
PHYSICAL ACTIVITY GUIDELINES FOR INFANTS & TODDLERS

As the United States begins to respond to the growing epidemic of childhood obesity, more and more organizations are recommending increasing the physical activity levels for youth. These recommendations have grown to include infants and toddlers. Dr. Jane Clark, professor and chair of the Department of Kinesiology at the University of Maryland, chaired the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) Early Childhood Physical Activity Guidelines Task Force that consisted of motor development experts, movement specialists, exercise physiologists and medical professionals. The purpose of this task force was to provide teachers, parents, caregivers and health care professionals with guidelines that address the kinds of physical activity, the environment and the individuals responsible for facilitating the physical activity.

With babies and young children confined to carriers, strollers, play pens, and car seats for hours at a time, developmental delays in such movement patterns as rolling over, crawling, walking and even cognitive development may occur. Such restrictions can begin the path to sedentary preferences and childhood obesity. Infants should be encouraged to be physically active from the beginning of life. That is among the recommendations of the first physical activity guidelines specifically designed to meet the developmental needs of infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

While the relationship between physical activity and health in adults and older children has been highlighted by various national health organizations and government agencies in the last decade, the importance of physical activity for infants, toddlers and preschoolers have not been addressed until now.

"Adopting a physically active lifestyle early in life increases the likelihood that infants and young children will learn to move skillfully," said Dr. Clark. "Promoting and fostering enjoyment of movement and motor skill confidence and competence at an early age will help to ensure healthy development and later participation in physical activity."

Guidelines for Infants

There are five guidelines for each age group and they are intended to answer questions relative to the kind of physical activity, the environment and the individuals responsible for facilitating the activity. Part of the infant's day should be spent with a caregiver or parent who provides systematic opportunities for planned physical activity. These experiences should incorporate a variety of baby games such as peek-a-boo and pat-a-cake and sessions in which the child is held, rocked, carried and introduced to new environments.

- Guideline 1. Infants should interact with parents and/or caregivers in daily physical activities that are dedicated to promoting the exploration of their environment.
- Guideline 2. Infants should be placed in safe settings that facilitate physical activity and do not restrict movement for prolonged periods of time.
- Guideline 3. Infants' physical activity should promote the development of movement skills.
- Guideline 4. Infants should have an environment that meets or exceeds recommended safety standards for performing large muscle activities.
- Guideline 5. Individuals responsible for the well-being of infants should be aware of the importance of physical activity and facilitate the child's movement skills.

Guidelines for Toddlers and Preschoolers

For toddlers, basic movement skills such as running, jumping, throwing and kicking do not just appear because a child grows older, but emerge from an interaction between hereditary potential

and muscle memory produced from movement experience. These behaviors are also clearly influenced by the environment. For example, a child who does not have access to stairs may be delayed in stair climbing and a child who is discouraged from bouncing and chasing balls may lag in hand-eye coordination.

- Guideline 1. Toddlers should accumulate at least 30 minutes daily of structured physical activity; preschoolers at least 60 minutes.
- Guideline 2. Toddlers and preschoolers should engage in at least 60 minutes and up to several hours per day of daily, unstructured physical activity and should not be sedentary for more than 60 minutes at a time except when sleeping.
- Guideline 3. Toddlers should develop movement skills that are building blocks for more complex movement tasks; preschoolers should develop competence in movement skills that are building blocks for more complex movement tasks.
- Guideline 4. Toddlers and preschoolers should have indoor and outdoor areas that meet or exceed recommended safety standards for performing large muscle activities.
- Guideline 5. Individuals responsible for the well-being of toddlers and preschoolers should be aware of the importance of physical activity and facilitate the child's movement skills.

During the preschool years, children should be encouraged to practice movement skills in a wide variety of activities and settings. Instruction and positive reinforcement is critical during this time in order to ensure that children develop most of these skills before entering school.

"Obesity is a major health problem in children and adolescents. Over the past 20 years, obesity has tripled among adolescents and doubled among children in this country," said Nazrat Mirza, MD, a general pediatrician at Children's National Medical Center, Washington, D.C. "The rapid rise of obesity is due to decreased physical activity and increased sedentary activities such as watching television and computer and video games."

"Prevention and treatment of obesity entails changes in lifestyle that promote physical activity and minimize sedentary behavior," said Dr. Mirza. "Although there is no data to show strong correlation between obesity in early childhood and adult obesity, promoting positive behaviors early on in childhood may lead to persistence of these behaviors into adulthood - helping alleviate the problem of obesity."

According to NASPE Executive Director Judy Young, Ph.D., "Because children are not small adults, these activity recommendations are based specifically on the developmental characteristics of children. For instance, children develop skills through involvement in physical activity and parent involvement plays a significant role in children developing motor competence and enjoying physical activity. Only through devoting time to these skills will they become a regular part of a healthy lifestyle. Children and youth who do not participate in adequate physical activity are much more likely to be sedentary as adults than children and youth who are active."

It is never too early to begin encouraging a healthy and active lifestyle. Exposing youth, including infants and toddlers, to appropriately challenging and exciting physical opportunities will result in longer, healthier and more productive lives.