



Bringing Back Physical Activity Play in Childhood

Currently more than 43 per cent of children under 12 are considered overweight and are at risk for related health problems. In light of this, those caring for children are taking a closer look at the opportunities they offer for young children to take part in physically active play and to develop healthy lifestyles.

A number of factors have led to a decline in physical activity in childhood in recent years, including:

- Emphasis on children's cognitive development and academic skills — over motor skills. This emphasis ignores the interrelationship among the four development domains: cognitive, social/emotional, language/linguistic and physical.
- An increase in the use of and the age of beginning to play video and computer games.
- Increased fear of injury (and litigation) due to physical activities, which tend to be more “risky.”
- Concerns about the safety of neighborhoods and community play settings.

Most early learning and child care programs support a child's developing physical domain by including active play daily. However, like any program component, physical activity playtimes need to be regularly reassessed. How are the playtimes being delivered? What is the quality of the experience? How much time is allotted for physical activity play?

Because physical play is so important to the health and development of young children, experts recommend that practitioners observe, assess and adjust their early childhood programming to make physical activity a prominent, daily feature.

Tips to help you evaluate your program's physical activity

- Revisit your knowledge, thoughts and feelings about the purpose of child's play. You may be more comfortable with cognitive learning and less aware of the contributions of active play.
- Discuss the values of physical play, noting similarities and differences among social, emotional, cognitive and physical play values. Explore how physically active play supports the development of each domain.
- Explore your feelings about physical activity experiences in terms of risk management and in relation to provincial child care regulations.
- Identify the influences of effective role modeling of physical activity and current practices. Are parents and practitioners modeling a healthy active lifestyle for the children?



- Assess the available indoor and outdoor play spaces for their usefulness in offering physical activity experiences for the children. What experiences can be offered in small spaces and what can be offered in the outside play area or within the community?
- Assess the effectiveness of play environments for physical activity experiences that support inclusive practice.
- Consider physical activities that parents and practitioners enjoy that might also interest children.
 - Identify your program's promising practices related to physical activity. Use these practices as a foundation for planning ways to increase the physical components.
- Discuss how the planning and documentation of physical activity experiences fits with programming in child-initiated and child-centered play environments.

Challenges to physical activity programming

- Perception that physical play (outdoor play) infringes on time necessary for academic learning.
- Attitudes about risk, weather conditions and cultural appropriateness.
- Inadequate indoor and outdoor play environments for inclusive play experiences that are developmentally appropriate.
- Inadequate knowledge; skills and attitudes emphasized in post-secondary early childhood education curriculum and student experiences.
- Variation in the interpretation of provincial standards for child care playground equipment and play materials.
- Limited access to resources, materials and programs.
- Limited access to early learning and child care practitioners who can model effective physical activity practices.

The physical activity program element is at the very centre of a child's development. Each decision to make program improvements provides an opportunity for early learning and child care staff to learn, set effective goals, develop as a team and broaden understanding of the mandate for quality early learning experiences.

- ▶ Participating in physically active experiences requires the use of cognitive and social/emotional processes as well as physical skill. Therefore in the overall children's program design, it would seem . . .
- ▶ It is possible to plan a child-centred children's program that would meet a centre's outcomes through physically active experiences alone. This could be achieved by . . .