Family matters

■ Parenting column by Sasha Brown, family care manager at Community Family Care, Staunton

Don't be glued to your screens

BETWEEN computers, smartphones and tablets, families are racking up more screen time than ever. UK health advice from NICE suggests that children should have 'screen free' days and two-hour limits on time spent in front of screens.

It sounds great, but the reality of implementing this can be a battle many parents struggle to face.

■ **Set a good example**

Children learn from their parents, so if it's normal for them to see you constantly on your phone or tablet then they will want to do the same. Turn off your tech at the same time as you expect your children to do so.

■ **Establish rules**

Have some family rules regarding screen use and implement times when you have 'family time' instead and everyone turns off their tech. Get everyone involved in coming up with the rules/times for breaks so that everyone is on board. Use apps to help program breaks on devices and use consequences such as turning off the internet/power to help enforce breaks. You may also have a 'tech box' where devices get put during a screen-free day.

■ **Equal devices**

Treat devices equally: the average family has nearly two dozen screens under one roof, so they must be treated the same. Don't just swap a tablet for TV time. Try to eliminate background TV so children get used to screen-free time. Removal of a device could also be a consequence for not following the family agreement.

■ **Be interactive**

Plan what your child views, watch programmes or play games with them, and comment on what you're watching. Screen time can be isolating so have a balance of interaction during time on tech, which can also be used as a teaching tool. Tablets and phones can also limit the amount of eye contact that is shared between children and parents, so remember to put down your tech when responding to your child.

■ **Provide alternatives**

Create a weekly schedule based on the idea of one hour of technology use equalling one hour on other activities. Pick up a book with real pages, suggest outdoor activities, get on the floor and play board games. There are lots of alternatives – relive your childhood days.

■ **Community Family Care, based at Staunton, helps families, children and young people in need of additional support. It seeks to improve parents' confidence, help with routines to get children to school, or more complex support dealing with challenging behaviours at home. The work its staff carries out includes peer mentoring and life coaches for young people, and family support programmes. Visit communityfamilycare.co.uk.**

Tablets and phones can limit eye contact shared between children and parents

Fat not fruit?

THE AUTHORS OF A NEW BOOK TALK TO ***LISA SALMON*** *ABOUT WHY THEY BELIEVE IT'S FINE FOR KIDS TO EAT CREAM AND CHEESE, BUT NOT TO EAT A LOT OF FRUIT*

JUST when you'd managed to get the kids eating their five-a-day fruit and veg, and cutting down on saturated fat, a new book is claiming that's not quite the right way to go.

A trio of experts insist that while vegetables are indeed good for kids, fruit should only be eaten in moderation because of its high sugar content, but they can eat as much cream, butter and cheese as they like.

FORBIDDEN FRUIT

CHEF Jonno Proudfoot, who wrote the book Super Food For Superchildren with sport and exercise scientist Professor Tim Noakes and paediatric dietitian Bridget Surtees, says: "If the authorities suggest five fruits and five vegetables are the same thing, I think they've made the rules too simple.

Chef Jonno Proudfoot

"Five fruits is certainly better than five cokes, but five vegetable portions will be infinitely better.

"I think five-a-day could live harmoniously within this realm of eating, provided it was five veggies and an occasional fruit."

And as for the long-demonised saturated fat, the authors insist early studies suggesting 'saturated fat is bad' were "flawed and contradictory", pointing out that the argument saturated fat raises blood cholesterol concentrations which directly cause heart disease is "at best a gross oversimplification and at worst just plain wrong", and that children need fat for healthy growth and development.

GOLDEN RULES

THE book, which features plenty of healthy, low-sugar recipes for children, identifies three 'golden rules' for children's eating, largely based on nutritional advice outlined in the authors' first book, for adults, The Real Meal Revolution.

The rules are simply: no added sugar; no refined carbs; keep it real.

NO ADDED SUGAR

IT'S been known for decades that high sugar consumption causes dental problems and is a cause of obesity, says the book, which points out that sugar offers no nutritional benefit, but is addictive.

The authors say too much over the long-term can lead to health problems including diabetes, and complications linked to obesity including heart disease and strokes.

The World Health Organisation recommends a total of three to eight teaspoons of sugar a day for children, depending on age, but the book advises aiming for the lower end, promising that following the no added sugar rule will make an "unimaginable difference" to a child's long-term health and wellbeing, and stressing: "How bad is sugar? To put it in perspective, think of it as cocaine for your kids."

NO REFINED CARBS

REFINED carbs are carbohydrates that have been broken down during food processing. A good example of a refined carb is flour, which is created when a grain, usually wheat, is finely ground. This removes the fibrous outer layer, which contains most of its vitamins and minerals, and the remaining glucose spikes blood glucose levels, says the book, while providing little or no nutritional value.

The authors point out that if a child eats a bowl of sugar-coated rice-based cereal, for example, the refined carbs in the rice will break down to sugar too, so the child effectively eats a bowl of sugar.

"This is the path to future obesity and ill-health, so steer clear of all refined carbs," they advise.

KEEP IT REAL

REAL, non-processed whole foods are the basis of healthy eating, says the book, pointing out that processed foods are packed with sugars and refined carbs, plus various additives "that really shouldn't be passing through your child's body".

DAUNTING DIET

IF this new way of eating seems daunting, Jonno says introducing it gradually is a lot better than not doing it at all.

"It would be best to dive right in, but there can only be benefits to removing even the smallest amounts of sugar and refined carbs from one's diet," he explains.

And all three authors stress: "This is a wake-up call to today's parents. We're advising a radical shift away from the nutrition orthodoxy that has produced unhealthy children at alarming rates in the last three decades."

■ Super Food For Superchildren: Delicious, Low-sugar Recipes For Healthy, Happy Children is published by Little Brown, priced £20.

Veg is great... but should fruit be eaten in moderation

FOOD TRAFFIC LIGHTS

The book divides foods into Red, Orange and Green lists, which indicate how often they should be eaten by children aged over three who are a healthy weight.

GREEN

Children can eat freely: vegetables (apart from potatoes), eggs, all meats, poultry, game, fish and shellfish, butter, double cream, hard and soft cheeses (for calcium), cream cheese.

ORANGE

Children should only consume in moderation: all whole and dried fruit, potatoes, grains such as rice, quinoa and oats, honey.

RED

Children should avoid: all confectionery, ice-cream, crisps, commercial breakfast cereals, all breads made from grains containing gluten, commercially-breaded or battered food like chicken nuggets, highly-processed sausages and luncheon meats, all soft drinks and fruit juices.

THREE OF THE BEST... GARDEN GAMES

MY VEGETABLE PATCH KIT

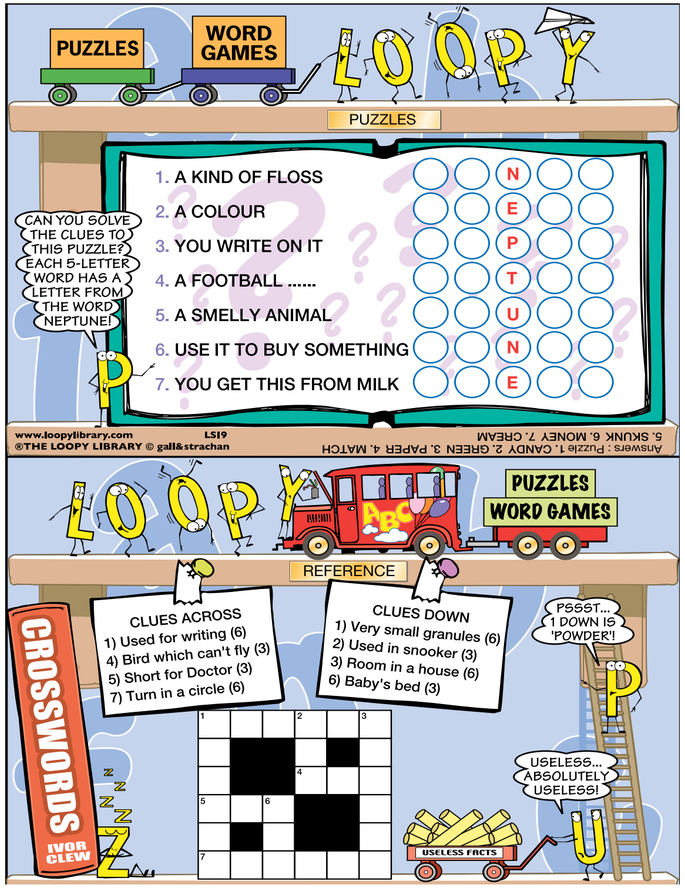
Get your little gardener growing with this kit, which includes three pots, a tray, compost and carrot, radish and lettuce seeds. Suitable from six years. **£16, www.nhmshop.co.uk**

LITTLE TIKES GO GREEN PLAYHOUSE

A playhouse to help teach youngsters about the environment, with eco-friendly features including a solar light, working pump sink, recycling centre, water reservoir and flower garden. Suitable from 2-8 years. **£269.99, www.littletikes.co.uk**

JUMBO HI-TOWER

Kids can stack 58 wooden blocks to build the highest tower they can, to a maximum height of 1.5m, and take turns to remove pieces without making the tower tumble. Suitable from six years. **£29.99, www.amazon.co.uk**



Snotty noses are a running joke my kids never get tired of

IT was while my seven-year-old was flicking through the Guinness Book of World Records this week that something struck me.

He'd read about the largest feet in the world, the most fingers and toes on one person and the longest nose. And I realised that children's fascination with the human body and its multifarious and sometimes yucky functions knows no bounds.

This is a difficult column to write in the knowledge that some of you will be reading it as you sit down to lunch. The last thing I want to do is say anything that might prompt you to regurgitate it.

But if that were to happen, I can guarantee that you'd at least have your child's attention.

You only have to watch one episode of the BBC programme Operation Ouch to realise this.

If you're not familiar with the show, it's like 24 hours in A&E, but designed for kids and therefore nothing sad ever happens.

Plus, its two hosts – handsome twin doctors blatantly there to brighten Mummy's day, if you get my gist – are relentlessly cheerful and matter of fact.

Which is quite an achievement when you consider the subject matter they have to play with.

Some of the subjects covered in my boys' favoured episodes include, 'Is it okay to eat snot?', 'Where does poo come from?', 'How many germs are in a cough?' and 'Snot Apocalypse'.

I don't think this counts as a spoiler for me to say that there's a lot of snot in this series. For the producers of Operation Ouch, snot is clearly the biggest ratings-booster there is. It's like throwing a serial killer into a soap opera – a tried and tested winner every time.

The reason all this works is that, for a child, there is nothing more interesting than those bits of the human body that are both slightly disgusting and quite funny.

I have no idea if my view is skewed because I have three boys. The feminist in me would like to say every child is the same, but I honestly can't claim with any conviction that any little girls I know find this stuff quite so engrossing.

All I do know is that, it doesn't matter what disaster might have befallen one of my kids – best friends moving to Outer Mongolia, catastrophic school reports, or something really serious like the Xbox controller going missing – all anyone needs to do to cheer one of them up is let out a spontaneous burp. And if that doesn't work, fart.

Children – especially boys – are fascinated by the disgusting

Though, clearly, I wouldn't recommend encouraging this in the middle of church or anything . . .

■ **Jane's new novel, Summer Nights at the Moonlight Hotel, is out now.**