

Why movement is critical for your child's mind and body

Toddlers may seem like a naturally energetic bunch who don't need any extra encouragement to get up and move, but health professionals say that many youngsters don't get as much exercise as they should.

In fact, today's little ones often spend chunks of their days strapped into car seats and strollers or watching "The Wiggles" on the 24-hour cartoon channel rather than doing the wiggling themselves. Even meals, in some instances, are purchased from fast food chains and consumed in the car as parents race between errands and the next item on their lengthy "to-do" lists.

Considering all that, it's no wonder our nation's obesity epidemic is affecting younger and younger children. According to the American Heart Association, more than 10 percent of U.S. children ages 2-5 were overweight in 2002, up from 7 percent in 1994. Additionally, toddlers and preschoolers are showing early signs of such health problems as diabetes, heart disease, elevated blood pressure, and high cholesterol—all of which were once unheard of in young children.

Researchers say the rapid rise of obesity and other health problems in young children is due to decreased physical activity and increased sedentary activities such as watching television.

The benefits of movement

Children need to be fit for the same reasons adults do: To maintain or improve their health and ensure that their bodies can do what they need them to do. Regular exercise helps kids grow, build strong muscles and bones, and develop important motor skills to progress through the stages of early childhood movement (creeping to crawling to standing, standing to walking and eventually running). Regular exercise can also enhance feelings of self-worth and confidence.

"It's important for little ones to be physically active from the beginning, especially since confining babies to strollers, play pens, and car and infant seats for hours at a time may delay development such as rolling over, crawling, walking, and even cognitive development," says one pediatrician.

Encouraging active play—whether or not it works up a sweat—shows children that physical movement helps them feel good, and can be lots of fun. When little ones use their muscles and acquire new skills—by learning how to turn a two-legged hop into a skip, for example—they discover that they feel stronger and more confident, and are more likely to be excited to try even more physical challenges.

Physical movement also prepares children for preschool activities (group games and sports) by exercising the large muscle groups they need for running, jumping, hopping, and climbing, to name a few. The stretching and strengthening of muscles in early childhood leads to other refined or fine-motor skills, such as grasping and pinching, which are needed to hold a crayon, use a computer mouse, or cut with scissors.

Children need both gross and fine motor abilities to hold themselves upright, make eye contact and sit for lengths of time when learning such skills as reading and writing once they are in school.

Time to get moving

The National Association for Sport and Physical Education recommends that all young children be involved in a variety of age-appropriate physical activities beginning at birth to develop motor skills and encourage a healthy, active lifestyle.

Infants should be encouraged to explore their environment, although there is no specific recommended amount of physical activity infants should have. Here are a few ways this can be accomplished.

- Tummy time is recommended to help strengthen babies' neck, shoulder and torso muscles which they will need to roll over, sit up, and crawl. Put your baby on his stomach on top of a blanket on the floor, then place toys just outside of his reach to encourage stretching and wiggling movements. Start with 5-10 minutes of tummy time until your child is more comfortable and then gradually increase the time. (Stroller and car seat time should be limited to no more than 60 minutes a day, except when sleeping.)
- Placing your infant on her back is a great way for her to see so much of what is happening around her. Lie on a blanket on the floor together and encourage your child to reach for toys or objects you dangle over her body. This exercise can also be done with your baby in her crib.

Toddlers should get at least 30 minutes of physical activity daily, but more is encouraged. This can be as simple as loading up a toy backhoe with dirt and dumping its contents somewhere else or riding a tricycle or other kid-powered riding toy. Here are a few ways to excite your little one to move and groove.

- Put kid-friendly music on your CD player and dance together. Make up your own dance moves, then try to string three different moves together for a performance. A likeable children's musical performance group that gets little kids shaking their limbs is The Laurie Berkner Band. Try the "We Are the Laurie Berkner Band" DVD or "Rocketship Run" CD.
- Play Follow the Leader. This is a good indoor and outdoor game. Mix it up a bit by marching, crawling, skipping, twisting and turning. For added measure, count aloud how many jumps or hops you perform in a row.

Preschoolers should have at least 60 minutes of structured physical activity daily and several hours of unstructured movement. This might include such activities as ball games that involve rolling or catching, swimming, gymnastics, dance, or simply following friends on an obstacle course around the backyard or park. Here are a few fun games to help get your preschooler moving—even in the winter months.

- Playing a game of hopscotch gets your kids moving and helps with number recognition. Plus, your child will have fun using chalk to help you draw the hopscotch squares.
- Make an obstacle course in your yard. You can incorporate lots of different moves, such as skipping or somersaulting from one challenge to the next. Keep the course length short until your child is comfortable adding more challenges. For example, have your child run from the

start to area one where she has to do three jumping jacks, then skip to area two where she has to make a snow angel, then roll to area three where she has to make a snowball that she rolls in the snow back to the start. (Feel free to use that big snowball to make a snowman or snowpet.)

Book List

Do you need some more ideas in your reserve to help get your children moving? Here are a few books to make it easier for you to find fun and active games to play.

- *The Wiggle & Giggle Busy Book: 365 Fun, Physical Activities for Your Toddler and Preschooler* by Trish Knuffer. The Wiggle & Giggle Busy Book offers daily suggestions for physical activities as an alternative to watching TV and playing videogames. With activities divided into chapters on outdoor, indoor, water, rhythm/music and holiday activities plus an introductory chapter describing stages of development in children, this helpful, easy-to-use book will keep kids happily occupied for hours.
- *Wonderplay* by Fretta Reitzes is a parent's guide to active child's play. With more than 200 activities—games, craft projects, cooking, music, dancing, and more—this wonderful book offers many ways to have fun with children and encourage them to learn and grow.
- *The Outside Play and Learning Book: Activities for Young Children* by Karen Miller. Bring learning activities outdoors with this vital resource filled with hundreds of engaging activities and games that span the curriculum from movement to art to math.