

Eyes on



Physical activity and young children

A fun and healthy habit



Centre of Excellence
for Early Childhood
Development



STRATEGIC KNOWLEDGE
CLUSTER ON EARLY

child development

PARENTS



“The early years represent the perfect time to introduce physical activity as a life-long healthy habit.”

What do we know?

- Physical activity is a part of your child’s daily routine. Playing ball, running, and jumping are all vigorous activities. Children are active even when standing and painting, dressing up in costumes, and walking, but are not when they sit or lie down to watch TV, read or draw.
- The early years represent the perfect time to introduce physical activity as a life-long healthy habit.
- Physical activity has positive effects on your child’s physical (healthy weight and blood pressure) and mental health (psychological well-being). In the long term, it can also prevent cardiovascular diseases and promote bone health, motor skills, and the social and emotional development of your child.
- Excess weight and obesity can be prevented through physical activity in young children.
- Many young children do not participate in sufficient physical activity to remain healthy.
- Children are more active when their parents have an active lifestyle and participate in physical activity with them. Boys are more active than girls.
- The more children play outside, the more active they are likely to be.
- When young children are inactive (for example, watching television), they are at risk for developing weight problems. Preschool children who watch more than 2 hours of television a day are more likely than others to experience health and developmental problems.
- There is no evidence that using electronic media can benefit your child’s health or education under the age of 2. In fact, in children who watch a lot of television in these first few years, it has been shown that:
 - They are likely to experience problems with their attention span later on.
 - They are at risk for developing language and memory difficulties.
 - They tend to experience more difficulties in school than children who do not watch a lot of television.
- For children who attend child care facilities on a regular basis, the setting can play a crucial role in ensuring that they get the amount of physical activity they need.

Paying attention to...

What can be done?

... your child's participation in physical activities.

- Provide unstructured and structured activities that your child can participate in and enjoy (walk, play ball, climb in a jungle gym, bike).
- If your child can walk, allow him or her to be active for at least 3 hours a day.
- Emphasize fun and participation rather than competition, and be a play partner for your child.
- Encourage your child to spend time outdoors, ideally several hours every day.
- Make sure your daughter and your son are equally active.
- Arrange a play partner for your child to motivate him or her to be active.

... long periods of inactivity.

- Take care that your child is not inactive for more than one hour at a time (except for sleeping).
- Divide long car trips by 10 to 15 minute energizing breaks.
- Whenever possible, encourage your child to walk rather than sit in a stroller.

... the time spent using television and electronic media.

- Ban televisions and game consoles from your child's bedroom and child-care centre.
- Discourage the use of television and electronic media with children under 2, and limit it to 1 hour a day for children between 2 and 5.

... be a role model for your child.

- Be active and have fun with your child with activities such as bike riding, playing hide-and-seek or playing with a ball.

... the child care environment.

- Look for a setting that has adequate outdoor space, equipment and shading areas.
- Choose a setting where the staff is trained in physical activity for young children.



Information

This Key Message is a publication of the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development (CEECD) and the Strategic Knowledge Cluster on Early Child Development (SKC-ECD). These organizations identify and summarize the best scientific work on early childhood development. They disseminate this knowledge to a variety of audiences in formats and languages adapted to their needs.

For a more in-depth understanding of physical activity, consult this topic (synthesis and experts' articles) in the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, available free of charge at www.child-encyclopedia.com.

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In this document, the masculine form is used merely to simplify the text. No discrimination is intended.



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