.

A study of obesity in the U.S. by network scientists Nicholas A. Christakis of Harvard and James H. Fowler of the University of California, San Diego created a stir when it was published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* a couple of years ago.

The gist of it was that obesity was catching: one of the findings was that a person's chance of becoming overweight increased 57% if he or she had a friend who was obese. More recent studies have looked at how social networks might be used to improve public health—in areas of drug use and insomnia among teenagers, for example.

Last winter Drs. Christakis and Fowler studied the spread of H1N1 flu at Harvard and published their findings in the journal *PLoS One*. They reported that the flu developed two weeks earlier in their "friend group" than in their randomly

selected group. "Friend monitoring" could work as an early-detection system for disease, Dr. Fowler suggested.

In the real world, social reinforcement can improve people's health habits. In other words, although weight gain among friends may make us fatter, our social connections can also lead us to go to the gym more often or eat more vegetables.

Drs. Christakis and Fowler explain their work in a new book aptly titled "Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives." ♦

Inside look at tumultuous world of middle schoolers

Text “Whassup?” to middle schoolers and they’ll text back “NMJC” (“not much, just chillin’”). But it’s not true. Nobody just chills in middle school, writes Linda Perlstein in her important book that follows five young people from 6th to 8th grade—the critically formative, early adolescent years that used to be called junior high school.

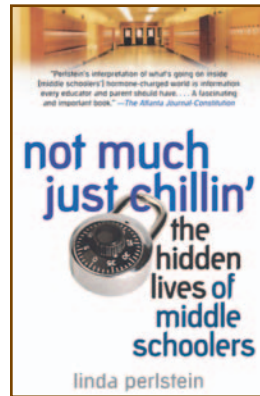
“More than anything, middle school pulls in children and pitches back teenagers,” Perlstein says. “It is a time of change, which means, at this age, many things.”

For Eric, an 8th grader, change means going from eager to please his mother and his teachers to

realizing that there’s not much room in his life for homework.

For Jackie, a 7th grader, it means going from someone who invented a “playground-wide inoculation against boy germs”

to majorly obsessing over her and her friends’ crushes. For Elizabeth, also a 7th grader, it means going from talking to her parents about everything to shrugging off their suggestions and demanding to be left alone.



For Jimmy, who’s starting 6th grade, it’s all about his body and the uncomfortable changes he’s going through. And for Lily, also in 6th grade, change means an urgent need to know at every moment

where she stands with her peers, wearing the right clothes, saying the right things and fitting in.

The five children Perlstein follows are at the same time lovable, contradictory, frustrating and real. And her book can help parents, teachers and friends understand

what’s really going on in this tumultuous, hormone-charged, fast-changing world.

To her credit, Perlstein manages to let her middle schoolers tell their stories in their own voices. She also looks at early adolescent social and psychological development and the new brain research. And she’s not shy about giving parents advice on how to handle peer pressure, burgeoning sexuality, obsessive gaming, bullying, gay bashing, and IM’ing.

Not Much, Just Chillin’: The Hidden Lives of Middle Schoolers (Ballantine paperback \$16) is available in bookstores and online. ♦

Work & Family Life provides information and practical solutions to a wide range of family, job, and health issues. Our purpose is to help our readers reduce their stress and find pleasure and satisfaction in their many roles at work, at home, and in their communities.

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