



Active Play and Movement for Young Children

Developmentally appropriate curriculum provides for all areas of a child's development: linguistic, aesthetic, cognitive, emotional, social and physical. Regular physical activity and good nutrition work together for better health. However, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, many children in the United States do not engage in enough physical activity. In fact, we know that activity drops off significantly as children approach their teen years and that prevalence of overweight children is at an all time-high (1).

Children begin to acquire and establish patterns of activity at a young age; thus even preschoolers should be encouraged to engage in regular physical activity. According to the Dietary Guidelines, children two and older should aim to accumulate 60 minutes of moderate physical activity daily. This can be accomplished in increments over the entire day.

Preschoolers are growing, developing and learning to use their bodies. Physical activity should be planned that is appropriate to their stage of development. The following are activity suggestions for caregivers for 2- to 5-year-olds from the National Network for Child Care (2).

Two-year-olds

- ✓ Let toddlers help you with simple chores such as picking up toys or putting clothes in the laundry basket.
- ✓ Provide safe outlets for physical activity and space exploration like small steps, boxes, barrels, tires, pulling and pushing toys, ride-on and ride-in toys.
- ✓ Provide opportunities for learning about cause and effect by giving toddlers many opportunities to fill, dump, collect, gather, give, hide, and seek.
- ✓ Play "parade" or "follow the leader".
- ✓ Encourage verbal skills by giving simple directions like "Close the door, please" or "Would you pick up that doll".
- ✓ Encourage a toddler's love for imitation by teaching finger plays and songs. Play "you are a mirror". Stand facing the children and have them copy everything you do. Reverse roles and let the child lead while you mirror the actions.
- ✓ Encourage sand, mud, clay, and water play. Toddlers enjoy messy play and learn a great deal from mixing, sifting, pouring, stirring, and shaping.

Three-year-olds

- ✓ Play ball—show children how to throw, catch, and kick balls of different sizes.
- ✓ Show children how to hop like a rabbit, tiptoe like a bird, waddle like a duck, slither like a snake, and run like a deer.
- ✓ Encourage a variety of body movements and dance to music of many kinds. Play musical games such as "London Bridge," "Ring-around-the-Rosie," and "Farmer in the Dell".
- ✓ Ask for help with simple household tasks such as putting the napkins by each plate, putting socks in the drawer, watering plants, or stirring the muffin batter.

Four-year-olds

- ✓ Encourage physical development. Play follow the leader. Pretend to walk like various animals.
- ✓ Set up an obstacle course indoors with challenges such as crawling, climbing, leaping, balancing, and running across stepping-stones.
- ✓ Encourage walking with a beanbag on the head.
- ✓ Encourage 4-year-olds to help you plan and plant a garden. They will love to water plants daily and will enjoy measuring plant growth.

Five-year-olds

- ✓ Encourage body coordination and sense of balance by playing "Follow the Leader" with skipping, galloping, and hopping. Skip or jump rope to music, teach folk dances and games, provide a balance beam, a tree for climbing, and a knotted rope suspended from a sturdy frame.
- ✓ Teach sack-walking and "twist-em," "statue," or "freeze" games to provide an outlet for their drive for physical activity.
- ✓ Teach games that can teach right and left directions like "Hokey-Pokey," "Looby-Loo," and "Simon Says".
- ✓ Give opportunities to express dramatic and creative interest. Teach children how to move their bodies to dramatize the opening of a flower, falling snow, leaves, or rain; wiggly worms and snakes; and laundry blowing in the wind.

More opportunities for movement

Music and Movement—build a collection of music or videos that invite movement. Choose silly songs like "Shake My Sillies Out" by Raffi or classics like "Row, Row, Row Your Boat". Children love rhythm and movement and there is no shortage of music for young children that invites active play. Check out the music selection at your local library or music store.

Nature Walks—make regular walks a part of your activity plan. Turn on the fun by playing a game of follow-the-leader or "Who can spot this?". Children love spotting items that are different colors, shapes or sizes.

More than Fingerplays—Teach children rhymes that invite more than fingerplay. For instance, children can pretend they're popcorn popping or act out "Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed" with their whole bodies.

Books They Can't Sit Still For—Search for picture books that encourage activity. For instance, Toddler Aerobics: Animal Fun by Zita Newcome encourages children to waddle like a penguin, scuttle like a crab, stomp like elephants and more. See "Children's Literature with Dietary Guidelines Messages" in this tool kit for more books that make kids want to move.

1. *Guidelines for School and Community Programs to Promote Lifelong Physical Activity Among Young People* MMWR 1997;46:RR-6.
2. Reprinted with permission from National Network for Child Care. Oesterreich, L. (1995). *Ages & stage series*. In L. Oesterreich, B. Holt, & S. Karas, Iowa family child care handbook Ames, IA: Iowa State University Extension.