



Dr. Craft's

# Active Play!

## Fun Physical Activities for Young Children

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### Have children eat well and play hard to curb childhood obesity by Diane H. Craft, PhD

**Problem:** The incidence of childhood obesity has risen alarmingly over the past 35 years

**Causes:** Poor diet and lack of moderate to vigorous physical activity

**Solution:** Have children eat well and play hard!

There is an epidemic of childhood obesity in our nation. This was not always so. In 1971, fewer than 6% of preschoolers were overweight. Recent statistics show that now almost 14% of pre-schoolers are overweight. Overweight children are more likely to develop type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, bone and joint problems, weak immune systems, and have risk factors for heart disease. And overweight preschoolers are more likely than not to remain overweight as teens, and live their lives as overweight or obese adults. Many factors are implicated in the notable increase in childhood obesity. Many experts agree that the chief causes of the epidemic lie in the two areas in which children's lives have changed most dramatically over the past 35 years:

- The food children eat now has more fat and sugar content than ever before. Children also have more opportunities to drink sugared drinks and snack on unhealthy foods than in the past.
- Children have fewer chances to engage in physically active play. Many choose and are allowed to be entertained in front of television and computer screens, instead.

The good news is that changing children's diets and increasing their activity levels can reduce many of the health risk factors of being overweight. So make every effort to ensure that the children in your care eat lots of fruit and vegetables, and stay away from sweetened drinks and snacks with high fat and sugar content. Also give them daily opportunities to engage in moderate to vigorous physical activities that are both challenging and fun. Remember: children need to eat well and play hard to stay healthy!

*Today's preschoolers might have shorter lifespans than their parents because of the effects of obesity.*

### How much physical activity do children need?

In an expression of concern for young children's health and fitness, the National Association of Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) has recommended that preschool children need:

- 60 minutes of structured physical activity, and
- 60 minutes of unstructured physical activity daily, and
- To not be sedentary for more than 60 minutes at a time, except when sleeping.

NASPE also urges that children:

- Develop fundamental movement skills, and
- Have safe indoor and outdoor play areas, and
- Have caregivers who know the importance of physical activity and help children learn movement skills.



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# The many benefits of physical activity

- Active children are healthier
- They develop fundamental movement skills
- Physical activity stimulates brain development

**Y**oung children enjoy health benefits from engaging in moderate to vigorous physical activity. Being physically active reduces the likelihood that they will develop type 2 diabetes, cardiac problems and other health concerns associated with being overweight. Children who play vigorously on a regular basis are more physically fit than sedentary children. And children who exercise regularly sleep better.

Children who learn to enjoy moving and playing vigorously are more apt to continue being physically active throughout their lifetimes. When they get lots of practice running, throwing, kicking and striking as preschoolers, they are going to be better at these skills than children who don't get the opportunity to practice. Getting lots of practice at moving at a young age might mean the difference between choosing to enjoy being in the game on the

playing field rather than watching from the sidelines as a teen, then later slumping on the sofa watching sports on the television as an adult.

When physical activities are fun, children learn to enjoy being physically active. They think of physical activity as play, but they are really practicing their fundamental movement skills and improving their physical fitness at the same time. These happy experiences can lead to a lifetime appreciation of being physically active!

Children also learn as they participate in physical activities. They learn the rules of games. They learn about their body parts and how they move when active. And they can learn about objects, shapes, colors and spatial relationships while playing structured physical activities designed to also teach cognitive concepts

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**Promote a healthy lifestyle on behalf of the children in your care. Make sure they eat well and play hard.**

## Tools for success: Fundamental Movement Skills

A skill is a learned ability to do something well. Fundamental movement skills are the movement abilities toddlers and preschoolers learn and practice over and over during their active play. They are the movement tools children must master before they can use them successfully later in life in sports and recreational activities. Walking, running, jumping, hopping, and galloping are all locomotor fundamental movement skills preschoolers practice. Throwing, catching, striking and kicking are all object control fundamental movement skills appropriate for preschoolers to learn. Turning, twisting, bending, stretching, reaching, lifting and falling are all stability fundamental movement skills young children practice daily.

Performing fundamental movement skills at a competent level takes lots of practice. Children generally need to acquire these skills between the ages of two-to-seven years. After age seven, children begin to enter the specialized movement phase, where they practice refining their fundamental movement skills to play sports and take part in recreational games and activities. Children who have not had lots of practice with fundamental movement skills before they reach the age of seven can have a difficult time enjoying active play with other children at school, and might be subjected to teasing or ridicule for their lack of skill.

Most preschoolers' daily physical activity is really only sitting, squatting, lying down, standing and walking. They need to do much more running, climbing, jumping and other large-muscle activities to exercise their hearts and lungs. The physical activities in the book *Active play! Fun Physical Activities for Young Children* (Craft & Smith 2008) are age-appropriate for children two to five years old. They are designed to give children many opportunities to practice their locomotor, object control and stability skills doing stimulating activities that they love.



# Successfully leading physical activities

Structured physical activity is active play that is planned and led by an adult. Structured physical activities have clear goals for the children. Structured physical activities give children the chance to be moderately to vigorously active over a set period of time. They emphasize practicing fundamental movement skills and help improve children's fitness. Many structured physical activities can be organized to also help children learn academic concepts.

**B**eing organized is an important beginning to successfully leading physical activities with young children. Follow these ten suggestions for best results:

1. Have a clear beginning to the physical activity time. Gather the children together and have each child sit on his or her own carpet square or floor spot before and after activities. This helps the children understand their job is to listen to what you say when they are sitting on their floor spots.

2. Have clear boundaries. Boundaries show children where they can and cannot go during the activity. Most young children do not understand complex concepts such as 'stand behind the line.' Use physical barriers as boundaries to keep children safely away from danger.

3. Briefly explain and demonstrate the activity. Keep your explanation short. Then show the children what you want them to do.

4. Use recorded music as a signal to start and stop physical activities. All Stop & Go to Music and Musical Hoops from the book *Active Play! Fun Physical Activities for Young Children* are activities that help children practice listening to musical cues.

5. During physical activities, give plenty of verbal cues, encouragement and constructive corrections to the children. Try to give children four encouraging comments for every one constructive correction.

6. If an activity becomes unsafe at any point, stop it immediately. Turn off

the music. Have the children return to their floor spots. Refocus the children. Re-explain or change the activity as needed, and begin again.

7. Make clear, easily recognized transitions between physical activities. When using music, turn it off as a cue for the children to stop and listen. Ask them to return to their floor spots and sit down. Briefly explain the next activity. Invite the children to stand up and get ready as you restart the music.

8. Provide closure at the end of the structured physical activity time. Turn off the music. Have the children sit on their floor spots. Talk about the activity. Ask the children how they felt doing the activity. Explain how the activity helped to make them healthier. Then sing a closing song together just before ending physical activity time.

9. Ask the children to help collect any equipment used during the activity. Have them bring it to you for storage.

10. Have water, not soda or fruit juice, available for children to drink during and after the physical activity time.



## Making Physical Activities Fun!

Physical activities can be hard work for children, but they will do the work gladly if they are motivated. The best way to motivate children is to give them an understandable reason for doing the activity. A well designed physical activity, with a purpose the children see as reasonable, can be so much fun that the children will ignore how hard their bodies are working. They will just think about the great time they are having!

Preschool children like activities that let them show how strong or how fast they are. They also like activities that let them pretend to do adults' tasks and use objects that adults use. Laundry Pick-Up, Stocking Grocery Shelves, Push & Pull Baskets and Lug-a-Jug, are just some of the activities from the book *Active Play! Fun Physical Activities for Young Children*, that have the children pretend they are doing adult tasks.



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# Health and safety considerations

Some equipment used in physical activities for young children might pose a hazard if not used properly. For example, pieces of burst balloons and broken bubble wrap can lodge in a child's throat. Use only helium quality or punch ball balloons. Make sure balloons are covered, and be sure children do not mouth or bite any equipment. When using ropes, cords, ribbons, and similar equipment, closely supervise children to be sure that a child does not become entangled in and potentially strangled by these items.

**R**eview each child's records to learn whether there are any health concerns that might limit the child's ability to do any specific physical activity. Get advice from the child's medical professional for any child who is known to have health problems. Cardiac conditions, exercise-induced asthma, or sickle cell anemia are examples of conditions that might limit children's physical activity. Watch for bluish lips and nail beds during vigorous activity. This might be a sign of cardiac problems. Watch for prolonged shortness of breath, difficulty exhaling, or wheezing. This might indicate an asthma attack. Stop any child from participating in an activity if you see these symptoms, or other health or safety concerns. Tell the parent what you saw as soon as possible.

Ask the advice of the child's physical or occupational therapist about positioning and mobility recommendations for any child in your care with cerebral palsy or other orthopedic conditions.

## Children's Safety

Sound judgment in planning and leading physical activities is required with young children. They can be creative and quick in the ways they can place themselves in danger. You must always watch the children, at all times, when they are being physically active. Watch for changes in a child's activity level that might indicate a health issue. Watch children for safe behavior. Observe their play and use your own good judgment

in anticipating and preventing anything from happening that might be unsafe for the children.

The activities in the book *Active Play! Fun Physical Activities for Young Children* have been done safely and successfully in settings with multi-age groups of children. However, you will need to decide whether the activities will work safely for the children in your care. If an activity seems unsafe for any child, do not play it. Here are some of the more important safety issues to think about when doing physical activities with children.

### Help children develop listening skills

Start physical activity time with *All Stop & Go to Music* and *On/Off* from the book, *Active Play! Fun Physical Activities for Young Children*. Children need to listen and act quickly when you give safety instructions. Both of these activities give children practice listening and responding to verbal cues.

### Running Safety

Have all preschoolers run in the same direction so they don't run into each other. Never ask children to run to a wall or fence or any other immovable object. Most young children cannot yet judge distances or stop quickly. Make the boundary several feet in front of any wall or other immovable object in case children run past the stopping point.

There may also be times and places where running might be impractical or unsafe for children. Consider substituting other locomotor skills such as jumping and hopping for running.

### Older children with younger children

Be sure that larger, heavier children do not roughhouse with smaller, lighter children. A heavier child falling on a small child can cause injury. When larger and smaller children play together, do activities that don't require body contact.



If a physical activity becomes unsafe at any point, stop it immediately!