

# Ayurveda for Kids

Harnessing Ancient Wisdom in a Modern World

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Most of us have had the experience of wanting to offer the best foot forward for the children in our lives—whether we have the privilege of raising them or are simply fortunate enough to know and love them. As an art and science of living, Ayurveda has a great deal of wisdom that is just as easily applied to children as adults. We hope that this resource will help you to apply some of the ancient wisdom of Ayurveda to the children in your life—in support of their vibrant health.

We will start with some foundational tools to help you understand the Ayurvedic approach, as it applies to children. We will also highlight a few considerations particularly important in the lives of children. But please know that in no way is this resource meant to replace or supersede the value of a qualified team of health professionals—nor will we attempt to help you diagnose any specific health challenges. We hope you enjoy the exploration and find this content valuable.



# A Preventative Approach

As with many forms of Eastern medicine, Ayurveda is fundamentally a preventative approach to well-being. While we can absolutely look to Ayurveda to help correct imbalances that may be cropping up in our kids, it also has the potential to set our children on a lifelong path toward optimal health and well-being.

Unfortunately, our culture's obsession with speed, efficiency, and ease is eclipsing some of the timeless wisdom that has helped to keep us in tune with the cycles of the seasons, our own circadian rhythms, and eating seasonally-appropriate foods. Ayurveda works with the cycles of life and the rhythms of the natural world in order to foster strength, resilience, and vibrant health. And children are uniquely positioned to benefit from this approach because the natural intelligence within their bodies has not usually been significantly altered by the habits of a disconnected world. Often, even when there are imbalances at play, small shifts will reignite a child's natural capacity to heal and thrive.

## Ayurveda Celebrates Uniqueness

Ayurveda is a unique system of medicine in that it does not profess one-size-fits-all solutions, but rather honors and celebrates each individual. One of the core tenets of Ayurveda is that each of us is born with a distinct constitution—a particular combination of *vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*—that is completely unique to each of us. If the *doshas* are new to you, here is a brief orientation. Vata is the energy of air and ether, movement and impulse, creativity and connection; it governs breathing, the pulsation of the heart, muscle movement in general, nerve impulses, sensory perception, communication, and our capacity to experience flexibility, joy, and expansive consciousness. Pitta is the energy of fire and water, digestion and transformation; it governs appetite, digestion, absorption, assimilation, intelligence, charisma, courage, and ambition. And kapha is the energy of water and earth, structure and cohesiveness, grounding and stability; it governs nourishment, growth, lubrication, regeneration, fluid balance, fat regulation, strength, stamina, memory, and our ability to feel compassion and contentment. Every child's body has all three doshas. We all do. But different individuals have different proportions of each one, and most of us are predominant in one or two of them.

According to Ayurveda, one's constitution (*prakriti*, in Sanskrit) is established at conception, cemented at birth, and it remains constant over the course of a lifetime. It represents each individual's natural state of equilibrium and provides a personal blueprint for optimal health. Our constitutions influence our physiology and physique, our likes and dislikes, our tendencies and habits, as well as our mental and emotional character. Understanding the broad strokes of a child's constitution can provide tremendous insight into how to support his or her strengths, health, and well-being, while simultaneously being able to anticipate and protect against predictable vulnerabilities. The thing is, this process looks a little bit different for every child, depending on his or her make-up. The [Ayurvedic Profile™ quiz](#) offers a guided process for determining your child's constitution and current state of balance. While most children will likely have some characteristics of all three doshas, this next section will help you to determine which traits from each dosha are most prevalent.





## Vata in Children

Vata manifests in children as a lighter, leaner build with an irregular appetite. Vata is present in children who tend to get cold fairly easily or who have a tendency toward dry skin. Vata hair is thin and may be tightly curled, while vata skin tends to be thinner and often leans toward darker tones. Vata also lends itself to quickness in the mind and body, as well as high levels of creativity. As far as challenges go, excess vata is usually behind tendencies toward worry or anxiety, mental and physical restlessness, finicky eating habits, difficulty sleeping deeply or soundly, and can be blamed for any struggles with constipation as well.

## Pitta in Children

Pitta is present in children with a moderate physical build, who have a rather sharp appetite. These children will need to eat regularly because they do not tolerate skipping meals. Pitta will cause children to be averse to hot weather because of their tendency to overheat. Pitta hair is fine and straight, while pitta eyes are piercing and sharp. Pitta is attributed to reddish hues in the hair and skin, and also the presence of freckles and moles. When children have a sharp and capable intellect, articulate speech, and especially innovative minds, you can rest assured that pitta is at work. The challenges associated with excess pitta include tendencies toward diarrhea, inflammation, sensitive or easily irritated skin, and a notable presence of sharp emotions like anger and frustration.



## Kapha in Children

Kapha shows up in children as a solid and sturdy physique, with notable strength and endurance. These children will typically have a rather mild appetite and slower digestion but will likely also genuinely appreciate food and enjoy eating. Kapha skin is thick, oily, and very smooth, while kapha eyes are exceptionally large and captivating. Kapha hair is thick, abundant, and often wavy. The kapha mind is very steady and compassionate, not easily ruffled, and can sustain an impressive level of focus for prolonged periods of time. Kapha sleep is quite sound and may be prolonged as well. As for the challenges of excess kapha, these include sluggish digestion, chronic congestion, lethargy, excessive sleep, depression, and excess weight.

## The Kapha Stage of Life

For children, constitution isn't the only consideration. It's also critical to understand that childhood is, by nature, considered to be the kapha stage of life. This is because kapha is directly related to our physical structure and is the primary support for all *anabolic* (building) processes that occur in the body. Kapha is ruled by the water and earth elements, and it governs things like our fat reserves, fluid balance, hydration, and tissue nourishment—all of which are instrumental in the rapid growth and development that so uniquely characterize childhood. The truth is, without a significant buffer of extra kapha, children would have a very difficult time pulling off the job of growing an adult human body. While this is not our focus here, you can learn more in our resource on [The Three Stages of Life](#).

What's important to understand is that with the extra kapha comes an increased vulnerability to a rather predictable set of challenges. Kapha is heavy, slow, cool, oily, smooth, soft, stable, substantive, and cloudy, which, in excess, can lead to congestion, coughs, runny noses, frequent colds, and excess mucus. It is precisely because childhood is the kapha stage of life that we have come to expect these conditions in childhood more than at any other time of life. Many parents and caretakers are actually quite relieved to learn that children have to get sick in order to build healthy and strong immune systems. But there is no need for them to suffer endless colds, chronic infections, or frequent trips to the doctor.

## Kapha and Mucus

Children are natural experts at making mucus, which serves them well in that it buffers their tissues against being overly dry or irritated as they are growing rapidly, but it can also leave children more susceptible to colds, the flu, other communicable illnesses, and infections of many varieties. Simple measures to support the mucous membranes can do wonders for overachievers in the mucus-making department. Try lubricating the inside of the child's nostrils with a small amount of [Sesame Oil](#) or [Ghee](#) on a daily basis. These substances can simply be applied gently with a pinky finger. Older children may even be open to learning how to do a proper [nasal rinse](#) with a neti pot to help keep the nasal passages clear and healthy. Pacifying kapha throughout the body will also help to balance excess mucus production.





## Balancing Kapha Systemically

Because kapha is systemically elevated in childhood, it can be helpful to have a few tricks up your sleeve to keep the natural increase in kapha from becoming an imbalance. Kapha is pacified by increasing lightness, sharpness, heat, dryness, roughness, fluidity, mobility, subtlety, and clarity. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways, including diet, lifestyle, and the use of herbs and formulas.

### Ayurvedic Diet for Kids

We can keep kapha in check by feeding kids a balanced diet focused on naturally light, heating, dry, and fibrous foods like fresh fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains. Ideally, we want these foods cooked, using generous amounts of warming, digestive spices such as garlic, [ginger](#), [cinnamon](#), and [turmeric](#), and we want to serve them warm or hot. Favor the pungent, bitter, and astringent tastes, and reduce kapha-provoking foods like wheat, dairy, and sugary sweets. If you'd like to know more, please see our resource on how to follow a [Kapha-Pacifying Diet](#), as well as our list of [Kapha-Pacifying Foods](#) (which includes those best avoided).

### Lifestyle

Maintaining a strong level of physical activity is one of the most supportive lifestyle choices that we can encourage children to make because it improves circulation in the blood and the lymph, balances energy levels, supports the proper flow of nutrients, and bolsters detoxification mechanisms throughout the body's organs and tissues. Regular exercise—even in the form of play—can dramatically curb kapha's problematic tendency toward stagnation.



## Herbs and Formulas

You can further support *agni* (the digestive fire) and continue to clear excess kapha from the system by offering children supportive herbs in honey. Experiment with different combinations of things like [cinnamon](#), [ginger](#), [trikatu](#), [turmeric](#), and [sitopaladi](#). Give them a total of ¼ teaspoon of your favorite single- or mixed-herb combo, stirred into a spoonful of raw honey, one to three times per day. This can be particularly beneficial during kapha season (winter and early spring), times of transition, or whenever a child is experiencing an acute kapha imbalance. You can also sprinkle a bit of [trikatu powder](#) (the same formula found in [Kapha Digest tablets](#)) on a child's food like pepper to help to kindle agni and counter excess kapha throughout the system.

## The Importance of Digestion

Ayurveda regards digestion as the very cornerstone of health. Therefore, whether they are dealing with an acute imbalance or not, we want our children to have robust digestive strength; it will help them to foster optimal health and well-being throughout their lives. What children eat absolutely matters. Do your best to provide a diet built around healthy, whole foods rather than processed or sugary ones. Make sure the little ones in your life know the importance of drinking plenty of plain and pure water throughout each day. And teach them to observe their elimination as very direct feedback from their bodies on both their food and fluid intake. Clear and copious urine indicates that they are well-hydrated, which is essential to the proper functioning of their tissues. Regular, soft, well-formed stools that have minimal odor, are easily wiped, (and ideally even float) indicate healthy digestion and bowel function. We can also teach our children how important it is to have a bowel movement daily upon waking, and even invite them to relax on the toilet every morning to encourage this habit.

Further support for the digestive fire in children has a lot to do with aligning their diet and lifestyle habits to be more in sync with the rhythms of the natural world. Do your best to serve them seasonally-appropriate foods, by organizing your meals around foods that are being harvested at any given time of year. Know that children's bodies will naturally tend to crave heavier, denser foods in the fall and winter months, and will appreciate lighter fare with more watery fruits and vegetables in the spring and summer months. You may even notice a natural reset (and a corresponding drop in appetite) occurring in the spring. While young children should not follow rigid cleansing protocols, eating less, simplifying the diet, and detoxing from sugar and processed foods is a fine thing for kids to do in the springtime, when the body is naturally geared toward cleaning house and the energies of the season serve to buffer against depletion.

In order to function at its best, the digestive fire needs to be hot, sharp, dry, light, mobile, subtle, luminous, and clear. In the interest of protecting the natural intelligence of agni, we can also encourage the children in our lives to:

- Drink a glass or two of room temperature or warm water 20–30 minutes ahead of meals, while reducing the intake of fluids during the meals themselves.
- Practice gratitude before receiving a meal and eat mindfully (i.e. not while multitasking, on the go, or engaging with screen time).
- Eat a “ginger pickle” (a nickel-sized slice of fresh ginger, with ¼ teaspoon honey, a squeeze of lime juice, and a pinch of salt) 15–30 minutes before lunch and dinner.



- Enjoy plenty of digestive herbs and spices (garlic, [ginger](#), [cinnamon](#), [cumin](#), [coriander](#), pepper, [trikatu](#)).
- Leave plenty of space between meals for proper digestion without snacking in between (ideally, at least three hours).
- Take a deep breath before transitioning from a meal to the next activity. Invite a connection with the sensations of being full and satisfied.



## The Importance of Routine

As many of you who are already familiar with Ayurveda know, a [daily routine](#) is considered critically important to our overall health and wellness, and a routine may be even more important for children. Routines create safety, stability, and trust for a child's nervous system while supporting their physiology to develop healthy habits.

### Healthy Sleeping Habits

Children need considerably more sleep than adults, and while their sleep habits will change dramatically from infancy through puberty, ensuring that they get enough of it is critical. Develop as much consistency as possible around when children nap during the day (if applicable), go to bed at night, and awaken in the morning. Obviously, their schedule will need to adapt as they grow and their needs change, but there's no question that consistent sleep routines foster health.



## Healthy Eating Routines

Children do best when their bodies can rely on eating at predictable times each day. Ideally, their eating routines should be focused around several substantive meals, served at about the same times each day, and that provide their primary source of nutrition—with minimal snacking in between. Most kids do well with three meals a day, but this may need to be adapted according to each individual's constitutional type and digestive strength. Some kids will need to eat more frequently than that, or at least be supplemented with a snack or two. Do your best to allow at least three hours between each meal or snack. This will allow the digestive fire to fully process each one before more input is introduced. It also helps the body to develop healthy habits in terms of regulating blood sugar and energy levels.

## Healthy Lifestyle Habits

When it comes to lifestyle, it will generally benefit kids to cultivate consistency and predictability wherever possible—especially around mealtimes, playtimes, nap times, bedtimes, and waking times. This doesn't mean that life should be rigidly structured with no room for spontaneity. But it is helpful for kids to have a structural framework within which variety can emerge. A life that's completely unpredictable is rather hard on children's nervous systems, and a lack of routine also makes it much more difficult for kids to stay connected to their natural circadian rhythms and bodily intelligence. To further support wellness, it is highly appropriate to place healthy limits on screen time, to give our children access to the outdoors, and to encourage playful activity. Most kids get loads of exercise without even realizing it when they are given time to play outside.

We also happen to live at a time when there are seemingly limitless activities for children to engage with, explore, or master. The broad array of options, combined with our cultural obsession with staying “productive,” has led to hordes of children whose schedules are absolutely packed from the time they wake up each morning until they fall into bed at night. There is no doubt that structured activities can be highly beneficial on any number of levels, but the truth is that less is often more. Consider this for a moment: play is a critically important language of childhood, a developmental necessity that is often encouraged by boredom. So occasionally, it is important to ask ourselves if our children might benefit from more unstructured time each day. At the very least, we should be intentional in our evaluation of how much our kids are doing (and why). If we're willing to be really honest about how each activity is serving them and to consider streamlining their commitments, we may be making space for our children to reclaim childhood, which is bound to be a good thing.

## Honoring Both Mind and Body

As a holistic tradition, Ayurveda recognizes that there is far more to a child's health and well-being than the proper functioning of their physiology. In fact, children are incredibly energetically and emotionally sensitive. So while they may have a strong baseline of physical health, children will usually benefit from whatever levels of support and mentoring we can provide to help them navigate the complexities of their feelings, sensitivities, and humanness. Here are some practices that can help to support the whole child by fostering health in the mind-body system and by teaching our children how to resource themselves energetically.





## Love

The value of love in a child's life cannot be underestimated. And we don't have to do everything perfectly in order for the children in our lives to know that they are loved. Truthfully, it is often helpful to be honest about the fact that, while we don't have all the answers and will inevitably feel the full range of human emotions regularly ourselves—anger, sadness, confusion, fear, joy, and so on—the foundation of our love for them is unshakable. We can also embrace our own humanness, admit that we are going to make mistakes, and encourage the children in our lives to make mistakes, too. In fact, finding ways to celebrate the risks a child takes, whether or not they “succeed” with the desired outcome, supports their knowing that our love is not conditional. You can also show them how important they are to you with the gift of your full presence.

## Ayurvedic Oil Massage for Children

*Abhyanga*, the ancient practice of massaging the body with oil, calms the nervous system, lubricates and rejuvenates the tissues, and promotes healthy circulation throughout the body. It is no coincidence that the Sanskrit word for oil, *sneha*, also means love. This practice can be incredibly calming and soothing to a child's nervous system and it benefits both the physical body and the more subtle realms of consciousness. The oil itself forms a protective sheath around the body that can help to buffer the nervous system and the mind against whatever happens to occur on a given day. Before a child's bath, massage about ¼ cup warm oil into the child's skin, hair, and scalp ([Organic Sesame Oil](#), [Sunflower Oil](#), [Coconut Oil](#), and [Ghee](#) are traditional favorites). It is best to warm the oil by placing its container in a warm water bath until it is skin temperature or ever-so-slightly warmer. Ideally, the bathroom should be warm as well so that the child doesn't get chilled during the massage.



You can remove excess oil from babies and small children before the bath with a special chickpea and milk pudding “soap.”

### Recipe: Chickpea and Milk Pudding “Soap”

#### Ingredients:

- 1 tablespoon chickpea flour
- ½ cup organic milk

Mix a tiny bit of the milk into the chickpea flour and whisk until smooth. Add the rest of the milk and stir until well mixed. Heat in a small saucepan, stirring constantly, until it just starts to thicken. Remove from heat, transfer to a small bowl or cup, and let cool to body temperature. Rub into the skin and scalp wherever oil was applied and rinse thoroughly with water before or during a bath.

Tip: It often works well to make this “soap” just before you begin the child’s oil massage; it will likely be just about the right temperature by the time you’re ready for it. Nevertheless, please test it so as to avoid burning the child’s skin.

## Yoga and Pranayama for Children

Children can learn very early the value of being present with their bodies and with their breath. A kid-friendly way to teach **Full Yogic Breath** is to have a child pick a favorite stuffed animal and place it on the belly as they lie on their backs. Have them practice making the stuffed animal rise and fall on the wave of their breath as they inhale and exhale. There are many children’s yoga classes available as well, and we ourselves can teach children simple *asanas* at any time. Kids often especially love poses named for (and imitating) animals they are familiar with (cat, cow, puppy pose, downward dog, and lion pose).

## Mindfulness and Meditation for Children

Similarly, very young children can be encouraged to observe their bodies and their minds in age-appropriate ways, as long as this is done in short stints that the children can manage. They can sit and count their breaths, observe a candle as they sit peacefully (in a safely supervised way), close their eyes and invite serenity for a minute or two, or be encouraged to give their full attention to receiving nourishment at a family meal. Children will also learn a great deal from observing the adults in their lives taking time to engage with mindfulness and meditation, so prioritizing these practices yourself will surely have a long-term impact as well.



## Offering More Focused Support

As it is an essential part of childhood to get sick from time to time, it is helpful to have a few ideas on more specific ways to support a child's optimal health. Here are a few easily-accessible suggestions:

- **Chyavanprash.** One traditional Ayurvedic formula that is fabulous for children is **Chyavanprash**, a nutrient-rich jam made of amalaki fruit and other supportive ingredients. Chyavanprash is a strong rejuvenative, which supports the physiology of childhood while bolstering the immune system. Most children like the taste of it and will happily take a spoonful or two every day. You can also stir Chyavanprash into warm milk (or a milk substitute), warm water, or spread it on toast. For children, taking it plain on an empty stomach is often most effective, and you may find it especially helpful in the fall and winter months, during the cold season.
- **Spiced Honey.** Give  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon of single- or mixed-herb combinations (black pepper, **cinnamon**, **cardamom**, **ginger**, **manjistha**, **sitopaladi**, **turmeric**, or **trikatu**), stirred into a spoonful of raw honey, one to three times per day. The honey offers scraping and cleansing capacities while the herbs bolster digestive strength, support agni, and clear excesses in the doshas.
- **Ginger Honey.**<sup>1</sup> Juice or press a large piece of fresh ginger and add a pinch of salt. Measure the juice and add twice as much raw honey. Mix well and keep refrigerated. Give to children one teaspoon at a time to stimulate agni, guard against stagnation, and promote warmth and clarity throughout the system.



- **Throat Soother.** **Throat Soother spray** helps to eliminate excess kapha from the throat while bolstering a healthy immune response. Most kids enjoy the taste and will happily take a spray or two several times each day.
- **Bronchial Support.** **Bronchial Support syrup** rejuvenates and bolsters health in the mucous membranes throughout the respiratory tract.
- Supportive Teas. Warming, clarifying herbal teas such as ginger tea and licorice tea can be served with a teaspoon of honey to support both the respiratory tract and digestive strength.
- **Garlic and Ginger.** These foods are wonderful for stimulating digestive strength, clearing excess kapha, and strengthening the immune system. Cook with generous amount of them whenever a child needs a little extra support.
- **Garlic Ear Drops.** Peel a clove of garlic, smash it with the flat side of a knife. Let sit in a small bowl for 10 minutes. Pour 2 ounces of boiling water over it and let stand another 10 minutes. Strain into a sterilized dropper bottle. Cool and drop into the ear canal as needed to support the immune response and promote clarity and balance there. You can even fill the ear canal and have the child lie still for a couple of minutes before draining. Use within one week and make a fresh batch as needed.
- **Hot Steam and Baths.** Hot steam and water help to liquefy and clear stagnant kapha and can be very useful when children are experiencing an accumulation of kapha anywhere in their respiratory tract.

## Trust Yourself and the Body’s Natural Intelligence

We’ve covered a lot of information here, and before we wrap up, it’s important to circle back to one of the most basic elements of caring for the children in our lives—trust yourself! Kids are incredibly sensitive and intuitive. They will almost certainly feel most held and supported when they sense that we ourselves are at ease with guiding the process. This is not to say that, as a parent or caring adult in a child’s life, you have to have it all figured out. Quite the contrary. Recognizing and honoring our limitations as human beings is incredibly important and serves as fantastic modeling for the children observing us as well. You probably don’t have time to learn everything there is to know about Ayurveda, and that’s ok. What you can do is trust your own inner guidance as to what’s most important for the child(ren) in your life. You can also rest into the natural intelligence within you, within nature, and within each and every child, as a resource. This is not about doing things perfectly. It’s about doing our best and trusting that that is enough. Any tools, however small, you can give the little ones in your life will set them on a better path—for life. Celebrate your generous heart, take whatever baby steps you can, and know that children are naturally resilient. They are lucky to have someone like you in their lives, so approach each step with curiosity and wonder, and enjoy the journey.



## References

<sup>1</sup> Douillard, John, *Perfect Health for Kids* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2004), 81.

