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## PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN THE EARLY YEARS

### ***Introduction***

Active living is part of a healthy lifestyle in which physical activity is valued as part of daily living. Early childhood is the ideal time for children to develop healthy lifestyle attitudes and behaviours. For young children, daily physical activity is not only essential for healthy growth and development; it also lays a foundation for a lifetime of health through active living.

Although it may seem that young children are naturally active, over the past 20 years children have become less active. In fact, recent research suggests that more than half of Canadian children and youth are not active enough for optimal growth and development. The decrease in children's physical activity has been affected by many things like safety concerns, demanding schedules, TVs, computers and video games, and other modern conveniences.

Child care providers spend many hours with children in their care. This creates a unique opportunity to make a difference by promoting physical activity opportunities and active living values with these children. By offering a program that integrates physical activity into the daily curriculum, child care providers not only support the optimal growth and development of children in their care, they increase the likelihood that these children will become active, healthy adults.

There are many resources available to support child care providers to integrate physical activities into the daily curriculum. This section has been adapted using Best Start, 2011 and CSEP guidelines, 2012. Additional information and complete downloadable documents can be accessed by following the website information in the resources section of this chapter.

## PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT

Childhood health and developmental problems caused by inactivity are increasing. To prevent these problems all infants, toddlers and preschoolers must be encouraged to be physically active. One long-term benefit is that active children are more likely to lead active healthy lifestyles as adults. In addition to providing many health-related benefits, physical activity is instrumental in the optimal development of motor, cognitive, emotional and social skills in young children.

For young children, play is often synonymous with what is called physical activity. Within the field of psychology, play has been described as 'the work of children.' Research shows that through structured and unstructured play, children develop fundamental movement skills. In turn this enhances the development of cognitive, social and emotional skills. Simply put, for young children, moving is learning.

Physical inactivity is usually associated with health risks like unnecessary weight gain and obesity, heart and bone diseases, some cancers, and type 2 diabetes (which has been observed in children with obesity). Growth and developmental impacts for a young child are often overlooked. The risks of being under active are even greater for young children because cognitive, social, emotional and physical development is intertwined.

Physically under-active young children tend to have under-developed fundamental motor skills. When children do not develop these fundamental motors skills it sets them up for failure. As a result, they are less likely to choose to be physically active as they grow up.

Being physically active helps young children to:

- Establish and strengthen networks between the body and the brain
- Build the foundations for moving, learning, and communicating
- Develop physically, intellectually, socially and emotionally
- Be healthy, happy, and confident
- Achieve their full developmental potential

## PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND ACTIVE LIVING PROGRAM INTEGRATION

Integration means that physical activities are planned and organized by child care providers every day as part of the curriculum. When young children experience the joy of moving, they learn to value physical activity and are more likely to continue to be physically active throughout their lives. As part of program integration, it is important that child care providers demonstrate and teach positive attitudes towards physical activity. Children also need to understand the benefits and necessity of physical activity, and can be taught this by discussing what happens to their bodies when they are being physically active.

There are many ways to integrate physical activity and active living values into the daily curriculum:

- Have children act out the words in books and songs
- Read books about people who lead active lives
- Go on a nature walk while learning about the environment
- Have children use their bodies to create shapes, number and letters
- Have children count physical movements
- Display photos of the children being active or posting images of children moving and playing actively
- Be an active role model by participating in structured and unstructured physical activities

# **Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines for the Early Years 0-4 years, 2012**

## Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines

**FOR THE EARLY YEARS - 0 – 4 YEARS**

### **Guidelines:**

For healthy growth and development:

-  Infants (aged less than 1 year) should be physically active several times daily – particularly through interactive floor-based play.
-  Toddlers (aged 1–2 years) and preschoolers (aged 3–4 years) should accumulate at least 180 minutes of physical activity at any intensity spread throughout the day, including:
  -  A variety of activities in different environments;
  -  Activities that develop movement skills;
  -  Progression toward at least 60 minutes of energetic play by 5 years of age.
-  More daily physical activity provides greater benefits.

#### **Being active as an infant means:**

- Tummy time
- Reaching for or grasping balls or other toys
- Playing or rolling on the floor
- Crawling around the home

#### **Being active as a toddler or preschooler means:**

- Any activity that gets kids moving
- Climbing stairs and moving around the home
- Playing outside and exploring their environment
- Crawling, brisk walking, running or dancing

The older children get, the more energetic play they need, such as hopping, jumping, skipping and bike riding.

#### **Being active can help young kids:**

- Maintain a healthy body weight
- Improve movement skills
- Increase fitness
- Build healthy hearts
- Have fun and feel happy
- Develop self-confidence
- Improve learning and attention

#### **All activity counts. Try these tips to get young kids moving:**

- Create safe spaces for play.
- Play music and learn action songs together.
- Dress for the weather and explore the outdoors.
- Make time for play with other kids.
- Get where you're going by walking or biking.

**Any way, every day.  
Get active together!**



Available from: [www.csep.ca/guidelines](http://www.csep.ca/guidelines)

# **Canadian Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines for the Early Years 0-4 years, 2012**

## **Canadian Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines**

**FOR THE EARLY YEARS - 0 – 4 YEARS**

### **Guidelines:**

-  For healthy growth and development, caregivers should minimize the time infants (aged less than 1 year), toddlers (aged 1–2 years) and preschoolers (aged 3–4 years) spend being sedentary during waking hours. This includes prolonged sitting or being restrained (e.g., stroller, high chair) for more than one hour at a time.
-  For those under 2 years, screen time (e.g., TV, computer, electronic games) is not recommended.
-  For children 2–4 years, screen time should be limited to under one hour per day; less is better.

#### **The Lowdown on the Slowdown: what counts as being sedentary**

Sedentary behaviours are those that involve very little physical movement while children are awake, such as sitting or reclining:

- in a stroller, high chair or car seat
- watching television
- playing with non-active electronic devices such as video games, tablets, computers or phones

#### **Spending less time being sedentary can help young kids:**

- Maintain a healthy body weight
- Develop social skills
- Behave better
- Improve learning and attention
- Improve language skills

#### **So cut down on sitting down. To reduce young children's sedentary time, you can:**

- Limit use of playpens and infant seats when baby is awake.
- Explore and play with your child.
- Stop during long car trips for playtime.
- Set limits and have rules about screen time.
- Keep TVs and computers out of bedrooms.
- Take children outside every day.

**There's no time like right now  
to get up and get moving!**



Available from: [www.csep.ca/guidelines](http://www.csep.ca/guidelines)

## *Infant Activities*

Physical activities for infants are those activities that help them explore their world.

Infants should be free and encouraged to move whenever possible. Stimulating environments that encourage infants to move and explore their world enhance motor skill development. For babies, physical activity means encouraging reaching, playing interactively (gentle limb manipulation, pulling to stand, row your boat) and plenty of time on the floor for "tummy time" and to practice rolling, sitting and crawling skills.

Infant physical activity and motor skill development can be hindered by the overuse of infant carriers, seats, swings, play yards, "exersaucers", jumpers and strollers. Infants whose physical activity opportunities are restricted may experience delays in motor skill development and other areas of development. Restricting infant physical activity may also begin the path to sedentary preferences.

## *Toddler Activities*

In toddlers, the transition from crawling to standing, walking and running is a natural and normal part of growing and experiencing movement. Toddlers need both structured and unstructured physical activities to enhance the development of many emerging fundamental motor skills.

Child care providers should encourage toddlers to experiment and discover their environment, play actively with other children and imitate adult roles and actions. An environment that stimulates physical activity provides toys, objects and equipment that children can ride, push, throw, pull, balance on, climb on and jump from safely.

To encourage motor skill development it is essential that child care providers provide structured physical activities for toddlers like:

- walking and running games (tag, stop and go, change movement)
- follow the leader games (animal imitation games, body awareness games)
- obstacle courses
- ball play – throwing, kicking, hitting and batting
- rhythm, music and dance activities (marching band, hopping and dancing games)
- balance activities and games (balance beam - not more than 25 cm off ground)

## **Preschooler Activities**

Preschoolers need to learn and refine basic motor skills. It is critical to ensure that children develop most of the fundamental skills before entering school. Child care providers can encourage preschoolers to practice movement skills by providing fun activities that can be done individually, with a partner and with a small group.

Unstructured activities should encourage preschoolers to climb, balance, swing, hang, ride and slide. Preschoolers can practice these skills by exploring large outdoor toys and equipment, including wheeled vehicles and preschool playground equipment with surfaces of varying heights.

To encourage motor skill development it is essential that child care providers provide more structured physical activities for preschoolers like:

- walking and running games (tag, stop and go, change directions, change movements)
- follow the leader games (animal imitation games, body awareness movement games)
- obstacle courses
- ball play – throwing, catching, bouncing, kicking, hitting and batting
- rhythm, music and dance activities (marching band, hopping and dancing games)
- balance activities and games (balance beam – not more than 50 cm off ground)
- blanket and parachute games

## **Promote Cooperative Play and Participation**

Child care providers can create an environment that encourages cooperative play by emphasizing fun, participation and challenge when planning physical activities. When physical activities are fun they maximize participation. Make sure when planning physical activities to ensure no child is excluded or eliminated from play. Consider if equipment is required to participate in an activity and ensure sufficient equipment is available for all children to participate. There may be some competition, but games can be modified to maximize participation so that instead of losing or sitting out, children can continue to participate. Participation is also maximized when the child care provider is an active role model. Participation rates increase when child care providers engage in play and physical activity with children.

### Safety Considerations

Safety should be a prime consideration when designing and implementing physical activities for young children. Children will gain more confidence about their physical abilities in an environment that reduces the likelihood of harm. One way child care providers can identify possible hazards is through visualization. By going through the daily curriculum and imagining children playing the activities, possible dangerous areas or conditions can be identified. Identify factors related to the children themselves, the play equipment, toys, play surfaces and the environment, and the required supervision.

### Safety – Children

- Ensure appropriate clothing and footwear is worn (no dangling jewelry, scarves or drawstrings, non-restrictive clothing with no loose ends, soft-soled, non-skid footwear, no bare feet)
- Ensure protective equipment is used and put on appropriately
- Ensure the age appropriate use of toys and playground equipment
- Safety – Play Equipment, Toys and Play Surfaces

*Please refer to the Bicycle, Car Seat, and Playground Safety section of this manual.*

### Safety – Outdoor Environment

*Please refer to the Child Care and the Environment, and Sun Safety sections of this manual.*

### Safety – Supervision

- Actively supervise young children
- Spot young children on equipment
- Teach them to wait their turn, hold handrails and not to push
- Teach basic rules of safe play
- Teach children how to use equipment safely
- Encourage cooperative play

### Limit Class Size

Class sizes and ratios should be based on Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014 (CCEYA), Part II, Section 8.

## Promote Gender Equality

It is important to promote gender equality in physical activity programming. Activities should be gender neutral so that physical activity is equally promoted in both boys and girls. To enhance the promotion of girls in physical activity, child care providers can introduce children to physically active women (athletes, coaches, officials and leaders in sport).

## Consider All Children's Abilities

An inclusive environment is one that provides the opportunity for children of all abilities and interests to participate in all activities. Child care providers can create inclusive environments by recognizing the inherent value of each child, and the right to take risks and make mistakes, the need for independence, self-determination, and the right to choice. Within an inclusive program,

- Activities are modified and individualized as necessary
- Expectations are realistic yet challenging
- Assistance is provided only to the degree required
- Dignity of risk and availability of choices are respected and fostered

## Promote Caregiver-Parent Communication

To enhance children's development at home, child care providers can share information with parents about the importance of daily physical activity. Child care providers can share the activities of the child(s) day and offer ideas to parents to continue physical activity at home to enhance the child's development in all areas.

## Implement Assessment and Evaluation

Observe children during movement activities for the purpose of assessing motor skill development, individualizing instruction, planning lessons with objectives, evaluating program effectiveness and identifying children with special needs.

## ***Actions to Move Forward***

Reflecting on the information provided in this section about physical activity and development, recommendations for infant, toddler and preschooler levels of physical activity and best practices for physical activity programs, child care providers are encouraged to:

1. Evaluate existing curriculum and teaching methods
2. Advocate for the improvement of existing programs
3. Enhance developmentally appropriate decisions about curriculum and content
4. Make informed decisions about how content is presented
5. Increase integration of movement activities into existing curricula

## **RECOMMENDED PHYSICAL ACTIVITY RESOURCES FOR CHILD CARE PROVIDERS**

To help child care providers enhance physical activity programming, several resources are available that promote physical activity with young children.

### **Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP)**

[Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines for the Early Years 0-4 years 2012](#)  
[Canadian Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines for the Early Years 2012](#)

### **Ophea - Healthy Schools Healthy Communities**

Teaching Tools

[http://teachingtools.ophea.net/activities/early-learning-resource](#)

Physical Health and Literacy Videos (Ophea, 2013)

[http://youtu.be/\\_okRtLv-7Sk](#)

[http://youtu.be/e4PjX9mXYq8](#)

[http://youtu.be/cDudzvfZdBs](#)

### **Best Start by Health Nexus Resources**

#### **Have A Ball Together Improve Physical Activity of 2-5 year olds.**

This kit contains a variety of materials in a handy, ready-to-go 'briefcase' for promoting and delivering physical activity opportunities for young children. The Toolkit includes: a binder of information, a copy of "Moving and Growing: Ages Two, Three and Four", a copy of the Rainbow Fun resource on CD, the Chief Medical Officer of Health Report "Healthy Weights, Healthy Lives", Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating: Focus on Preschoolers, a beach ball to "get the ball rolling", and other complementary materials.

[http://haveaballtogether.ca/](#)

### **Canadian Institute of Child Health**

#### **Moving and Growing: Exercises and Activities for Children from Birth to Six Years of Age.**

This series of books outlines physical activities and games for young children. Written for parents and child care providers, each booklet has suggestions for safe, age-specific play and activities to enhance motor development and physical fitness.

[http://www.cich.ca/Publications\\_childdevelopment.html#movinggrowing](#)

## **Physical Activity**

### **Public Health Agency of Canada**

A variety of resources for families, caregivers and children including guides for families and teachers, an interactive magazine for children, and a physical activity chart and stickers.

[Canada's Physical Activity Guide for Children](#)

### **Further Reading on Physical Activity**

[Canadian Standard in Exercise Science and Personal Training \(CSEP\) 2012](#)

[What the Research Says: Best Start](#)

[Resources: Best Start](#)

[Bright Futures in Practice: Physical Activity \(Georgetown University\)](#)

[www.brightfutures.org/physicalactivity/pdf/index.html](http://www.brightfutures.org/physicalactivity/pdf/index.html)

[The Benefits of Physical Activity for First Nation, Inuit and Métis Communities](#)



For additional information on local physical activity programs/resources, call Health Connection at 705-721-7520 or 1-877-721-7520