Watch for signs of stress. Be available to talk to your child about what he is thinking and feeling. Sometimes having someone to share a problem with makes it seem easier to handle.

**KEEPING FIT FAMILY STYLE**

Physical fitness is a habit that we learn. Children learn early to choose between sitting indoors and watching television or going outside to play ball. Parents teach fitness by their example.

Are you overweight? Do you have high blood pressure? Do you eat a balanced diet? Smoke? Do you limit fat, salt, sugar and caffeine? Do you regularly participate in sports or exercises?

Now is a good time to get together as a family and get in shape. It is hard to find time in a busy schedule to exercise, but the rewards are worth the effort. Staying in shape helps you look better and feel better. Regular exercise helps you handle stress. Eating nutritious foods helps keep the heart, digestive tract, and circulation running smoothly. Fewer major health problems and visits to the doctor save time and money.

What activities does your family enjoy? Have you tried hiking, swimming, bicycling, running, aerobics, tennis, racquetball, boating, camping, baseball, soccer, karate, walking, roller skating, gardening...?

**MAKING MEMORIES**

Do you have special traditions in your family — a favorite food for a birthday dinner or special activities for holidays? These special things bring families together. They make precious memories.

Your little one will love to celebrate holidays. Plan special family times that your child can look forward to. Let children have a job to do to get ready. Picking out the holiday decorations or Grandmother’s birthday present is sure to be remembered in years to come.

These family traditions give both children and adults a sense of belonging. They help us know who we are and where we came from. This feeling of security is important to your preschooler.

**AN ENDING ... AND BEGINNING**

This is the last issue of the “1-2-3 Grow!” series. The last three years have passed so quickly! We hope that at least in some small way, “1-2-3 Grow!” has equipped and encouraged you to be the best parent you can be! As you look toward pre-K and kindergarten, we hope you’ll continue to use all the people and agencies available to help your family stay healthy and happy. The Extension Service, your school, your doctor and many others share your hopes.

Best wishes!
Your child's fourth birthday will be here soon. On this birthday, your preschooler will be able to count the candles, not just blow them out. Your child will also be thinking ahead to the excitement of a party and presents. These are big changes compared to last year's 3-year-old.

HOW DOES YOUR PRESCHOOLER GROW?

By the age of 4, many children can dress themselves. It is still easier to pull a zipper down than up. Shirts sometimes end up on backward or inside out. With your child getting better at drawing shapes — circles, squares, lines. Many almost-4s enjoy drawing human figures. Don’t be surprised if the “Mommy” and “Daddy” don’t look quite like you.

Allow your preschooler to draw his way rather than tracing or copying. Stringing large beads is another activity children can do well now.

Preschoolers are getting better at reasoning and figuring things out. For example, show Sarah that she gets four candles in her birthday cake because she will be 4 years old. She will soon be able to figure out that baby brother is only 2, so he gets only two candles. Your child can also understand past, present and future. When you say, “Tomorrow is Saturday. We all stay home on Saturday,” your 4-year-old will understand that today we still go to work and preschool. He can make plans for Saturday: “Tomorrow, when we stay home, I want to paint.”

A 4-year-old will tell you, “I’m not a baby anymore.” He knows that in the past, he was helpless. You had to do many things for him. Now he is bigger and smarter. He will also say, “When I get bigger, I want to drive a truck.” He understands that in the future he will be even bigger.

Most 4-year-olds can also brush their teeth and wash their hands. These self-help skills are important to a child’s independence. They are willing to take turns and share. Many 4-year-olds have a special friend whom they like to play with and talk about. “Can Willy come over and play with my toys? I’m going to let Willy play with my new blocks.”

Your preschooler may resent being told what to do. He may go through a moody stage around this time. Remember, each time a child learns and grows, he has to get used to the “new” him. It also changes the way parents need to deal with him. At each stage, be sure to ask yourself if you as a parent are growing along with your child.

SAFETY

Children still learn by watching adults. This can be a problem when it comes to safety. Your child will watch you use power tools and want to do the same thing. Your child will watch you plug in electric cords, use matches to start a fire and take medicine. Your child will want to imitate you but will not understand the dangers.

A preschooler’s curiosity will lead her to the medicine cabinet to look at the little bottles and colored pills. She will climb on a stool and stand on the kitchen counter to get the matches off a top shelf. This is just being curious, not “bad.” What can a parent do to prevent injuries? Here are some ideas:

- Store dangerous materials in high cabinets, with lock if necessary.
- Explain to your child why he should not touch some things. “These matches are only for me to use. They might hurt you.” “We don’t play with sharp knives. They could cut you.”
- Teach safety rules. “You can help me vacuum, but I will plug it in.” “Only one person can climb on the ladder. First I will go up, then you can have a turn with my help.”
- Show safety rules by being a good example. Put covers back on cleaning products and put them away after each use. Wear your safety belt every time you get in the car.
- Unplug electric cords with fingers on the plug. Don’t yank cord from 2 feet away.
- Check on your child’s activities often. Be sure you know where he is at all times.

HELP YOUR CHILD COPE WITH STRESS

As children get older and face new experiences, they also feel stress. Stress is the feeling that we cannot handle everyday activities and events. Having busy schedules, fears, demanding parents and expectations that are too high can pressure children.

Your children will let you know by their behavior when they are troubled. Bedwetting, unusual crying, nightmares and becoming more demanding are some common signs of stress.

New experiences such as going to a new daycare setting can upset a 3- or 4-year-old. Other typical problems might be a new baby in the family or fights between Mom and Dad.

Teach your child at an early age how to deal with stress. Show your child how to manage time. We must all make decisions about how much we can do in each hour. Help him set realistic goals and to plan ahead. Don’t force him into experiences he is not ready for.

Teach your child how to relax. Recreation and leisure activities are important parts of our lives, not just a luxury. Show your child how to stop and take a deep breath.

One of the best stress relievers, for you and your child, is to spend some happy time together.