Encouraging Physical Activity in Preschoolers



Steve Sanders, EdD

Encouraging Physical Activity in Preschoolers

Moving Matters Series

Steve Sanders, EdD



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Contents

1.	The Importance of Physical Activity	
	for Preschoolers	1
	Promoting a Healthy Lifestyle	6
	Risks: Overweight and Obese Children	
	Understanding Motor Development	
	Developmentally Appropriate Practice	
	Physically Active with Special Needs	21
	Importance of Physical Play	24
2.	Nutritional Awareness	29
	Striving for Energy Balance	
	Healthy Weight and BMI	
	Hydration: Fuel for Activities	
	Kicking the Soda Habit	
3.	Best Strategies for Learning Physical Skills	39
	Stand Back and Watch	
	Adult-Initiated Activities	43
	Providing Appropriate Tasks	44
	Refining the Skill	45
	Promoting Continual Practice	50
	Modeling Physical Skills	51
	Providing Feedback	53
	Further Encouragement	55

4.	Physical Activity Environment	58	
	Preschool Environment	59	
	Preschool Playgroups	60	
	Taking It Outside	62	
	Moving to the Music	64	
	Skill-Development Equipment	65	
	Tidy Equipment Storage	76	
	Safety Guidelines	77	
5.	Activities for Learning the		
	Essential Physical Skills	83	
	Understanding Movement Concepts	85	
	Traveling Skills	87	
	Balance Skills	98	
	Jumping and Landing	116	
	Kicking	125	
	Throwing	132	
	Catching	142	
	Striking with Body Parts	151	
	Striking with Implements	158	
	Youth Sports	169	
6.	Moving Forward	174	
References and Resources			
Index			

The Importance of Physical Activity for Preschoolers

CHAPTER

1

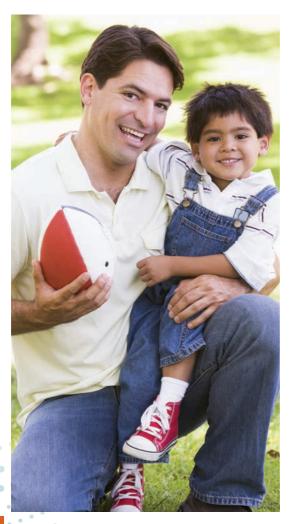
Whether you are a teacher, a home-based caregiver, or a parent, by helping preschool children discover their capabilities and reach their potential through physical activity, you are serving as their guide on a remarkable journey. Over the next several years, the preschool children in



your care will develop and refine a variety of motor skills that they will use throughout life to be physically active and remain healthy. You may be wondering what qualifies as physical activity. Many health and fitness organizations categorize it as any body movement that results in energy expenditure above resting. Therefore, any movement a child does other than sitting or lying down can be considered physical activity. However, we will focus on activity levels that improve health and physical development. Along with caregivers, parents serve as an important resource in helping preschool children develop their physical skills. Your role is to play with the

children, provide appropriate activity equipment, and help guide them to learn about their physical potential.

You might be thinking, "I am not very physically skilled. Will I be able to teach a child how to jump, balance, throw, catch, or kick a ball?" The answer is that you do not have to be skilled to help children develop a foundation of physical skills; all you have to do is participate in the adventure. The activities in this book are simple and straightforward and do not require you to be a professional athlete or a trained physical-education teacher. You can help children develop motor skills! This is going to be fun and exciting for you and the children in your care.



If you want children to reach their potential to be physically active throughout life, the preschool years are a crucial time. This is the time when basic physical or motor skills are developed. Just like learning to write, read, or understand numbers, learning motor skills is essential to learning about the world. As children grow, having a foundation of physical skills will enable them to participate in all kinds of fun activities. The basic motor skills discussed in this book include those related to traveling (moving

from one place to another), balancing, jumping, throwing, catching, kicking, striking with body parts, striking with rackets, and striking with long-handled implements.

Adults participate in physical activity and maintain fitness and health through skill-based activities such as dance, tennis, swimming, golf, basketball, aerobics, walking, and bicycling. If children feel competent in many motor skills, they will have a greater tendency to participate in physical activity later as adults. Physical skill development is at the center of young children's physical growth. No matter what the activity, a child cannot take part successfully if he has not mastered the essential fundamental movement skills contained within that activity. Therefore, if children are going to lead physically active and healthy lives, now and as adults, a foundation of physical skills must be developed. This approach is grounded in the knowledge that children who have not developed a foundation of physical skills become adults who typically do not participate in physical activity.

Physical skills take time to learn and require practice to refine. Although all children have the potential to develop these skills, many do not receive opportunities to learn the basics. Without a foundation of skills, they quickly can become turned off to physical activity. Children who have difficulty with gross-motor activities may experience frustration and poor self-esteem. Some children who find motor skills challenging will avoid participation because they fear failure. These children will then have fewer opportunities to practice and improve their physical skills.

By helping a preschool child embark on this physical-skill adventure, you will ensure that by the time he is six and entering school, he will have a strong foundation and will feel confident in his ability to run, jump, skip, and gallop. He will know the basic techniques involved when balancing, kicking, throwing, catching, dribbling, volleying, and striking with rackets and bats. Most of all, the development of these basic skills will provide the opportunity to refine physical skills in a variety of games and physical activities throughout the elementary years and throughout life.

The intent here is not to make children into professional athletes; you are simply teaching them the basics and providing guidelines as they work to

develop essential physical skills. Each child will develop motor skills at his own pace, and all children will demonstrate different strengths and abilities depending on their interests. Having the skills to read, write, and do math helps children understand how the world works. Similarly, having the skills to balance, throw, catch, and kick a ball helps children understand how to interact with others and carve out a comfortable place in the physical world. When you work with children to develop a foundation of the basic physical skills, you prepare them to participate with confidence in any physical-activity opportunity that may come along. Above all, the purpose is for both of you to enjoy moving and playing together. For physical activity to become an important part of a child's life, it must be fun!

The information provided here will help you explore the importance of physical development, considerations for setting up an environment that promotes physical activity, the types of equipment you will need, and strategies for presenting learning activities to children. The physical-skills section defines and presents the essential skills and is full of activities for caregivers, children, and families to do in the learning environment or at home. Join with other adults and children, and get started moving and learning in your center's play area, in a nearby park, or in your own backyard. Play and be physically active with the preschoolers in your care as much as you can. Having a foundation of physical skills helps children make friends, develop confidence, and participate in daily physical activity. Regularly using these skills will also help decrease the child's risk for many illnesses and will help improve the child's overall health.

Keep in mind that this book is promoting higher-level activities, not movements such as walking across the yard to get into the car, strolling across the room to turn on the TV, or sitting at a table eating a meal. Although all of these are low-level forms of physical activity, participation will not improve health. The discussion will focus on physical activity that is above what you normally do just to move through the day. Some examples of healthy physical activity might include walking, biking, climbing, dancing, gardening, swimming, and all kinds of games involving skills such as throwing, catching, kicking, and striking. These movements burn calories, work the muscles, and increase the heart rate.

As you know, preschool children are physically active from the time they get up in the morning to when they go to bed at night. Most people who care for preschoolers cannot imagine these children being more active. What educators know from research and experience is that many children will participate less and less in physical activity as they get older. This decrease stems from many factors, but one of the top reasons is that many children do not develop the foundation of skills they need to participate.

ACTIVITY LEVELS— DID YOU KNOW?

Preschoolers are in constant motion, but this is not the case with many older children. Participation in all types of physical activity declines strikingly as age or grade in school increases. Research suggests that older adolescents are less likely than younger children to be physically active, and adolescent

girls are less likely than their male peers to be physically active. Nearly half of U.S. youths twelve to twenty-one years old are not vigorously active on a regular basis. However, young people who believe they are competent and have physical skills are more likely to be active regularly.

Many physical activities do not require a high level of skill to participate. Walking, for example, does not require much skill. Galloping, skipping, balancing, jumping, throwing, catching, kicking, and striking with paddles and bats are more complicated. They will require practice with the necessary skills and assistance from adults to master them. Learning about and participating in physical activity is similar to learning to read a book—you need a foundation of skills to do both. To read, a child must understand what letters are, that letters form words, and that words form sentences. As the child grows, she will learn about verbs, nouns, adverbs, and punctuation. She will develop the knowledge and obtain the skills needed to read. Likewise, a preschool child will need to learn the basic skills required for participating in physical activity.

HOW MUCH
PHYSICAL ACTIVITY
DO CHILDREN NEED?

Preschool-age children who are capable of walking unaided should be physically active daily for at least 180 minutes (three hours), including activity that makes them huff and puff.

This activity does not have to be done all at once. It can be built up throughout the day in fifteen- to twenty-minute segments. As well as encouraging physical activity, limit the amount of time that children under five years of age spend watching television, using small-screen devices, or playing on the computer to two hours a day or less.

Promoting a Healthy Lifestyle

Physical activity is essential at all ages, but it is especially important for the preschool child. Research suggests that the key to helping a child be physically active is discovering activities that the child finds fun and feels successful doing. Children and many adults may shy away from physical activity if they are insecure about their abilities. Therefore, in addition to enjoying the activity and having fun, it is important for children to develop and improve the fundamental motor skills needed to participate in a variety of physical activities.

You can help make physical activity a priority by scheduling opportunities for children to play. Having regular play time encourages children to develop good habits and practice the skills they will need to continue to be active for many years to come. Learning and refining motor skills during physical activity permits children to fully explore and function in their environment and supports their social and cognitive development.

Many different forms of physical activity are possible, but not all of them benefit children in the same way. Research has found that children who spend the most time in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity tend to have the highest levels of motor skills. This may be because physically active

children spend more time learning and improving new motor skills. Children with better motor skills may also find physical activity easier and more fun. Here are some visible signs that can indicate the intensity of a child's physical activity:

- Sedentary: not participating in any physical movement (watching TV, reading, drawing, taking naps)
- Light: not out of breath (moving about, standing up, walking at a slow pace)
- Moderate to vigorous: heart is beating fast; may be out of breath (running, swimming, biking)

A number of sources, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, have summarized the research findings on the rewards of regular physical activity. Here are some of the benefits for children:

- Physical activity strengthens the heart. The heart is an organ consisting
 of muscle. Like other muscles, the heart's performance improves when
 it is regularly challenged. The heart responds to physical activity by
 becoming stronger and more efficient.
- Physical exertion helps keep arteries and veins clear. Exercise reduces the amount of harmful cholesterol and fats in a person's blood. It



- increases the flexibility of the walls of blood vessels and helps to lower blood pressure.
- High levels of activity can strengthen the lungs. As the child increases
 her movement and becomes more and more active, she increases lung
 capacity. The lungs then become more efficient in moving air in and out
 of the body. As a result, more oxygen is drawn into the body, and more
 carbon dioxide and other waste gases are expelled.
- Physical activity reduces blood-sugar levels. Exercise prevents sugar
 from accumulating in the blood by triggering muscles to take up more
 glucose (sugar) from the bloodstream and use it for energy. This can
 reduce a person's risk of developing diabetes.
- Being active can control weight gain. When a child is sedentary and spends much of the day sitting, she tends to take in more calories than she needs. These unused calories accumulate as fat. A child who is physically active uses more calories, which takes fat away and lowers weight. Lowered weight is good for the child's heart.
- Physical activities can improve bone density and strength, which may lead to improved posture for children. All that jumping preschoolers do is great for building stronger bones.
- Regular physical activity often makes children feel more energetic and reduces the likelihood that they will tire during the day.
- When a child is physically active—using up large amounts of energy and calories during the day—he sleeps better at night.
- Active movement enhances emotional well-being. Most adults report that
 they feel calmer and happier after they are physically active. This also
 can be true for children, as physical activity releases beta-endorphin,
 a natural substance in the body associated with feelings of well-being,
 heightening of appetite, and lessening of mental depression.
- Active children tend to perform better in school. Physical exertion increases oxygen flow to the brain and directly affects brain behavior and development. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) report titled Health and Academic Achievement suggests that physical activity can positively affect cognitive skills and attitudes and behavior in the learning environment, all of which are important components

SLEEP_ DID YOU KNOW?

Sleep is directly related to physical activity and is essential to children's health. Experts recommend ten to twelve hours of sleep per day for children ages three to six. Rest is as important as physical activity for healthy growth and development. Research suggests that children who spend time in vigorous physical

activity are quicker to fall asleep and sleep longer. Children who exercise less during the day take longer to fall asleep at night.

of improved academic performance. These include enhanced concentration, attention, and on-task behavior.

Children who are not physically active enough will not have the chance to get these benefits and are at increased risk of becoming overweight or obese. Weight gain in turn makes it harder for them to be active and keep up with others, either in sport or in play. Active children typically become active grown-ups. By encouraging children to be physically active, you are helping them set up healthy lifelong habits.

Risks: Overweight and Obese Children

In addition to knowing the benefits of daily physical activity for children, it is also important to provide information related to lack of physical activity. Media coverage has provided statistics on the alarming rise of childhood and adult obesity. Despite all the attention, the problem is not improving. Overweight and obese children are more likely to be victims of bullying, be sick more often than their normal-weight peers, develop sleep apnea, and become obese adults. Research suggests that more than 50 percent of children who are overweight or obese between the ages of three and six are still overweight or obese at age twenty-five.

About one in three children and adolescents in the United States was overweight or obese in 2012, according to the CDC's Childhood Obesity Facts. By keeping active, children are less likely to become overweight in the first place or to become overweight during later stages of life, according to Physical Activity Facts from the CDC. So you can help them stay healthy and have a good body image by encouraging active movement.

Obesity among children has reached epidemic levels. Although there are a lot of reasons for this increase in childhood obesity, the number one reason children become overweight is the lack of daily physical activity. That, combined with poor eating habits and increased time spent watching television or playing video games, has helped to create a culture of overweight and obese children.

Parents and caregivers must grasp the concept that the quality of children's lives, now and in the future, depends partially on empowering them to participate daily in physical activity. Children are less active now than at any point in history. One in three children is overweight or obese. They eat more fast food than their parents did and interact outdoors far less than young people did twenty years ago. One in four children eats fast food each day. On average, children now spend more than 7.5 hours each day in front of a TV, according to the President's Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition. Certainly the U.S. culture is changing, and the consequence of this trend is increased frequency of overweight and obese children.

This problem is not going away. But you can help by taking steps to help children maintain an appropriate weight and increase their levels of daily physical activity. The benefits are healthy bodies, healthy self-esteem, and healthy lifestyles.

Understanding Motor Development

Learning can be defined as a permanent change in behavior resulting from experience and practice. Motor development is the process of change in a child's movement abilities related to physical skills involved with locomotion (running, galloping, and skipping), manipulation (throwing, catching, and striking), and stability (jumping and landing, and balance). Many factors can affect motor-skill development. The information in this book prepares you to help children learn the fundamental movement or motor patterns needed to perform a variety of physical skills.

You will find examples of experiences and practice activities

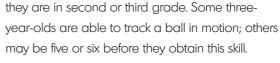
that will help children learn a new motor pattern or skill. After practice over a period of time, the skills will become more and more automatic, and you will see a permanent change in the child's ability to perform these skills.

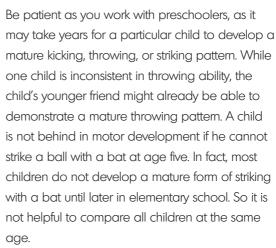
A position statement from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE), Looking at Physical Education from a Developmental Perspective, observes that motor development is an interactional process leading to changes in behavior over time. This document outlines some simple principles related to developmental changes in children as they learn physical skills. (For further information, NASPE is now known as Shape America, and the position statement is available on the organization's

website.) Understanding the principles of motor development will help you create a positive learning environment where physical skills can be practiced and mastered.

Different Rates of Development

First, a critical premise of motor-skill development is that children develop at different rates. Some kindergarten children can skip; others may not skip until





Change is individual. The general sequence of change remains the same for everyone, but the rate of change differs from one child to another. Change results from a multitude of factors that come together in different ways and at different times for different individuals. It occurs in the context of an individual child's body characteristics, environmental surroundings, and opportunities to practice physical skills.

Development is related to a child's age but is not determined by it. Many three-year-olds



can gallop, but simply being a three-year-old does not mean a child will gallop. Many preschools will provide developmental charts suggesting that children should have certain skills at a specific age. This information is simply a developmental benchmark. Some children reach the benchmark early, and some do not meet the benchmark until much later.

Age simply does not predict motor ability. If it did, then all adults would be skilled athletes. Although there are certain advantages as children grow older (quicker reflexes and better visual-tracking ability), the only way individuals become adept with motor skills is to use, or practice, those skills. Thus most adults are reasonably efficient at walking. Many, however, are inefficient at catching a ball or striking an object with a racket. They are inefficient not because they lack the potential to be skillful but because they have not used the skills regularly over a period of years and have not developed the fundamental motor patterns.

Changes in motor skills happen sequentially over time. Children crawl before they walk, and they walk before they run. Their motor skills develop in an orderly manner. The important thing to remember is that children can advance in all skills from an immature stage to an advanced stage with practice.

Developmental change is cumulative. Early behaviors act as building blocks for later emerging skills.

For example:

- Running is built on walking.
- Catching a small ball is built on first catching larger balls.
- Running to kick a ball into a net is built on first making contact with a stationary ball.

Single factors do not cause developmental change; rather, it results from many factors acting together. A child can jump from both feet at the same time



GENDER
DIFFERENCES
—DID YOU
KNOW?

Motor development is not always the same for boys and girls. Research shows that preschool boys tend to be better at object-control skills (throwing, catching, and striking) and that girls usually have better locomotor and balance skills. By about age ten, given the same practice opportunities, both boys and girls demonstrate similar motor development.

and land on two feet when he has the strength, balance, and motivation to do so. The emergence of the two-footed jump is not the result of any one of these factors but the result of interactions among all of them. The rate of a child's change may be limited by a lack of progress in one or more areas.

Myths about Motor Development

Before moving on to discuss how principles of motor development can help you design an environment for skill practice, there are some myths about motor-skill development that you should be aware of.

The first myth is that children can develop motor skills through play. Play is used for understanding the physical and social world; skill development does not just naturally happen through play. There is certainly evidence that motor skills may develop through informal play (for example, hours of basketball or soccer practice), but children need more than just play time to develop physical skills. They need help from their peers and from knowledgeable adults to develop and refine a foundation of physical skills. However, when children play on the playground or in the backyard, they can further practice and refine skills taught by caregivers and parents. Children do not learn to read by picking up a book and looking at the pictures. They need adults to help them understand what letters and words mean. Then they can practice reading books and refine their reading skills. Motor skills are developed in much the same way. Children practice

individual parts of a skill, sometimes with instruction from an adult, and then they practice and refine the skill during play time. Giving children play and practice time is critically important. Children who spend lots of time in low-level activities, in front of the TV, or playing video games do not get the opportunities other children have to practice skills; therefore, they do not tend to participate in healthy physical activity as they grow older.

A second myth about motor development and skill acquisition relates to the idea of the natural athlete. Although some children are genetically disposed to do better at some sports or physical activities than others, the fact is that most highly skilled children have participated in one or many sports from very early ages. Some children begin kindergarten with mature throwing and catching patterns, for example. They played a lot of catch with parents, caregivers, siblings, or friends from a young age and thus enter school more highly skilled than their peers. In time, their less-skilled peers can catch up if they, too, practice and use the motor skill thousands of times as they play with friends, on teams, or with caregivers or parents. Motor development is not automatic. If children are to develop physical competence, they need a variety of equipment and materials; planned, appropriate movement experiences; and opportunities to practice and apply previously learned skills.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

The term *developmentally appropriate practice* suggests that caregivers are presenting physical-skill activities and instruction to children using methods that will benefit and enhance the children's ability to learn new skills. If you are using information based on research and experience about how children grow and develop, you are more likely to understand best practices and successfully tailor instruction to children.

Developmentally appropriate practices include those that are both age appropriate and individually appropriate. Age-appropriate activity suggests that the child is at an age that is developmentally appropriate



to begin learning a skill via the activity. For example, most preschool children are developmentally ready to practice bouncing a ball, so that activity would be considered age appropriate for a preschool child. If you placed a child on a basketball team at age four and she was not yet competent in bouncing a ball, this would be considered a developmentally inappropriate activity. It would be inappropriate because the child does not yet have the skills to participate in the game.

When providing skill-development activities, you need to be aware if the child is individually ready for the activity. Some children can handle specific challenges before others. For example, most four-year-old children are not yet ready to continuously swing a rope and jump. But some four-year-olds can swing a rope and jump several times in a row. You will have to observe and make a judgment on when a child is ready for certain activities and when it is best to wait. You do not want to push children to practice skills if they are not developmentally ready for them, but you also do not want to hold them back if they are ready to learn. There is no magic formula for knowing when to introduce skills; it all depends on the developmental level of the particular child.

For an activity to be developmentally appropriate, it also should be instructionally appropriate. In other words, you should provide a fitting environment for learning new skills and should present tasks and activities to children in suitable ways. The following instructional practices will help you establish a positive physical-activity environment:

- Children learn through involvement, observation, and modeling.
 Construct the environment with specific skill learning in mind, and then guide the children toward learning the skills. By carefully observing a child's responses and interests, you can adapt the learning experiences to meet the needs of that child.
- Children should be allowed to seek creative solutions. Give them time and opportunities to explore appropriate responses.
- Parents should show interest and participate in skill-development activities. They are their children's first role models and most relied-on source for information.
- Children need a variety of experiences to help them obtain a
 mature level of fundamental motor skills. Select activities that are at
 the appropriate ability level for that child. Do not push activities just
 because you think they might be fun or because other children can
 already do the activities.
- Children should be able to make choices and explore what their bodies can do. Always provide them with opportunities to play with equipment and experiment before you provide any instruction on how to do a skill better.
- Provide a variety of different sizes, shapes, and weights of equipment. All equipment should match the developmental level of the child. A basketball or softball would be inappropriate for a preschool child to bounce or throw. The items are just too heavy for a small child to be successful with them. Modify equipment when appropriate, such as using a punch-ball balloon to strike instead of a ball.
- Repetition during practice is important to learning new skills. For
 example, challenge children to throw and hit a target ten times in a
 row so they can work on developing the desired throwing movement
 pattern.

- Children will not develop a solid foundation of physical skills without frequent practice. Practicing a skill one or two times is not enough. With repetition of all skills, they can develop a broad base of strong skills.
- When learning new skills, competition with others delays the
 developmental process. Activities should emphasize self-improvement
 instead of winning and losing. Competing against oneself is
 developmentally appropriate for preschool children, but competing
 against others is not.
- Young children learn best when they are successful. Make sure activities
 provide children with challenges and opportunities to practice skills at
 high rates of success.



GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PROGRAMS

In 1994, the Council on Physical Education for Children created a set

of guidelines specifically to help caregivers understand developmental issues related to preschool physical development. Understanding these issues can help child care—center, preschool, and kindergarten teachers to provide physical-activity programs that will best benefit children. When parents begin the process of selecting a preschool for their child, they should ask if the center provides a developmentally appropriate physical-activity program.

Caregivers and directors should also assess whether their program provides developmentally appropriate activities. The following questions can help.

- Do you have both indoor and outdoor spaces for physical activity? Are the spaces safe? Are physical activities restricted due to a lack of space?
- Does the program have a written physical-activity curriculum?
 Does the curriculum focus on development of basic skills? A curriculum loaded with games emphasizing rules and formations would be considered inappropriate for preschool children.
 Curriculum goals should emphasize development of basic skills.
- Does the curriculum emphasize fitness activities? Preschool children get their fitness through participation in skill-development activities. They are not developmentally ready to participate in adult fitness activities. Running laps, doing calisthenics, and following recorded aerobics programs, which set expectations that all children move in time with the music and do the same things at the same time, are definitely not appropriate.
- Do children have opportunities to be involved and remain active?
 Activities where children are waiting in lines for a turn in relay races, to be chosen for a team, or because of limited

- equipment would be considered developmentally inappropriate. Games in which a child is eliminated from playing also would be inappropriate.
- Is physical instruction built into the daily schedule in addition to free play and recess?
- What is the class size during physical activity? Is more than one academic classroom put together for physical activity? Group size should be limited to no more than twenty four- or five-year-olds with two adults. Younger children require smaller groups.
- Is there enough physical-skill-development equipment available for all children in a class? Children should not have to wait in lines to use equipment.
- Is equipment sized for children? Adult-size equipment may inhibit skill development, or may injure or intimidate children.
- Are caregivers trained to help children develop physical skills?



Physically Active with Special Needs

All children, including those with differences in mental or physical ability, have the need to develop physical skills and be physically active. All children have unique needs, and you can help by modifying activities to meet those special needs.

Children with disabilities tend to be less physically active than children

without disabilities. Yet they need physical activity to develop skills for recreational use throughout life. Physical activity improves health. Increased physical activity brings increased muscle tone and strength, especially for those prone to being less mobile. Skill development is just as important f or a preschool child with a disability as it is for a child who reaches physical milestones when developmentally expected.

The purpose here is not to discuss all the disabilities that children may face but to give g eneral direction on how you might help children with disabilities develop physical skills. Children with special needs should strive to develop the same physical skills as other children if possible. What may be different is the way you present activities to the children and the adaptations you make to teach the skills. A particular child may not be able to fully develop all the basic physical skills. If this is the case, select the physical skills that can be developed and that the child shows interest in, then emphasize those skills.

All children will require instruction, repetition, and practice to develop motor skills. Physical skills do





not develop in exactly the same way for all preschoolers. Although some variation is normal, children with disabilities may need even more time and instruction. Consider the following strategies that may further help in teaching a child with a disability:

- Present the tasks at the child's level of functioning. If the task is too difficult, break the task into smaller steps.
- Remove distractions such as extra equipment. To avoid cluttering the environment, have available only the specific equipment needed for the task at hand.
- Develop a daily schedule or routine and use it.
- Provide more feedback that is task specific, such as, "I like the way
 you use your fingertips when bouncing the ball." Demonstrate skills
 whenever possible.
- Emphasize the child's abilities rather than disabilities. Stay away from activities that may be frustrating, and try them again when the child shows interest in learning the skill.
- Select skills that are functional for the child, such as throwing (or dropping) a ball into a large basket as opposed to trying to hit a target that is on a wall.
- Provide children with more frequent opportunities to practice so they
 can retain the skill levels they have achieved.

- Increase the size of the target when throwing or kicking (make the target larger or the goal wider), and experiment with different sizes of balls until you find one that best suits the child's needs. Reduce the weight or size of the striking implement, such as using a lighter bat to practice striking or using a foam ball to throw or catch.
- Strike off a tee instead of tossing a ball to the child.
- Always work at ground level with balance activities (use a balance beam that is only a few inches off the ground), and let the child develop some proficiency before moving to a beam that is at a higher level.
- Ask a child with a visual impairment to hold your hand during travel practice or to touch the shoulder of a preschool friend who is moving directly in front of him. Use oral cues to tell the child what to do.
- Play follow-the-leader games by asking a child with a visual impairment to hold a short rope as you lead him slowly by holding the other end of the rope. Use your hands to adjust the child's body parts to ensure the correct positions.
- When providing instruction to a child with a hearing impairment, always demonstrate the skill at the same time and provide the child opportunities to watch others whenever possible.

instruction in physical education, even if all other students in the preschool do not receive such instruction. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides that a child between the ages of three and nine may be considered disabled if the child is experiencing developmental delays in physical, cognitive, communication, or social or emotional development. When a child begins school, parents should notify the school administration of the physical disability and the child's needs. According to IDEA, school staff must work with the family to provide age-appropriate physical-skill instruction.

Every child with a disability is required to receive

Importance of Physical Play

Besides instruction and practice, physical play is also important in promoting skill development and physical activity. Overall, play is important because it contributes to children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth. It also provides opportunities for caregivers and parents to engage daily with the children. Children are naturally playful and will usually join in when given an opportunity. Play lets children explore, discover, and try to make sense out of the world.

During physical play, children have time to explore, manipulate objects, and practice physical skills on their own. Physical play helps them learn how to use their muscles. Muscles get stronger and work better when children exercise them. Children need lots of opportunities to develop upperbody strength and confidence by climbing and hanging from playground equipment, striking balls with paddles, and throwing bean bags at targets. They also will need opportunities to strengthen the lower body by jumping up and down, balancing on one foot, and kicking a ball across a field. If children do not have enough chances to kick, throw, catch, jump, and balance, their muscles will not be as strong and they will not be as skilled as children who do have these play experiences.







Play, which cannot be structured for a child, is easier to recognize than it is to define. When you introduce a child to the skills of throwing, kicking, or balancing, you might call those activities play. However, you are in charge and are giving the child feedback about learning the new skill, so it is really instruction time. Play has no adult instructions; it is voluntary and fun. With play, the child is choosing and directing the activities. You can follow along and play with the children, but this is not instruction time. Children should enjoy play time in addition to instruction time. Physical play is practice time, a time for children to practice and refine skills they have been working on with your guidance. It is also time for children to explore, experiment, and learn new things on their own.

For children to develop a base of physical skills, they will need opportunities for adult instruction and for play. Play alone may not provide children with a foundation of skills, but it can provide them with opportunities to practice and refine skills that are introduced by caregivers and parents. Play is important because it helps children gain a sense of mastery and competency of skills. When a child throws a ball and hits a target, walks across a balance beam without falling, or kicks a ball into a net, all without adult help, these play activities will really add to her sense of confidence in her physical abilities.

PHYSICAL PLAY AND PASSIVE PLAY

Technology in the form of television, video games, and cell phones has an effect on physical play and should be limited during the preschool years. Times are changing. Although playing with technology (passive play) can have some benefits, most of today's electronic devices did not exist twenty years ago, when preschool children spent most of their time

physically playing and interacting with others. Many children now are learning computer skills before they learn basic physical skills. In a 2014 survey, AVG, an online security company, found that more three- to five-year-olds could play a computer game (66 percent) than could ride a bike (58 percent). Similarly, the study found that more of the children could navigate a tablet or smartphone (47 percent) than could swim unaided (23 percent). About four times as many children ages three to five could play with an application for a connected device (57 percent) than could tie their shoelaces (14 percent). To promote physical-skill development, limit passive play to about 20 percent of play time, and expand physical play to about 80 percent of the time allowed.





To ensure that children have enough play time, preschool programs should have daily recess, which gives children time to play with friends and practice physical and social skills. In an environment where test scores rule education policy, many schools have significantly reduced or completely cut recess time. Recess breaks should be scheduled at least every two hours in an all-day preschool to provide opportunities to rest from inside academic activities and to practice positive social skills with peers. Recess should be a period of free, unstructured play.

There is plenty of evidence that recess (unstructured play) benefits children in cognitive, social-emotional, and physical ways. Research suggests that when children have recess, they show the following characteristics:

- More on task in the classroom
- Improved memory and more focused attention
- More likely to take turns, demonstrate leadership, and learn to resolve conflicts
- More physically active before and after school

Your guidance can make a difference!

Preschoolers are constantly on the move using their bodies to play and learn. You can help them stay active as they grow by providing instruction in physical skills, motivating them to develop strength and fluid movements, and challenging them to improve their skill levels.

Not every child will become an athlete, but all children use motor skills to move around their environment, interact with others, play games, and learn. You can help preschoolers understand the best ways to do the following movements:

- Skip, gallop, and run
- Jump and land
- Throw and catch a ball
- Hit small balls with paddles, sticks, and bats
- Balance
- Kick accurately
- Strike large balls with their hands
- Jump rope
- Ride a bike

You don't want children to give up in embarassment, so help them develop the skills to play confidently. As in all types of learning, practice helps solidify the lessons learned during physical movement instruction.

Motivated by the knowledge and experience you provide, the preschoolers in your care can grow strong bodies, enjoy physical activity, and move with assurance toward a healthy lifestyle.



As a professor and early childhood consultant for more than 30 years, **Steve Sanders**, **EdD**, focuses on preparing the next generation of teachers to help children become physically active and healthy for life. He is the recipient of the Margie

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