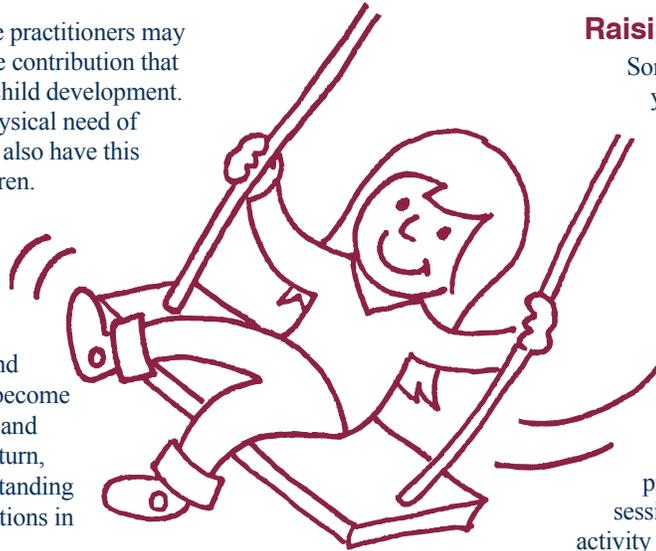




# The Value of Play for Young Children

Some early learning and child care practitioners may not be fully aware of the valuable contribution that physically active play makes to child development. However, most recognize the innate physical need of children to be physically active. Adults also have this need it's just more pronounced in children.

Physical activity is defined as any form of exercise or movement as essential for children's growth and development. It develops motor skills such as coordination, agility, balance and flexibility, allowing young children to become aware of their bodies and gain mastery and control over their body movements. In turn, children use their senses to gain understanding of their body movements and the conditions in the environment that affect movement.



## The benefits of active play

Physically active play exercises young bodies and develops healthy living practices. Children who participate in and enjoy active play are more likely to engage in physical activity as adults.

In addition to motor coordination and body awareness, spin-off benefits arise from physical activity experiences. For example, children develop creativity, confidence, emotional flexibility and social skills through physically active play. Children's perceptual and cognitive skills and processes are also enhanced through physical activity and motor movement.

## Active play and brain development

During the early years, active play experiences help develop the child's brain or neural pathways. The human brain has some 10 billion interconnected nerve cells with thousands of extensions. This interlacing of nerve fibres and their junctions allows a nerve impulse to follow any of a virtually unlimited number of pathways. In the early months of life, the human brain is programmed to develop multiple pathways as it matures and experiences its environment. Early experiences influence how a child's brain becomes structured and how the mind develops. Everyday experiences trigger neuronal development within the brain, and the more areas of the brain that are stimulated and used, the more pathways and networks that are established. This process strengthens the young child's development.

## Raising awareness in parents

Some Canadian parents want their young children to learn through traditional teacher-directed methods. These parents believe less time should be spent in play and more in academic preparation for the formal school system. As a result, in early learning and child care programs, activities and experiences that support academic skills may be highly valued by parents.

Practitioners may find it useful to provide handouts and information sessions explaining the value of physical activity play and the relationship to cognitive, social and emotional development. A parent

handout describing examples of physical activities from your program or activities for children and families would also be of value. Remind the parents that children require the opportunity to practice skills in order to master them.

## Active play supports child development because it . . .

- promotes health for a lifetime
- maintains a healthy weight
- strengthens muscles and cardiovascular functions/fitness
- develops movement coordination
- promotes active learning
- influences development in the cognitive, language, social and emotional domains
- encourages the development of problem solving skills
- fosters active participation and team building skills
- builds confidence and positive self-image
- is fun alone, with friends, with family

### Self-reflective experience



- ▷ Young children need physically active play because . . .
- ▷ Parents can be a centre's partners in design and implementation of physically active children's play by . . .