



# Physical activity

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Active play should be a part of everyday life for all children. Physical activity in childhood enhances bone strength, flexibility and coordination. Physical activity can have social, cognitive and psychological benefits. Physical activity may reduce the risk of childhood obesity. Physical activity and sedentary behaviour patterns tend to track into adulthood.

There are different forms of physical activity;

- > Running, swimming and bike-riding – improves cardiovascular fitness.
- > Climbing, jumping, skipping – improves bone and muscle strength.
- > Kicking, catching, throwing – improves hand-eye coordination skills.
- > Dancing, gymnastics – improves flexibility.
- > Group games – improves social skills, sharing and teamwork.

Currently, there are many aspects of everyday life in Australia that make it easy to be physically inactive or sedentary – we rely on cars for transport and we use the television and other screen-based items (such as computer games) for leisure and entertainment activities.

Parents, carers and staff can work together to make physical activity a priority both inside and outside of the home environment. For pre-school children, active play is the best form of physical activity. Active play involves all types of play – both indoor and particularly outdoor play. Other incidental physical activity includes 'active transport' (such as walking or riding bikes to a destination, rather than driving). Parents play important roles in developing physical activity behaviours in children through role-modelling physical activity, providing a safe and interesting backyard for children to play in and setting rules about how small screen entertainment is used in the home.<sup>1</sup> Early childhood staff can support parents and communities to encourage physical activity and also supplement this at their services.

## Health messages

These health messages are taken from Australian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for the Early years (Birth to 5 years).<sup>2</sup>

- > For health development in infants (birth to one year) physical activity, particularly supervised floor-based play in safe environments, should be encouraged from birth.
- > Toddlers (1 to 2 years) and pre-schoolers (3 to 5 years) should be physically active every day for at least three hours, spread throughout the day.
- > Children younger than 2 years of age watching television or using other electronic media (DVDs, computer and other electronic games) is not recommended.
- > For Children 2 to 5 years of age, sitting and watching television and the use of other electronic media (DVDs, computer and other electronic games) should be limited to less than one hour per day.
- > Infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers (all children birth to 5 years) should not be sedentary, restrained, or kept inactive, for more than one hour at a time, with the exception of sleeping.



<sup>1</sup> Spurrier NJ, Magarey AA, Golley R, Curnow F, Sawyer MG. Relationships between the home environment and physical activity and dietary patterns of preschool children: a cross-sectional study. *Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act*. 2008 May 30;5:31

<sup>2</sup> The Department of Health. Australia's Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines. Australian 24-Hour Movement and Guidelines for the Early Years (Birth to 5 years). Retrieved from website <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/health-pubhlth-strateg-phys-act-guidelines>

*The following health messages provide information about healthy physical activity behaviours for children and families.*

- > For healthy development in infants (birth to 1 year)
  - supervised floor-based play in safe environments should be encouraged from birth;
  - Moving helps babies to grow strong and healthy.
  - Provide a safe place for bub to play – watch them at all times.
  - Tummy time helps build strong muscles in bub's head, neck and body.
  - Babies like to move around.
  - Babies learn through play.
  - Noises help bub's brain development linked to hearing – play music and sing to bub.
  - Babies learn by touching.
  - Babies develop sight and eye strength by following objects with their eyes.
  - Playing outside helps babies to learn about the world they live in.
  - Let babies be active – try not to leave baby in a stroller, high chair or car seat for more than one hour at a time when they are awake.
- > Playing helps children develop important skills like walking, running, jumping and throwing a ball.
- > Active transport means walking or riding a bike or scooter to travel;
  - Try walking instead of driving the car.
  - Try walking instead of being in the pram or stroller.
- > Try walking or riding a scooter to preschool or school. Playing outside is important – it gives children more space to play together, make big movements and be noisy and messy.
- > Children don't need expensive toys to play with;
  - Children can play with boxes, clothes, wooden blocks, baskets, cushions, mats, pots and pans, balls, pegs, buckets, leaves and branches.
  - Make sure the things kids play with are safe and clean.
  - Remember some objects that are good for older children might not be safe for the young ones.
- > Sitting and watching television and the use of other electronic or screen-based entertainment (DVDs, computers, electronic games) should be limited.

## Examples of practical actions

- > Organise staff training for the Physical Activity Guidelines – understand the National Standards for childcare centres.
- > Organise group activities such as walk to the early childhood centre days, play groups, activity sessions.
- > Display and distribute ideas for active games/play.



### For more information

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