Families first

FALL + WINTER 2026



GOODNESS IN A BOWL

GIFTS TO THINK TWICE ABOUT

JUST PLAY!

WakeMed Children's







A YEAR OF MEMORABLE MOMENTS

From superhero sightings and a special visit from the Stanley Cup to the opening of a new Marbles exhibit, our Fall Carnival and more, this year brought plenty of reasons to come together and celebrate.

Take a look back at some of the people, experiences and memorable moments that made it a year to remember for WakeMed Children's.












TWINKLE

















Gifts to think twice about

Holiday wishlist warnings









Not every trending toy or gadget belongs under the tree. Pediatric surgeon Colin Muncie, MD, highlights potential hazards and shares practical advice to help families stay safe.

Families often find themselves scrambling for the perfect gift in the holiday countdown. But some of the latest and greatest trending items aren't necessarily wise or safe choices to make in haste. In fact, some of them really shouldn't be given to kids. Dr. Muncie, who is also a father of four boys, says it's alarming that some things on the market can be very dangerous if used improperly.

"Raising kids is all about letting them take calculated risks so they can grow appropriately as independent humans, but it's important for adults to understand that there can be serious risks that come along with some new toys, gadgets and devices," said Dr. Muncie. "And if you're going to buy them anyway, talk through the appropriate safety measures, immediately put them into practice and maintain those precautions."

Check Your List

Whether or not they've been extra good and nice, we encourage parents to think twice when gifting kids a new toy or device. Check out this list for some of the more popular items that kids may say they want and learn why you may not want to rush out to buy them.

ATVs, **electric bikes** and **scooters** are particularly dangerous because of their higher speeds, and children are often unable to properly control them. It's also difficult to hear something like an electric bike (e-bike) approaching, which can increase the risk of collisions. Families should take the time to understand the different classes of e-bikes and scooters, review the local laws and understand the real risks.

"If a child falls off an ATV, e-scooter or e-bike, which is going 15 to 25 miles per hour or faster, they can have injuries that include serious cuts, fractures and head injuries," said Dr. Muncie. "Until they are old enough to operate a car, using these really shouldn't even be a consideration, and even then, the higher speed of electric and motorized wheeled devices presents serious risk to all ages. Traffic laws need to be followed carefully, and protective gear should be worn for every single ride."



Button Batteries: A Hidden Danger

Toys marketed for toddlers and pets and other household gadgets are often powered by button batteries, which can be deadly if swallowed. The battery is dangerous because it can get lodged in the esophagus causing direct injury in such a tight space. Make sure any battery-powered device has screws to secure the batteries, and don't give young children access to items with button batteries. Get rid of any loose button batteries right away; store any extras completely out of reach in a child-proof container.

Family Safety Resources

aap.org
consumerreports.org
cpsc.gov
healthychildren.org
poisoncontrol.org
safekids.org

Helmets make great gifts, and the whole family should wear them when riding bikes of any type – the hassle is worth it to protect your brains, and they make some really cool helmets these days.

See tips on buying and properly fitting a helmet in the following pages.

Gel balls and **water beads**; **gel guns/blasters** are more dangerous than they appear. "If ingested, the beads and balls swell and can cause intestinal blockages requiring major surgery," said Dr. Muncie. Some beads also contain chemicals and neurotoxins, which can cause damage to the brain and nervous system. Additionally, law enforcement agencies have warned that some of the gel guns and blasters resemble real firearms, and children are using them in dangerous ways that are causing bodily harm to others.

Magnets such as the popular and powerful rare-earth magnets are extremely dangerous and can be deadly for children if swallowed. "When two or more magnets are swallowed, their attractive force can pull them together and cause a bowel injury such as a perforation or ulceration that requires major surgery," said Muncie. Initially a child may not show any symptoms so a parent may not realize they've swallowed the magnets, and the most likely symptoms are abdominal pain or flu-like nausea and vomiting.

"The key thing to note is you really should avoid having loose magnets in your home; if a toy with a magnet inside breaks you should throw it away immediately," said Muncie. "We've even seen older kids get into trouble with these because they don't recognize the danger of ingesting a magnet."

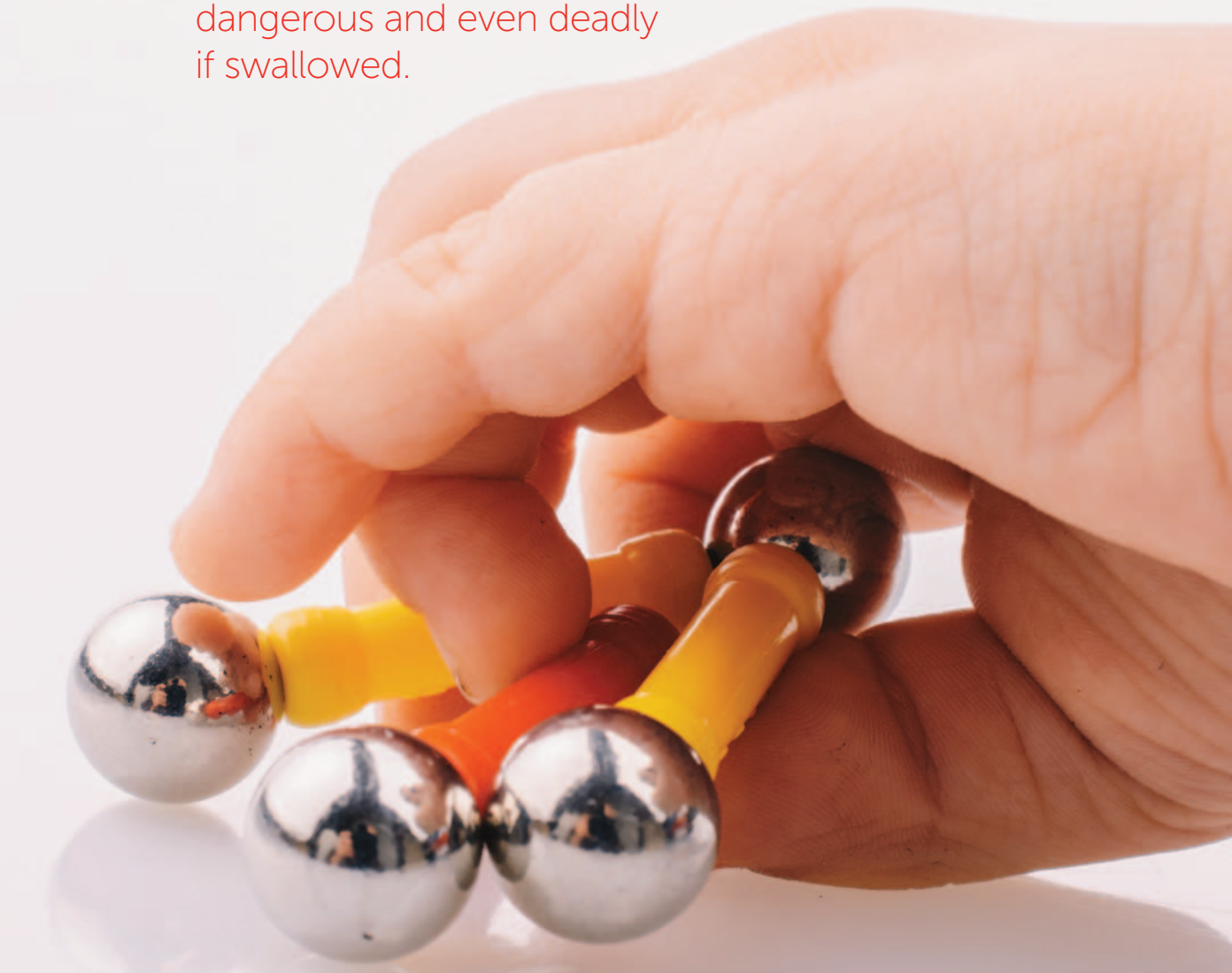
Digital devices open the door to kids being exposed to content that is not age-appropriate; they can also connect them to potential predators. The use of gaming systems, laptops, tablets, phones and even televisions should be monitored and discussed as a family regularly so the boundaries are clear, and concerns can be addressed. Quality of content, social interactions and sleep habits are big things for parents to be tuned into on a regular basis once kids have their own digital devices.

"Some video games that appeal to kids also have chat rooms that adults hang out in, which enables strangers to communicate with and exploit children," said Dr. Muncie. "Many families assume that just because a game is popular it must have good child protection measures in place, but unfortunately nothing could be further from the truth."

The American Academy of Pediatrics has recently updated its recommendations for screen use, and they provide resources online for healthy digital habits, media literacy and creating a family media plan. Visit aap.org to learn more.

Squishy toys and/or **sensory gel toys** made of plastic or silicone often have unknown substances inside that are unsafe, including chemicals and gel balls or beads that can be very dangerous if ingested. Reports have also been made of contact skin burns, severe irritations and strong chemical odors leading to headaches, nausea, irritated eyes, or a sore throat. Remnants of the broken or degraded squishy toys can also be a choking hazard.

Magnets can be extremely dangerous and even deadly if swallowed.



Completely preventable injuries can severely alter or end a child's life.

MAKE HELMETS PART OF EVERY RIDE

Wheeled devices should never be used without a helmet. "As a pediatric surgeon, I can't stress this enough: parents should also always wear a helmet while riding bikes, scooters and other motorized devices to protect themselves and model this important step for brain injury prevention."

Choose the Right Helmet

Safe Kids Worldwide provides the following tips for selecting and fitting helmets.

- Make sure the helmet fits properly and meets U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) standards.
- Let your child help choose a helmet they like – they'll be more likely to wear it.
- Use a CPSC-certified skateboarding helmet for skateboarding and longboarding. A properly fitted bike helmet can be used for biking, scootering and skating.

Bike Helmet Fit Test

- EYES check: Position the helmet on your head. Look up and you should see the bottom rim of the helmet. The rim should be one to two finger-widths above the eyebrows.
- EARS check: Make sure the straps of the helmet form a "V" under your ears when buckled. The strap should be snug but comfortable.
- MOUTH check: Open your mouth as wide as you can. Do you feel the helmet hug your head? If not, tighten those straps and make sure the buckle is flat against your skin.

Learn about other times kids should wear helmets, including skiing, snowboarding, sledding and horseback riding! **healthychildren.org**



When to Buy a New Helmet

Many manufacturers and safety organizations recommend replacing every 3 to 5* years. You should also replace a helmet if or when:

- It is involved in a crash
- An existing helmet no longer properly fits
- Straps are frayed or worn out
- Buckles are loose, rusted or aren't working correctly
- You notice physical wear, including a cracked or dented shell
- It looks faded or feels brittle
- There is visible separation between the foam and shell
- The helmet seems to have loosened over time

* Keep in mind that UV exposure, storage outside or in a hot car, and daily use take a toll on helmets and may increase the need for frequent inspections and replacement.

Most helmets have a manufacture date printed on a label or stamped inside the shell. If it is missing or you can't read it to confirm its age and that it meets CPSC standards, it's best to get a new helmet.

Learn more about bike safety and helmets at healthychildren.org and cpsc.gov.



MEET THE EXPERT

Colin Muncie, MD, WakeMed Pediatric Surgery

Dr. Colin Muncie is a board-certified pediatric surgeon with clinical interests in chest wall surgery, neonatal surgery and pediatric robotic surgery. Dr. Muncie earned his undergraduate degree at Ole Miss and stayed in Mississippi for medical school and general surgery residency. Prior to joining the WakeMed Children's team, Dr. Muncie completed his subspecialty training in pediatric surgery in Jackson at Children's of Mississippi, the only children's hospital in the state.

Dr. Muncie strives to provide hands-on, personalized care that is evidence-based while always putting the patient first. Outside of the office, Dr. Muncie can be found spending time with his wife and four boys, enjoying the outdoors, and golfing.

Watch: Pediatric Minimally Invasive Surgery

Scan the QR code to watch and listen to a WakeMed Fast5 video about pediatric minimally invasive surgery. Dr. Muncie explains the advantages of robotic surgery, what procedures it's typically used for, and how it can make recovery easier for children.

Read: A Mother's Search for Answers



Joel's mother expressed concerns for years about his chest indentation. She said it looked like someone had punched him in the chest. By the time Joel was 11, he began to complain of issues with breathing and foot swelling. Eventually, through his mother's persistence, he was referred to the WakeMed Chest Wall Deformity Center, where the family met Dr. Muncie. Scan the QR code to read this compelling story of a mother's search for answers.



MAKE EVERY DAY A PLAY DAY!

When parents are reminded of the importance of play, they may feel pressured to constantly create extra fun opportunities and unique outings for their children, but unstructured free play is invaluable. So don't feel guilty when life gets busy or it's cold and dark by the time you get home. There are plenty of ways to mix play into your family's day.

"Play doesn't have to happen in a special place, and kids definitely don't need their playtime to be overly planned or organized," said Meghan Sanger, supervisor of Child Life Services at WakeMed Children's. "When it comes to play, kids truly just need the freedom to move, explore, imagine and create."

Sanger says playtime should be a high priority when deciding how kids spend their days, but making sure kids get a healthy dose of play is all about mindset. "The trick is to intentionally dial down the seriousness and stress and give kids time to just be kids," said Sanger. "When they are truly in their mental play zone, it's a joyful thing to watch."

Playful Parenting

Sanger says kids definitely do want their parents to be playful and involved in the fun sometimes; other times they just want to know they're nearby and watching. So, jump in and have fun with them when it makes sense but let them be the star of their own show and follow along to see where their imaginations go.



Being a playful parent can also come in handy to help keep things from getting overly stressful or intense. It's an approach that tends to benefit adults and children, and it can build stronger connections.

When parents use a playful approach to guide their children through life, it can help create a positive environment where children learn and try new things through play.

Playful parenting can also be a way to create fun during what might seem like routine day-to-day tasks. Sanger explains that it also allows parents to see what type of play a child responds to and incorporate that into their day. "Songs, rhythm and silliness can help get kids to participate in things like cleaning up, putting on their shoes, brushing their teeth, and all sorts of routine and new things that otherwise may seem extra challenging."



Kids model parent behaviors. So let them see you being playful and creative. And remember that when kids see parents spending lots of time looking at screens, they want to do the same thing.

Let Them Play in Different Ways

Open-ended play is the best, according to Sanger, who is quick to point out the way most little kids' eyes light up at the sight of a new box that they have permission to play with – the opportunities are endless! If it's safe, let kids do what they want to with basic things around the house. "Simple things like used-up, empty toilet paper rolls have more uses than you ever imagined," said Sanger. "You'll be amazed and likely amused with the creativity that bubbles up during free play."

Sanger says that it's good for kids to be bored sometimes – that's the time when they finally have the opportunity to use their imagination and problem-solving skills. "It's OK to delay watching TV or playing video games and to let them just wander around looking for something to do," said Sanger. "You can give them a few suggestions or direct them toward a place that invites play, but you don't have to figure it all out for them – some of the best creativity arises when kids are not being entertained by anyone or anything."

For rainy days that may seem to drag on, Sanger suggests brainstorming a bunch of fun activities as a family that you can put in a bucket and pull out when you're ready for something new to do. Think of things you can do without running out to buy supplies. Sanger suggests a few of her favorites like painting rocks or letting kids pick out things from around the house to use to mold and create patterns in playdough.

"If kids are stuck inside for a long time during bad weather, they'll need to move their bodies around and use up some energy," said Sanger. "Scavenger hunts and obstacle courses that use stuff from around the house can be a blast for kids to create and navigate." Another fun idea is to build a BINGO card that is like a scavenger hunt for things around the house.

Remember, you can spend a lot of energy and money on activities for kids, but opportunities for play really don't need to be complicated. "The best thing parents can do is let the kids lead the play – abandon structured activities, especially when they aren't fun anymore, and go with the flow," said Sanger. "It's helpful to have some planned activities, but it's important for adults to recognize when it's time to step back and just let them play!" So, if a game of Scrabble with the kids suddenly turns into stacking tiles as high as possible, don't get frustrated – just enjoy their creative play in the moment.













A healthy dose of nature play is a great way to help kids explore the world around them. Getting outside doesn't always have to be an all-day adventure. Sanger says something as simple as 30 minutes at a park or even a short walk outside between rainstorms can invite some great imaginative play and perhaps even some fun puddle-jumping. Pick up rocks, sticks or acorns along the way. Who knows what you may discover together!

LET NATURE BE YOUR PLAYGROUND

Add a simple twist of fun to your time outside together with these playful ideas!

- Look for a specific color of flowers or search for shapes in nature.
- Wrap tape around your child's wrist so they can attach small leaves and flowers to make a bracelet.
- Bring a magnifying glass and get a closer look at bugs, dirt, moss and anything of interest.
- Look for animal tracks in the dirt, draw what they look like in a notepad and try to identify them.
- Pack binoculars and look for birds in the trees – birding is also a great listening activity.
- Collect leaves to press in books or to make crayon leaf rubbings on paper.
- Go on a sound safari. Listen for birds, rustling leaves, buzzing bugs or other sounds.
- Build a small fairy home. Use sticks, leaves, moss and pebbles to create a little hideaway for an imaginary creature.
- Play "I Spy" with a twist. Look for something rough, smooth, prickly, soft, tiny or taller than you.



THE SCOOP ON

soups

As we start to feel a chill in the air, a nice warm bowl of soup can be a great option for a healthy meal.

Ever wonder why soup is frequently at the top of the list of comfort foods? Why do people suggest soup when someone feels sick? And is soup actually healthy?

Olivia Watson, WakeMed dietitian, shares some helpful insight and says there are a lot of things that make soup a great choice when you are feeling run down or sick. But before you reach for your favorite soup, check out some of Watson's tips to make that next bowl of comfort extra healthy.

Soup can be comforting for many reasons. "Traditional soups that families have enjoyed over the years are familiar and predictable, which is what we need sometimes when we feel physically or mentally exhausted," said Watson. "Soups are also hydrating and can be very satiating, so they often fulfill a craving for something our bodies likely need."

Hot soups also naturally invite slower eating and simply holding a bowl or mug of soup can create a warm, cozy feeling. "When we slow down and are more mindful of what we are consuming, it can reduce stress and support healthy digestion," said Watson. "In today's world, many people are so busy that they need to eat on the go and don't have the time to savor flavors. So, it's naturally going to feel special when you slow down and settle in with a tasty bowl of soup."

When kids or adults have a sore throat, the warmth of soup and other warm liquids such as tea can be soothing or at least isn't likely to be irritating like some solid foods may be. Broths and soups are typically easier to digest so they can be a great choice when tummy troubles arise.

"Keep it simple, though, when a child is sick – stick to bland foods that are easy on the gastrointestinal tract," said Watson. "Steer away from creamy, high-fat and spicy soups when recovering from a stomach infection." While soup can be a good choice when a child is sick, Watson wants families to know that it is really important to contact your pediatrician or family physician and seek medical advice and care when a child or adult hasn't been able to eat much, has been vomiting, or has been dealing with diarrhea.

Many ingredients in homemade soups provide nutritional benefits. For example, herbs and spices such as turmeric have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. Watson recommends adding colorful ingredients and says that veggies provide good fiber and a variety of vitamins. Using frozen veggies in soup is a quick and easy way to pack in nutrients.



Suggestions for Soup Selection

- A truly low sodium soup has 140 mg of sodium or less per serving. Watch out for confusing labels that mention 'light' or 'reduced' sodium.
- Try to find options with no salt added. You can always add flavor at home if desired with a blend of salt-free spices.
- Creamy soups will likely have more fat.
- Select soups with a variety of vegetables and beans and/or a lean meat.
- Look at the labels and try to find soups higher in fiber and protein.
- Check the number of servings so you can accurately calculate sodium, fat, fiber and protein.
- If you have specific health concerns, speak with your doctor or a dietitian about your recommended daily intake needs and choose accordingly.

Not All Soups Are Super

A lot of the soups available in grocery stores are not so healthy, according to Watson. She explains that many store-bought soups are very high in sodium and fat. And you are usually paying a lot for a little. "If you can make a batch of soup at home, it will likely be more cost-effective and healthier," said Watson. But sometimes you just need something quick and easy, so she recommends checking the nutritional information and selecting the lowest sodium options. Check out the tips at left.

Basics for a Batch of Soup

When you're feeding a hungry family with busy schedules, a big batch of homemade soup can go a long way in keeping everyone fueled. "It doesn't need to be complicated to be nutritious," said Watson. "You don't really need an expensive broth from the store – a low-sodium broth or even just water is a good start." Watson says making a healthy, delicious soup is all about a balanced mix of ingredients. Check out her basic steps for soup below.

- Pick & prepare your protein (beans, chicken, ground turkey, lean beef, seafood or tofu).
- Pour in water or a low-sodium broth.
- Stir in fresh chopped or dried/powdered onion and/or garlic.
- Add some colorful veggies (fresh or frozen).
- Mix in rice or quinoa at the end, or serve it on the side.

KIDS IN THE KITCHEN

Making homemade soup doesn't have to be complicated or time consuming. Have fun with the whole family and let kids pick out ingredients for soups that you make together. Make some small batches and taste-test them to find out what everyone likes. "Usually when kids are involved in making food, they are more likely to eat it or at least try it," said Watson. "Let them pick a theme like taco soup and get creative!"



FLAVORS TO SAVOR

While Watson doesn't recommend spicy soups when navigating tummy troubles, she does encourage families to get creative with herbs and spices when making soup. "It's fun to experiment with different flavors, and you can greatly reduce the need for a lot of salt in soups when you mix in herbs such as cilantro, oregano, rosemary or thyme," said Watson. "Spices don't have to be spicy – try cinnamon, cumin, paprika, or blends like Italian seasoning or garam masala."

Tips & Tricks

- Try ingredients that you may not typically think about for soup. Mix in a few of these for a unique twist in a more traditional soup: tofu, miso, mushrooms, white pepper, fennel, lemongrass, bok choy, egg, lemon or lime.
- Whisk in an egg with cornstarch and lemon right at the end for a thicker chicken soup.
- Add a splash of cream or milk for a richer flavor in a pureed soup.
- Experiment with adding nut milks for a dairy-free option.

Balance your sodium intake by pairing a bowl or cup of soup with a side of veggies or a salad instead of salty crackers.

Time Savers



- Make soup ahead of time and freeze extra servings.
- Chop up extra veggies and freeze them to quickly add to a soup in the future.
- Use a slow cooker so you can set it up and get other things done.
- Cook extra beans, lentils or grains to use in soups throughout the week.
- Use low-sodium canned beans and vegetables to save time without sacrificing nutrition.
- Wash and chop vegetables when you get home from the grocery store.
- Double a recipe and freeze half for another meal.



A STRONGER START FOR YOUNG HEARTS

SportFit Heart offers free cardiac screenings to help identify potential heart conditions in middle and high school athletes before they become serious.

WakeMed Children's Pediatric Cardiology is proud to offer SportFit Heart screening events throughout the year as part of our commitment to keeping young athletes healthy and helping prevent catastrophic events. Designed for athletes in middle and high school, SportFit Heart provides no-cost heart screenings to help identify potential cardiac concerns before they become serious.

Familiesfirst

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During the event, participants receive a complimentary electrocardiogram (EKG), which is reviewed onsite by one of our pediatric cardiologists. Insurance is not required, and participants do not need to be patients of WakeMed to take part.

If an EKG reveals a potential concern, our team can perform an echocardiogram onsite at no additional cost and provide immediate results. This allows families to get answers right away and often eliminates the stress of waiting for a follow-up appointment.

"It is a powerful, efficient and painless tool to catch potentially life-threatening conditions impacting the hearts of young athletes."

Jason Ho, MD, pediatric cardiologist

While most participants receive normal results, some screenings identify findings that warrant additional evaluation. In those cases, participants are given priority access to our pediatric cardiology team for further assessment, treatment recommendations, or referral to additional specialists as needed.

Since the program began, WakeMed Children's has screened more than 1,000 children across Wake County. SportFit Heart events rotate among WakeMed Children's – Pediatric Cardiology locations in Raleigh, Clayton, Fuquay-Varina, Apex and Wake Forest, making these important screenings accessible to families throughout the region.

Stay informed about upcoming SportFit Heart events. Scan the QR code and complete the form to receive event updates.

Advisory Panel for Families First

Jerry Bernstein, MD, Raleigh Pediatric Associates, Retired

Karen Chilton, MD, Senior Vice President, Chief Quality & Medical Staff Officer; Chief Medical Officer – WakeMed Children's

Elizabeth Cleland-Roberts, MD, Medical Director, WakeMed Pediatric Primary Care

Bridget Donell, MD, Interim Executive Medical Director, WakeMed Pediatric Inpatient Medicine

Amy Griffin, MD, Assistant Medical Director, WakeMed Children's Emergency Department

Andy Jakubowicz, MD, Wake Emergency Physicians

Damilola Joseph, MD, Medical Director, WakeMed Children's Emergency Department

Jeff Langdon, Executive Director, WakeMed Women's & Children's

Bill Lagarde, MD, Executive Medical Director, PreciselyYou

Debra Laughery, retired

J. Duncan Phillips, MD, Surgeon-in-Chief/ Director, WakeMed Children's Pediatric Surgery

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Help bring comfort and joy to patients at WakeMed Children's Hospital by donating new toys, books or funds throughout the year. There are several ways to give. Visit **wakemed.org/toydrive** for details and our Amazon Wish List.

TOY DRIVE – Saturday, December 12

Bring new toys and books from the Wish List to any of these WakeMed locations:

- Children's Hospital: 10 am–2 pm
- North Hospital: 10 am–noon
- Cary Hospital: 10 am–noon





Text to Donate

Make a financial gift to the WakeMed Foundation to support initiatives that enhance care and services for patients and families. 100% of your donation goes directly to fund these initiatives.

Scan the QR code to give online or text **WMHolidayDrive** to 71777.