

# Physical Activity in the Classroom

## Why Promote Physical Activity?

One of the primary reasons for promoting physical activity in the preschool setting is that regular physical activity, combined with a balanced diet, can help prevent overweight among kids.

As discussed in Module One, childhood overweight is on the rise in the United States. Much of the focus around childhood overweight is on the foods kids eat. Some individuals think that kids today are heavier because they eat more junk food than in past years. While that may be true, fast food and soda are not the only reason kids are gaining weight. A study done in 2003 showed that kids are only eating 1 percent more calories than they did 20 years ago, but they are 13 percent more inactive. Therefore, while we need to improve the foods kids eat, we can't forget that they also need to move!

Module One gives background information on childhood overweight. The material in this module will focus on how to promote physical activity in the Head Start classroom.

## What is Physical Activity?

Physical activity is any bodily movement, produced by muscles, that burns energy. So...any kind of moving counts as physical activity!

Physical activity doesn't just mean jogging or push-ups.... in reality, many things that kids consider "having fun," such as swimming, playing tag, or riding a bike count as physical activity.

Moderate intensity physical activities are those that get your heart beating fast. Things like walking, bike riding, or mowing the lawn are examples of moderate physical activity. Vigorous physical activities are things that really make you sweat. Running, aerobics, or shoveling snow might fall into this category.

## Physical Activity Recommendations

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that all children participate in at least 60 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity most days of the week to maintain good health.<sup>2</sup>

However, if your child is overweight or at-risk for overweight, increasing physical activity alone may not produce significant weight loss. Increased activity along with improved nutrition over a period of months will be necessary for noticeable changes in body fat.

All children need both planned activity and free play. The National Association of Sports and Physical Education (NASPE) recommends that preschool children should get at least one hour of structured AND unstructured physical activity each day. While one hour of physical activity may help overall health, two or more hours are needed to develop the motor and social skills that children need to enjoy a lifetime of physical activity.

In addition to being physically active, children should not remain inactive for more than an hour at a time. The only time kids should be not moving for more than an hour straight is when they are sleeping!

It is important that children develop skills in the basic movement forms like running, skipping, hopping, and throwing early on so that they can use those skills as a stepping stone for more complex skills.

Safety should be the highest priority in areas where kids are active. Make sure any play area where kids are playing is free from sharp objects or other dangerous situations. Take a look around playgrounds before students go out for play time to make sure the equipment is working and there are no unsafe items on the playground.



Studies have shown that children enrolled in child care settings with educated staff who value physical activity get more daily physical activity. Your encouragement and role-modeling, along with positive feedback when students accomplish a new physical feat will go a long way in helping our young children develop a love of movement!



Structured activity involves making a specific time to be active, and planning certain kinds of things to do during that time. Teaching children how to move in all kinds of ways will help them enjoy physical activity. To make sure your students are exposed to all kinds of movement you may want to plan specific physical activities to help them.

Young children should learn to jump, hop, skip, kick and throw. Schedule two or three 10-15 minute physical activity breaks each day to help students practice these activities. Structured physical activity is typically adult-driven. The child's activity is directed and encouraged by a supervisory adult.

While structured physical activity is valuable, it is important for children to have time to play. Free play helps develop a child's imagination, creativity, body awareness and sense of space and dimension. Children learn about the world by moving around in it and exploring its wonder! Find safe places outdoors where children play. If the weather is bad, provide soft objects like balls and bean bags for children to play with indoors.



Examples of unstructured physical activity include a game of tag, climbing in a tree fort, pushing a friend on the swing, playing hide-and-go-seek, bike riding through the neighborhood, or kicking a soccer ball around the yard.

- Unstructured physical activity is typically child-driven. The child directs his/her own activity and play.
- Unstructured activity is usually sporadic, characterized by a lot of start/stop activity.



A team effort will be needed to help children meet physical activity recommendations. Head Starts should not be expected to provide all the physical activity kids need. Parents should be encouraged to be active with their children and to enroll them in activity-based teams and events in the community. Local governments provide information to parents on how to be active through parks and recreation programs.

The fact remains, though, that children spend a large part of their day in the school setting. All schools should strive to provide an "activity-friendly" environment where physical activity is modeled and encouraged while inactivity is minimized.

"With the exception of the home, school is probably the only other place with the structure, influence, resources and access to make a significant and sustained difference in terms of fostering a healthy weight."<sup>3</sup>

## Head Start Physical Activity Requirements



Federal and state guidelines are already in place to guide Head Start classrooms toward physical activity. Federal Head Start Performance Standards contain requirements around the promotion of physical development among students. In addition to federal requirements, the state of Alaska is one of only two states to require physical activity time in child care settings.

Child care centers receiving federal funds are required to provide time and space (both indoor and outdoor) as well as equipment and adult guidance for active play and movement that supports the development of both gross and fine motor skills of all students including those with special needs. Head Start Performance Standard 1304.21(a)(5)(i) states that, "in center-based settings, grantee and delegate agencies must promote each child's physical development by providing sufficient time, indoor and outdoor space, equipment, materials, and adult guidance for active play and movement that support the development of gross motor skills." Performance Standard 1304.21(a)(5)(ii) makes similar provisions for the development of fine motor skills, and Performance Standard 1304.21(a)(5)(iii) requires that physical activity opportunities be accessible to all children, including those with special needs.





Alaska and Massachusetts are the only two states to mandate physical activity in child care settings. Alaska is the only state to specify the number of active minutes required during the preschool day. Alaska Statute AAC62.420 requires “a minimum of 20 minutes of vigorous physical activity for every three hours the facility is open between the hours of 7 a.m. and 7 p.m.”



### Head Start Child Outcomes Framework

The Head Start Child Outcomes Framework is intended to guide Head Start programs in their ongoing assessment of the progress and accomplishments of children and in their efforts to analyze and use data on child outcomes in program self-assessment and continuous improvement.

The Framework is composed of eight general Domains, 27 Domain Elements and 100 examples of more specific Indicators of children’s skills, abilities, knowledge and behaviors. The Domains, Elements and Indicators are presented as a framework of building blocks that are important for school success. The Framework should guide agencies in selecting, developing, or adapting an instrument or set of tools for ongoing assessment of children’s progress.

The Physical Health and Development Domain contains goals for student achievement in both fine and gross motor skills. Head Start students are expected to develop fine motor skills like dexterity and control needed to use tools such as a scissors, paper punch, stapler and hammer. Students should also increase hand-eye coordination in building with blocks, putting together puzzles and stringing beads.

Head Start students should show increasing levels of proficiency, control, and balance in walking, climbing, running, jumping, hopping, skipping, marching and galloping. In addition, they should demonstrate increasing ability to throw, catch, kick, bounce balls, and use the slide and swings.



The Head Start Framework also calls for progression in physical growth, strength, stamina and flexibility. Students should participate actively in games, outdoor play and other forms of exercise that enhance physical fitness.

### How to Promote Physical Activity in Head Start



Activity-friendly schools incorporate physical activity wherever possible. Students should be able to be active during traditional times like recess, but also during instructional time. Activity-friendly preschools look to integrate movement into academic instruction. Since kids learn better when they are moving, teaching reading and math concepts through movement not only improves learning but also helps students get more movement time.

Activity-friendly preschools incorporate fun physical activity breaks and active field trips into the curriculum. They also have staff that understand and value the importance of physical activity and act as active role models.



The classroom environment has an impact on student activity levels.

Every classroom should have a designated activity area that is free from objects like chairs, shelves, and tables. Having this open space will allow students to participate in both structured and unstructured physical activities.

One way to promote physical activity in the classroom is to provide equipment and other manipulative objects that children can use to play or invent active games. Toys like foam balls, hula hoop, and bean bags invite play and imaginative movement!



Children don’t have to be sitting quietly in desks to learn. Quite to the contrary, kids learn better when they are up and moving. Take advantage of the enhanced brain function during physical activity and harness children’s love of moving by incorporating academic concepts into fun physical activities!

Teaching through movement as opposed to fighting an uphill battle of getting kids to sit still not only saves you time and stress, but helps make moving the norm, not the exception.

### Sample Activities

An example of how to integrate academic concepts into a fun physical activity is called “Alphabet, Vegetable, and Chicken Noodle Parachute Soup.” It’s a fun way to teach kids about letters of the alphabet, healthy foods and cooking principles. See handout.



## Sample Activities

Remember, children should not be inactive for more than an hour at a time unless they are sleeping. To make sure students are getting enough movement throughout the day, schedule in a few short activity breaks of about 5-10 minutes in duration.

Move students to your designated activity area and give them a chance to practice the “skill of the week.”



One activity break is called “Jump the River.” The purpose of this activity is to give children the opportunity to practice the skills of jumping and landing while emphasizing swinging the arms when jumping, and landing in a balanced position without falling. All you need is something for kids to jump over (jump rope, hoop, tape lines on the floor). Provide at least one object to jump over per child. Before beginning the activity scatter the jump ropes or hoops throughout the space so they lie flat on the floor.

Explain to the children that they are taking a walk in the woods and may need to cross a stream or river. Ask children to walk throughout the space and when they come to a river (rope, hoop, or tape line on floor) they need to jump over the river without getting their feet wet. Children should work independently of their classmates during this activity.

To assist children in learning the fundamentals of jumping, teachers should initially ask children to take off on two feet and to swing their arms forward when they jump. When landing, children should land on two feet spreading their feet about shoulder width apart so they have a wide base of support when they land. After landing children should proceed to and jump over the next river. Emphasis should be placed on landing on both feet at the same time without falling

over. Give children plenty of time to move throughout the space and jump over all the rivers. For safety reasons, suggest that children not get closer than two giant steps from each other, especially when they are swinging their arms to take off and when landing.

After three to five minutes of jumping, children may need a brief rest period (30 to 60 seconds) before they continue the activity.

MIX IT UP

JUMP ON IN



**MORE WAYS TO HELP KIDS LEARN TO MOVE**  
[www.pecentral.org/lessonideas/pe.lessonplans.html](http://www.pecentral.org/lessonideas/pe.lessonplans.html)  
[gameskidsplay.net](http://gameskidsplay.net)

Vary the activity by asking children to see how high they can jump and how far they can jump when traveling over the river. Emphasize landing on balance without falling over. More experienced children may like the challenge of clapping their hands as they fly through the air, or turning in the air before they land. Whatever the variation, teachers and children should not lose sight of the main objective of landing in a balanced position.

The National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE, 1995) has developed benchmarks in this area suggesting that by the time a child completes kindergarten he/she should be able to jump and land while being under control. This suggests that children this age should be able to jump in different directions both on the ground and off of low obstacles, and to stay on balance and not fall when landing. Participating in activities such as “Jump the River” will provide children with opportunities for skill practice. Teachers can use this time to observe children’s jumping and landing skills and record their progression toward reaching benchmarks in this area.

Teachers may also want to integrate this idea with a book they read to children about rivers or ways people travel.



Activity doesn't always have to be on a playground! Kids learn about the world by moving through it and experiencing new places, people, and things. For a little variety during "recess" time, consider planning an educational field trip to a nearby park, harbor, field, or salmon stream. Talk about the kinds of plants, trees and animals you see. Talk with people working in the community and have them show the kids what they do!

Local trails and beaches are a great place to get physical activity and learn at the same time. Find different shaped rocks, colored plants and animals. Talk about outdoor safety and dressing appropriately for the weather. Whatever you decide to do, it will be a learning opportunity and will get kids up and moving.

We all know that Alaska winters can be very cold, but don't let that stop your activity! Kids love to be outside when there is snow on the ground, and often don't even notice the chill in the air. As long as kids are dressed properly, provide and encourage cold weather activity.



Use snowy winter days to do physical activities like sledding, skiing, skating and snowman building. All of these activities are fun and are good energy burners. Kids will be doing healthy physical activity without even knowing it! Read the book "Recess at 20 Below" to your students to help them get excited about cold weather outdoor activities.

When the weather is just too cold or wet and you are forced indoors, find creative ways to keep kids moving. One way to do that is to adapt typical outdoor sports so they can be played indoors. For instance, you could play a game of "Socker" using a rolled-up sock as a ball and walls as goals!



Other fun indoor activities include having a treasure hunt, obstacle course, sit-up/push-up contests, or pretend "ice skating" with sock feet on a linoleum floor. Another fun idea is to play music and create a new dance!

## MOVERS AND SHAKERS

More experienced children may want the challenge of taking off from one foot and landing on two feet, or jumping off of one foot and landing on one foot. The focus should still be the same—swing arms when jumping and land without falling.

## INCLUDING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES



## Get Outside

Every Head Start classroom should have access to a safe place for children to play outdoors. Ideally, this play area will have a variety of equipment like slides, climbing structures, swings, etc. If you don't have immediate access to a playground, consider using the playground of a nearby school or park. If those options are not available, consider forming a volunteer parent/community group to design and build a simple play area near your classroom.

*Children with special needs who are not movement restricted should have little difficulty participating in this activity. Children who have movement restrictions can still participate but may need assistance. For example, teachers may need to hold the child's hand to help his or her land on his or her feet without falling. Children in wheelchairs or those who have severe movement restrictions will require a modified activity.*

*Do not feel limited to only jumping over hoops or jump ropes. This can be a great classroom integration activity and can have many variations. For example, ask children to draw or paint their own rivers on large sheets of paper. Make sure they draw fish, trees and other objects in and alongside their river. Tape children's drawings to the floor and pretend that the class is going on a trip. When children reach the different rivers scattered throughout the room they must swing their arms and jump over the river, landing on the other side without falling over.*

If you don't have enough space to do group activities consider using community physical activity facilities. Some schools have covered play areas you may be able to use.



## Keep Moving!



As a teacher, remember that it is very important for kids to move as much as possible. Because children have a natural love of moving, your only job is to make sure that they stay safe and have fun doing it! Make sure that your students have time to play freely each day, but plan time during the day for structured physical activity as well.

Finding places to be active in Alaska is as easy as looking out the window. Take advantage of local trails, beaches and mountains to keep your students active and healthy. When the weather is so bad that it's not safe to be outdoors, think about using community facilities or just be creative in the classroom. Either way, try to give your students positive experiences with physical activity so that they will continue to be active and enjoy a long, healthy life.

### MODULE THREE REFERENCES

- 1 Sutherland, et.al. Presentation to Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology. April, 2003.
- 2 DHHS, USDA (United States Department of Agriculture). Dietary Guidelines for Americans. 2005.
- 3 National Association of State Boards of Education. The State Education Standard. December, 2004.