

Fact Sheet

Interventions to increase physical activity in the early years

Most successful physical activity interventions have been based in child care settings. To get enough physical activity though, children should be encouraged to be playful throughout the day in all settings. Research into successful programmes for increasing physical activity in the early years has shown:

- Children need both structured activities and time to be creative. When adding new structured physical activity sessions to the curriculum, they should not replace free play.
- Children acquire more physical activity when offered additional short breaks rather than increasing the time of a single break.
- Programmes to increase physical activity were successful when delivered for 30-45 minutes, 5-6 days a week for up to 12 weeks.
- Structured physical activity sessions are also beneficial for increasing motor skill development. These sessions have focused on fundamental movement skills; body management; physical fitness and dance.
- Programmes for promoting motor skill development were most successful when sessions were delivered for 30-45 minutes, 2-3 days a week for 20 weeks.
- If extra playground equipment is provided during breaks, children increased their physical activity levels.
- Additional teacher training in ways to integrate physical activity into the curriculum was found to be effective in increasing physical activity.
- Even when an intervention is delivered in an early years setting, to see lasting changes in a child's behaviour it is important to involve the parents.
- When developing programmes to increase physical activity, it has been suggested:
  - Interventions should be targeted at parents/carers but the outcomes should be focused on children's physical activity levels.
  - The literacy of parents and care givers should be taken into account when publishing materials.
- Key elements of an intervention should:
  - be modelled through older peers or a role model such as the parents, carers or teachers
  - be incorporated into daily activities without affecting the pre- or post-care activities
  - include techniques to facilitate skill development.

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Implications for practice

In order to help children in the early years increase their physical activity levels, everyone has an important role to play. Below are listed action points for the different groups involved in planning and implementing physical activity programmes in the early years.

Policy makers should:

- take action to promote physical activity in the early years through policy measures
- review early year curriculums, giving consideration to how structured physical activity sessions can be incorporated into the programme's requirements
- consider the knowledge and expertise of early years staff and provide appropriate training and support to help successfully deliver physical activity programmes
- make certain all families are able to use suitable play areas in the local communities.

Practitioners should:

- provide children in their care with opportunities to learn and practise new movement patterns and skills
- ensure children, on a regular basis, have equal access to lots of small play equipment, everyday objects and props
- ensure all play opportunities are available to girls and boys alike
- modify break times to encourage shorter more focused sessions of outdoor active play
- take advantage of training courses and resources which update their knowledge and understanding of early years physical development
- work with parents to help them understand the importance of early movement experiences to the physical and psychological health and well-being of their child.

Parents/carers should:

- provide lots of opportunities for their child to be active on a daily basis, especially in a variety of outside environments
- work with their child's early years setting to:
  - keep up-to-date with the physical activity experiences their child is having
  - provide similar/new movement opportunities at home
  - send their child suitably dressed to participate in both indoor and outdoor activities whatever the weather
- be an active role model by participating in physical activity both by themselves and with their child
- give both boys and girls the same chance to try a variety of active play experiences.

References

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