

# INSIGHTS

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## Put kids in a good mood without drugs

Modern science has backed up what our grandparents instinctively knew – that exercise, a loving environment and plenty of sleep put a child in a good mood. Find out how you can help kids get in the right frame of mind naturally.....



Children's moods are influenced by many things including how they think and what happens to them during the day. They are also strongly influenced by the chemicals in their brains and bodies.

Australian psychologist Andrew Fuller, author of *Tricky Kids*, says brain chemistry has as much power to shift emotions as happy or sad events.

Fuller maintains that adrenaline and cortisol are two brain chemicals that parents want less of in their kids.

Adrenaline is responsible for the revved up, 'cordial high' and extreme activity that some kids experience. It causes the flight/fight part of the brain to take over.

Fuller also advises parents not to try to change kids' behaviour when they're filled with adrenaline. It's a waste of time until they have calmed down. Give amped up kids some space or the time to calm down before talking with them. Physical activity helps to dissipate adrenaline so make sure sport and exercise are regular parts of your child's day. Family routines and rituals also reduce adrenaline in kids so check out how your family normally functions and make sure life is predictable.

Cortisol is a stress hormone that is released with adrenaline. **It lowers children's verbal ability** so stressed kids often have trouble expressing themselves. Cortisol is often released when kids are fearful, or stressed by teasing or bullying. As much as possible provide a psychologically safe environment at home and support children when they have social difficulties at school.

Less sugar and more water also controls cortisol. Plenty of sleep reduces both adrenaline and cortisol.

### What about 'feel-good' brain chemicals?

Fuller describes dopamine and serotonin as **feel-good** chemicals that are related to pleasure and motivation. Dopamine helps people change moods. It's at its lowest levels during the teenage years which accounts for the 'gangsta rap' stare that some teens permanently display.

Exercise, active games, affection and spending time together are some ways to stimulate dopamine levels in kids. These activities stimulate the brain to release dopamine, which gives kids a feel-good, natural high.

Serotonin is a slow release brain chemical so in some ways it's more powerful than dopamine. Its effects can last all day. A good night's sleep, positive feedback and exercise all help produce healthy levels of serotonin.

My mother didn't realise it all those years ago when she insisted I got plenty of sleep; that I started the day with a healthy breakfast; and that I walked two kilometres to school, she was actually giving me a serotonin high. Her words of encouragement as I walked out the front door didn't hurt either. She didn't know she was altering my brain chemicals by doing what came naturally.

A lot of what we do naturally and instinctively as parents has positive effects on children's moods. Our grandparents probably didn't need to be told that exercise, a loving environment and plenty of sleep put a child in a good mood. And that lack of sleep, a hostile environment and the wrong food can make a child feel stressed or inattentive.

But science has given us some insights into altering moods that our grandparents didn't have. Best of all, we can alter children's moods in simple, common-sense ways without resorting to drugs. That's got to be an advantage.

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