What does it mean for a child to be “well?” This is the question we posed to school counselors Mrs. Jennifer Calvert, Mrs. Megan Thompson, and Mrs. Anne Hoffman. Although these women work with different students—Lower, Middle, and Upper School, respectively—they all agreed that wellness should be thought of in a holistic sense. That means taking care of the whole child—physically, mentally, and emotionally. When these key components are in balance with each other, optimal wellness occurs. Whether your child is in kindergarten or getting ready to graduate, here are some tips from our counselors about staying healthy and being ready to learn in every sense.

**Wellness in Lower School**

**Sleep.** Mrs. Calvert suggests that elementary-aged children get a minimum of ten hours of sleep a night as their bodies grow and develop. “This is critical, not only to their mood, but also their ability to focus on academics,” she said.

**Exercise.** Study after study shows how essential it is for little ones to move, and move often. “Because we understand a young child’s need for exercise for health and focusing, we offer PE daily and recess every day for free play,” said Mrs. Calvert.

**Pursue passions, but don’t overschedule.** It’s wonderful for kids to participate in an art class if they love to draw or play on a soccer team if they dream about being the next Mia Hamm, but be careful as to how much out-of-school time is spent on these pastimes. Too much of a good thing leads to burnout and stress. Mrs. Calvert suggests one or two activities a week is sufficient.
Foster responsibility, even at this young age. There are plenty of ways parents can help grow responsible kids. One is to ask them to help around the house in a developmentally appropriate manner. Mrs. Calvert also urges parents not to rush in and save their child when he leaves his homework or project at home. “I’m a firm believer in logical consequences,” she said.

Encourage kids to live our Cannon core values. “In my opinion, kindness is the most important. If you have a kind child, you have a child who shows respect, passion, teamwork, courage, and integrity,” said Mrs. Calvert.

Wellness in Middle School

Sleep. Sleep is crucial to overall adolescent wellness. A good night’s sleep (9 1/4 hours of sleep is the ideal number for adolescents) can help strengthen learning and memory, give you energy for the day, and help increase mood and mental well-being. Sleep allows the adolescent brain the time and energy to sift through the day’s events and information and store what is necessary into long-term memory. The more you learn, the more you need to sleep.

Nutrition. “Nutritious food will fuel kids’ bodies and minds,” said Mrs. Thompson. “Not eating healthy, well-balanced meals can affect kids’ attention, focus, and mental clarity. It can lead to feeling grouchy and grumpy, which can in turn affect levels of stress, feelings of competence, and can negatively affect communication between peers.”

Help them manage stress. The emotional ups and downs of adolescence can be difficult to navigate. Mrs. Thompson recommends parents help their children understand tools and strategies so they can learn to cope with stress. This includes cutting back on too many extracurricular activities and reinforcing tangible stress reduction techniques such as engaging in a mindfulness exercise (simply breathing deeply in a comfortable position and noticing your thoughts and physical feelings, what you smell, what you hear, what you taste, and what you see). Time management is also important. Parents can help their child plot out assignments, tests, projects, etc. on a large monthly calendar. “Oftentimes when students see how all their work is more spread out than they think, it becomes more manageable. Students can then create a list in which they order the tasks that need to be completed.”

Wellness in Upper School

Begin by listening. From a notification message on your phone to the ping of an e-mail, we live in a society in which we are constantly distracted by technology. But Mrs. Hoffman feels that it is only through the act of active listening that we can truly hear our children’s thoughts and emotions without judgment. Once we’ve truly heard our kids, we can invite them to be part of the discussion of managing their own wellness.

Provide guidance for setting limits. Society has conditioned our children to live in fear—fear of a bad grade, a lost game, or of not living up to expectations. Parents can help their children avoid this by encouraging them to set limits. “As parents, we need to remember that although students this age may look and often behave as adults, they still need adult guidance for setting limits,” said Mrs. Hoffman. “Their job, as they grow towards independence, is to push the limits and boundaries and our job, as adults, is to keep holding them accountable and remind them of the boundaries and expectations.”

Limit technology/electronics. Research shows how electronics interfere with sleep and contribute to anxiety and depression. Mrs. Hoffman suggests limiting technology use and making sure that all technology is switched off long before bedtime.

Sleep. Just like our other two counselors, Mrs. Hoffman cannot emphasize enough the importance of sleep. She cites neuroscientist Dr. Matthew Walker, who calls sleep “the Swiss Army knife of health.” When sleep is deficient, there is sickness and disease. And when sleep is abundant, there is vitality and health.” The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends 8 – 10 hours for teenagers.

All three counselors agree—by taking care of the “whole child” from the beginning, you can avoid unhealthy pitfalls down the road. As Mrs. Hoffman notes, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”