

1 Active Start

The importance of physical activity in the first six years of life

Why Active Play is so Important

Making sure that children are active

Young children need regular, vigorous, physical activity (active play) to develop and grow properly. This vigorous activity helps bones and muscles become stronger. Active play also builds important connections in the brain, and between the brain and children's muscles. These brain connections help children when they start school and begin to play more organized games with other children.

As life can be hectic and society relies on technology more and more, it can be difficult to integrate physical activity within daily routines. However, it is critically important for children to have a physically active lifestyle for life-long health, and physical and emotional wellbeing.



also linked to mental health problems. To develop good habits, children should be physically active every day.

What is meant by physical activity?

Physical activity means taking part in active play and games that use the large muscles of the body - games and

play where children crawl, walk, run, jump, kick and throw. Whole-body play of almost any kind, especially outdoor play, provides the movement that children need. Play that uses the hands and fingers is important in developing fine-motor skills and should also be encouraged.

Active play is also important for children with a disability, who are sometimes sheltered from the rough and tumble of childhood games. Some activities may have to be modified to ensure children's safety and to help them have success.

Active play is vigorous enough if children are breathing faster and deeper, start to sweat and get warm, can feel their heart beat faster, or have redness in their cheeks.

As parents, caregivers, and educators, it is important to do what is best for children, and this means making sure that they have enough of the right kinds of physical activity. So what activities should children be doing, and how much should they do?

Key Ideas:

Children should not go longer than 60 minutes without physical activity unless they are asleep.

Many short activities throughout the day are ideal for children.

Let children explore their play space and play equipment in a safe environment.

When children develop good habits of being physically active, along with developing good eating habits, they have an excellent chance of living long and healthy lives.

If children do not develop good habits of physical activity when they are young, they increase their risk of being overweight or obese later in life. Obesity is linked to an increased risk of health problems including diabetes, stroke, and heart disease. Obesity is

Funded by the Interprovincial Sport and Recreation Council.



For more information check out:

www.canadiansportforlife.ca

www.phecanada.ca

www.caringforkids.cps.ca

www.healthycanadians.gc.ca

www.pch.gc.ca/progs/sc/index-eng.cfm

www.phac-aspc.gc.ca

www.cich.ca/Publications_childdevelopment.html

How much physical activity¹?

Canada has not yet developed formal physical activity recommendations for children under the age of 6. While we don't yet have a strong enough evidence base for how much and what type of physical activity is best for young children, children should be physically active for a short time during every hour they are awake. Children do much better with lots of short bursts of high-energy activity, since short activities help keep kids happy and prevent boredom. The following guidelines are taken from the Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth (2010).

For Infants (up to one year): Daily activity is important, so provide toys and simple objects that encourage infants to move and do things for themselves.

Toddlers (1-3 years): At least 30 minutes of adult-organized activity daily and from 60 minutes to several hours per day of unstructured physical activity is recommended - especially outside activity, like playing in the park. Toddlers should not be inactive for longer than 60 minutes, except when sleeping.

Preschoolers (3-5 years): At least 60 minutes of structured physical activity every day, and from 60 minutes to several hours of daily unstructured physical activity is recommended. Outside activities and play are especially important. Preschoolers should not be inactive for longer than 60 minutes, except when sleeping.

Reducing screen time is also important

Screen time is the amount of time children spend watching television, movies, or DVDs, as well as the time they spend playing computer or electronic games.

Children up to 2 years of age should not spend any time watching television (or any other screen time), and children from ages 3 to 5 should be limited to no more than 1 to 2 hours of screen time each day.

At what age should physical activity start?

As soon as possible! Encourage children to roll over and crawl by putting favorite toys or stuffed animals at the edge of their reach. Don't put it too far away and let them play with it when they've reached it!

It is important to remember to provide a safe, stimulating, and interesting environment in which children can physically explore their world.

Kinds of activities

There are lots of good activities that will help children develop, and details can be found in the companion "one-pagers" about good physical activities for children. There are separate documents for

children in the first year of life, for children from one to three, and for children aged three to six.

Children need to learn many different types of activities which can be broken down into the following broad categories:

Body control skills - like balance, moving the arms and legs in rhythmic ways to songs and music, as well as developing coordination.

Locomotor skills - like crawling, walking, running, skipping jumping, leaping, rolling - and other ways to get from one place to another.

Sending and receiving skills - like rolling a ball, throwing, catching, kicking and hitting things with a bat or stick.

Children should also play in different environments, so they learn to be active indoors and outside, on ice, in the snow, and in water. Always keep in mind that children learn best when they can play in a safe, stimulating and interesting environment, and have good adult role models.

What is meant by....

Physical activity and active play: Both terms mean much the same thing. People who work in early childhood education usually use the term active play, while people in health, recreation and sport often use the term physical activity. Both mean moving about and using all of the large muscles in the body.

Structured play: Means children's play in which an adult has input. The adult often controls where the play takes place, initiates the play, controls what toys or equipment the children have available, and intervenes or participates in the play.

Unstructured play: This is play that is initiated by and controlled by the children themselves. It may be under adult supervision, but the role of the adult is to maintain safety and provide any needed support.

¹ Guidelines for physical activity taken from: Active Healthy Kids Canada. *Healthy Habits Start Earlier Than You Think. The Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth. 2010; Toronto, ON. pp 7.*

Funded by the Interprovincial Sport and Recreation Council.



For more information check out:

www.canadiansportforlife.ca

www.phecanada.ca

www.caringforkids.cps.ca

www.pch.gc.ca/progs/sc/index-eng.cfm

www.phac-aspc.gc.ca

www.cich.ca/Publications_childdevelopment.html

www.healthycanadians.gc.ca

Reproduction by educational and not-for-profit organizations encouraged - all other rights reserved.