

# GET THE FACTS: Physical Activity is Key for Young Kids' Health (Ages 3 through 5)

Early childhood is a critical time to establish movement skills and learn healthy habits. Regular physical activity is vital for healthy growth and development.

- ▶ Being active improves bone health,<sup>1-3</sup> helps maintain a healthy weight,<sup>2,3</sup> and strengthens important muscles in the bodies of young children.<sup>1</sup>

Young kids should get at least three hours each day of total physical activity to enhance their growth and development.<sup>3,5</sup>

- ▶ Many (but not all) young children get recommended levels of physical activity.<sup>4,5</sup>
- ▶ Participating in a variety of activities like playing dress up, or more moderate intensity activities like riding tricycles, and more vigorous intensity activities like skipping and jumping helps young children grow up healthy.
- ▶ However, only about one-third of kids' physical activity during child care hours is done at moderate-to-vigorous intensity levels.<sup>6</sup>

Increasing physical activity in early care and education settings is a national health priority.<sup>7</sup>

- ▶ Only about one-third of physical activity that happens during a child's time in an early care and education setting is done at moderate-to-vigorous intensity levels.<sup>6</sup> Most opportunities should allow for moderate-to-vigorous intensity movements, like running.<sup>8</sup>
- ▶ Every day, early educators can offer multiple active play opportunities, like playing on a playground, in addition to structured activities, like playing tag.
  - ✓ Planning safe, fun outdoor activities that can occur in imperfect weather<sup>7,8,9</sup> and integrating physical activity into educational lessons can help children move more.<sup>4,10</sup>
- ▶ Young kids are generally physically active in short bursts,<sup>8,11</sup> so offering a variety of activities and opportunities throughout the day can help young kids accumulate enough movement.
- ▶ While in early care and education settings, all young children should have about 15 minutes per hour of active and outdoor play opportunities (or about two hours per eight-hour day in care).<sup>4,8</sup>





## Early care and education settings are important places for helping the children who spend time there to move more.<sup>11</sup>

- ▶ Having open spaces and accessible portable play equipment, like balls or soft building blocks, can promote physical activity for all children,<sup>4,12-14</sup> even in smaller early care spaces.
- ▶ Children should have daily opportunities to play outside.<sup>4,8,13</sup>
- ▶ Early care educators can support physical activity through:
  - ✓ Modifying games and activities to help all children stay moving throughout the duration of the activity, including children with disabilities or lower fitness levels.<sup>15,16</sup>
  - ✓ Participating in physical activity with the children.\* This motivates children to move,<sup>10,17</sup> especially those who are less active.<sup>17</sup>
  - ✓ Sharing ideas for games to play or suggesting ways to go back into games to help children stay moving.<sup>17</sup>
  - ✓ Not taking physical activity opportunities away from children as a punishment.<sup>4,8</sup>

### \*Added benefit!

*Initiating and engaging in physical activity with children can help educators be more physically active too. Being physically active reduces the risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and depression and also leads to better sleep and less anxiety.<sup>3</sup>*

## WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

See the list of references for this fact sheet: [www.hsph.harvard.edu/prc/priority-areas/physical-activity/pa-young-kids-fact-sheet](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/prc/priority-areas/physical-activity/pa-young-kids-fact-sheet)

The following additional resources may be useful to:

- ✓ *Help children move more*
  - Stolley M. Hip Hop to Health Jr. SNAP-Ed Toolkit. Available at <https://snapedtoolkit.org/interventions/programs/hip-hop-to-health-jr>
  - Go NAP SACC (Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care). Available at <https://gonapsacc.org>
- ✓ *Provide more guidance on physical activity and young children*
  - Early Care and Education. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2021. Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/strategies/childcareece.html>
  - Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2018. Available at [https://health.gov/sites/default/files/2019-09/Physical\\_Activity\\_Guidelines\\_2nd\\_edition.pdf](https://health.gov/sites/default/files/2019-09/Physical_Activity_Guidelines_2nd_edition.pdf)
  - Health Benefits of Physical Activity for Children. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2022. Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/basics/adults/health-benefits-of-physical-activity-for-children.html>

## SUGGESTED CITATION

Get the Facts: Physical Activity is Key for Young Kids' Health (Ages 3 through 5). Prevention Research Center on Nutrition and Physical Activity Team at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA; May 2022.

*This work is supported by The JPB Foundation and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U48DP006376). The findings and conclusions are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or other funders. The information provided here is intended to be used for educational purposes. Links to other resources and websites are intended to provide additional information aligned with this educational purpose.*