

Fitness and the Young Child

by James M. Poole, MD, FAAP

The fitness craze is upon us; people are running along the streets, joining health clubs, and spending millions of dollars on nutrition and diet supplements. It is well proven that there is a relationship between an inactive lifestyle and the development of coronary artery disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and being overweight. Magazine and television models promote the *in shape* look. Unfortunately, with all this surrounding our everyday life, over 50% of American men and women are overweight, and many of them are obese. Just as we are working at getting in shape and being fit, our society is running in the other direction. Something is happening to our own behavior that allows us to be okay with being overweight. The victims in all this could be our preschool children, as the promotion of eating habits, activities, and sedentary lifestyles are taught in childhood.

Preschool children are active by their very nature. They tend to have an inherent drive for motor activity. In looking at the behavior of young children, notice how they explore their environment, go to all corners of the room or playground, achieve physical closeness, and enjoy communicating with others. These are all essential for proper cognitive, emotional, and physical development. When we allow children to run, play, and explore in a safe environment they will naturally get all the large motor activity that they need.

Television and computers obviously decrease the amount of time children are up and playing, either indoors or outdoors, and increase the likelihood of eating calorie-rich snack foods. There is a definite genetic link or predisposition to obesity. The recently discovered *obese* gene makes it imperative that families having problems with weight look at their diet, activity level, and exercise level to control obesity. Overweight children are more likely to experience depression, low self-esteem, and medical problems. Child care teachers can encourage healthy eating habits at the center and at home. Limit the amount of juice (two servings per day), fatty foods, and sugar given to the children and encourage children to drink water.

Water still remains a wonderful source of liquid. Work with any child at risk for being overweight and help all children to develop healthy lifestyles.

Physical development is most important in the early years of exploring, experimentation, and activity. Throwing balls, jumping, dancing, and jogging are all excellent exercises, as children learn to use their bodies and move through space in a coordinated fashion. Children are naturally active, and we must encourage the inactive child.

Children tend to follow a set sequence of learning and acquiring motor skills. The rate is not the same for all children, as children tend to develop and grow differently. There is no evidence that physical training during the preschool years accelerates or enhances a child's future sports performance. However, the preschool years are very important for motor development. The acts of running, throwing, catching, kicking, hopping, jumping, and climbing are all tasks learned through a child's natural activity. As they mature, learn by trial and error, perform tasks repeatedly, do not compete or compare themselves with their peers, and have supportive adults, children will naturally learn to accomplish and perform.

Parents, caregivers, and now some child care centers are pushing children into participating in organized sports and structured exercise sessions. The Academy of Pediatrics has identified three important factors for a child's readiness: (1) neurodevelopmental level (ability to have motor skills to accomplish the activity); (2) social development (ability to interact with the coaches and teammates); and (3) cognitive level (ability to understand the instructions or the rules of the game). All of this comes under the title of *Sports Readiness*, which is determined by the child's excitement and desire to participate (not the parent's).

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Daily Programs

When counseling teenagers on attention problems, I compare them to four year olds who by nature are fast moving, have short attention spans of five to ten minutes, are very active, easily distracted, playful, explore the environment (not the game at hand), and have difficulty following directions. Keep all that in mind and tailor the activity to fit children's natural responses: easy directions, short periods of structured activity (15 to 20 minutes maximum), followed with periods of free, unstructured play. When teaching, place all the children in a group or small groups with minimal distractions. Keep your fields short, equipment adapted to the size of the child, and games that do not require a score. Use soft balls, smaller groups, and balls like the Nerf tennis ball that do not bounce so high. Remember: To keep an active mind active, you must change the game or the position of the players often.

Classrooms should have open areas for large muscle movement. For example, a slide or climber for the two to three year olds, or crawl spaces and tunnels and obstacle courses set up within the room (a mesh tunnel can be purchased for little money). Four year olds are very active and will hide, so care must be taken in setting up their inside movement area due to the increase in accidents and running that takes place at this age.

Music and movement time is essential and is a wonderful active time. It teaches music to the children while they are learning how to gain control of themselves and move their muscles in some sort of pattern.

Transition times are another opportunity for physical activity. Singing and playing games as the children move from one activity to the next is a great way to accomplish the task. Having a small group of children do a particular exercise, such as touching their toes prior to washing hands, gets them moving and exercising without risk.

Proper clothing is very important for outside play — warm- and cold-weather clothes, no drawstrings, and proper shoes. Tennis shoes or shoes with some rubber soles are safest and best for the feet of the active child.

Playgrounds are interactive learning centers for staff and children. This is the perfect place for the learning of sharing, playing games together, support, and for doing your best without worry of comparison or winning. Free time as well as structured playground time is essential for children of all ages. Climbing equipment, though nice, is not necessary for the developing child. Safety, however, is

very important. Field trips to parks and playgrounds may sound exciting, but providers must look at safety issues such as fall zones, cushioning material, fencing, sharp objects, hot metal, and visualization to name just a few problems at public and private playgrounds.

Families and child care providers can be roadblocks or they can be springboards for making children excited about learning and accomplishing new tasks for and believing in themselves. Support, fun, success, variety of activities, freedom from the worry of failure and embarrassment, and the love of playing are what keep children of all ages (two to 92 years) enjoying games, learning, being active, and leading happier, healthier lives.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends:

- All preschool children should participate regularly in physical activity appropriate for their developmental level and physical health status.
- Emphasis should be placed on the promotion of physical activity as healthy living, not to maximize subsequent sports ability.
- Free play is preferred over structured play as it allows the children to develop at their own rate.
- Readiness to participate in organized sports must come from the child's eagerness and not the parent's desire.
- In structured sports programs, goals of participation and enjoyment should be emphasized rather than those of competition and winning.
- Physical activity is vitally important in the overall development of children and the development of healthy lifestyles. Parents and caregivers should closely monitor the amount of passive time children spend in front of the television or computer.
- Parents, family members, and caregivers should be role models for children by participating with children in physical activities.
- The playground for preschool children is a dynamic place of active learning, requiring the ability for free play, some structured learning activities, and the ability to explore in a safe and healthy environment.