

# Everyday Exercises for Healthy Caregivers

by Theresa M. Sull

Caring for young children is physically and emotionally demanding, but both parents and teachers experience great satisfaction when they help children develop in healthy ways. And wise caregivers know that they must keep *themselves* healthy as well, by including exercise in their daily routine.

A trip to the gym does not always fit into a schedule already stretched by

family obligations and employment. But the following exercises can be performed while at work — without interfering with supervision of children in the playground.

In fact, children who watch you stretch will be learning about the importance of movement for good health. They may even join in, or they may add new movements to their own play activities.

Some exercises must be performed while standing, but others can be done when sitting. To make them easier to remember, these exercises are described in *head to toe order*. But make it a habit to exercise any body part whenever you can. The sequence of the exercises is not important.

## Spine

First, stand tall! Pretend that you are being pulled up toward the sky by a string attached to the crown of your head. Shoulders back, arms down at your sides, palms forward. Take a deep breath, fully inflating your lungs. Feel your spine straighten and stretch. Exhale slowly as you relax. Each time you inhale, you should feel your stomach expand.

## Neck

Next, drop your chin to your chest. Let the weight of your head stretch your neck as you count slowly to 15, to 20, or to 30 as this stretch becomes easier. Now slowly bend your head back. If it's not too sunny, enjoy watching the clouds for the count of 20. If you experience dizziness, numbness, or tingling, stop your neck exercises.

Without forcing, bend your head slowly to one side, so that your ear comes closer to your shoulder. Hold this neck stretch for up to 30 seconds. Then bend your head to the other side.

Look both ways . . . carefully. With your chest kept in a forward position, twist your neck so you can watch what's happening, first on your left, and then on your right. Hold each stretch for 15 seconds.

### Children need exercise, too!

Today's families are busy. Modern life poses difficulties, so some grown-ups may be busy with employment or education obligations. But teachers can pick up where families leave off, emphasizing fresh air, sunshine, and movement. Early childhood and after-school programs can provide role models, safe spaces and equipment, and motivating games for fitness. Make sure all children have enough exercise and outdoor time to ensure their health!

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## Hands

Hands can be exercised together or one at a time. First, make a fist. Hold it tightly, then slowly relax your hand. Open and close your hands, spreading your fingers apart, several times. With your other fingers held together straight and tall, perform 20 thumb bends, bending each thumb at all its joints. Now straighten your thumbs and spread all your fingers apart again. Touch each fingertip with your thumb, moving from index finger to baby finger, and back again.

## Chair exercises

Begin an activity with the children by sitting down on a chair. At the same time, right along with you, the children can sit and exercise on *their* chairs. If you do this exercising before another sitting activity, you should find that the children are more willing to sit quietly after exercising. Also, using sitting time this way will help you use it wisely — to get in shape yourself, and to continue offering healthy examples of exercise to the children in your care.

## Legs

First, slowly sit down and rise from the bench or chair with your feet flat on the ground placed no more than a foot apart. This movement can strengthen thighs and calves, and can be repeated several times. When you're sitting, take several deep breaths to expand your diaphragm. To strengthen the abdomen, pull in your stomach as though you're putting on tight jeans. Keep your back in a neutral position, neither slouching nor arching. With palms on the bench and legs extended, you can push up on the chair bench to briefly bear your weight on your arms.

Then, while perching on the edge of the chair, lift each knee toward your chest.

In this slow, seated march, each knee will be held in the air for the count of five. It's important to keep your back straight and stomach in, so your hips and thighs, and not your rounded spine, are doing the work of lifting. Some of us may be able to perform the seated march with our hands on our thighs, increasing demands on balance. Stop when you start arching your back, marching no more than five times with each leg.

Give your legs a short rest while you sit with arms at your sides and elbows bent. Rapidly flip your hands over one at a time, from palms up to palms down.

While making yourself stable with straightened arms on the bench at your side, do up to five leg lifts, straightening your knee while lifting your bent foot to the count of three. Slowly return your foot to the floor.

Now, still seated, try some ankle and foot exercises with straightened knee. Bend your foot up and toward your leg. Hold the foot up for 15 seconds. Then move it down and away, pointing your toe.

## Back

You can stretch your back after sitting. Stand with your hands on your hips and gently arch your back about three times.

## Balance

Now stand behind the bench or chair for a few exercises that improve your balance as well as strengthen your legs, areas that are both important when you take care of kids! First, touching the back of the chair for stability, stand on one foot for 15 seconds. Change sides. Work toward letting go with one hand, then both hands, as your balance improves.

## Shoulders

With your arms at your side, shrug your shoulders. Hold them up for the count of 15, then release them slowly. Now bend your elbows and press your shoulder blades together for the count of 15.

Next, with thumbs near your armpits, slowly lift and lower your elbows, making "chicken wings" 15 times. Don't raise your shoulders while you do this.

## Arms

With your arms held straight out in front of you, perform some hand and wrist exercises. (When your arms tire, these can be performed with elbows bent near your waist, or with arms hanging at your sides.)

Extend your arm like a policeman signaling "stop." You will feel each shoulder blade move. Alternate arms ten times. You also exercise your wrist while waving to children, keeping your elbow at your side, with your arm held still and your fingers spread.

Stand with feet close together for 30 seconds. Now slowly lift yourself on tiptoes five, ten, or 15 times. You'll feel the pull in your calves.

Do a side step, shifting weight to each leg in turn. This becomes a little dance step with the addition of singing, clapping, and other arm and hand motions.

A very slow march in place can help hip flexion. Keeping your abdomen tight, hold each knee up for a few seconds, and then relax the leg slowly.

For hip flexibility to the side (abduction), do a slow standing scissors movement, moving each straightened leg out to the side in turn. Don't lean to the side or try to lift your leg too high — an angle of 30 degrees is about right. Try for ten times on each side.

Don't forget to join the children's games for healthy exercise! Tossing a ball in a game of catch, throwing beanbags at a target, marching with instruments in a parade, doing the *Bunny Hop* around the room, moving like animals (bears, elephants, snakes, crabs, pigeons, eagles), rolling and unrolling in a bed sheet on the ground, dancing and playing circle games (classics like the *Hokey Pokey* or *Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes*) — all this movement is as good for teachers as it is for children!

Some of us have been actively exercising for years, while others need to get back into regular exercise slowly. Regardless of our present level of fitness, we can all benefit from performing more exercises that fit into our work with children.

The exercises I've described in this article can be a starting point. You can pick more exercises from books or magazines, or follow the advice of a physical therapist or exercise coach. In any case, follow the precautions in the "Exercise Wisely" box.

And don't compare yourself to the dancers or actresses you see on television. Even using personal trainers and chefs, many famous people find it difficult to stay in shape faced with our current reality of busy schedules and fast food.

As I frequently tell myself, "Take one small step in the right direction, and try again tomorrow." The children are depending on us to care — about their health, and about ours. To ensure *everyone's* health, exercise every day!

*Physical Therapist Charron Andrews read an earlier draft of this article.*

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## Exercise Wisely

- Wear loose clothing that allows you to move.
- Don't get overheated. Where I live, sometimes it is too hot to be outdoors!
- Drink plenty of water.
- Don't force a muscle movement. A little discomfort may be normal, but *pain means stop*.
- Move slowly and evenly. Unless you're an athlete who is in training to be a sprinter, faster is not better.
- Breathe deeply and evenly, and relax.
- Avoid overexertion. Two short exercise sessions may be better than one long one.