

HAPPE: Toddlers in Physical Play



Ms. Parish is playing chase with Don and Toni; Jackson is galloping around the “running road”; Faith is walking on stilt cups; Tamija is climbing the cargo net; and the rest of the children are busy learning fundamental motor skills and engaging in health-promoting physical play.

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Illustrations by Sandi Collins.

MANY OF TODAY’S CHILDREN AND YOUTH are at risk of becoming inactive, obese adults. An inadequate movement foundation in the early years puts children at risk for becoming inactive, overweight—or even obese—adults who may develop coronary heart disease, diabetes mellitus, and/or other chronic illnesses (NASPE 2002). To bring attention to the concern, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) in 2002 published a call to action—*Active Start*. The report recommends that toddlers accumulate at least 30 minutes of planned physical play on a daily basis. It encourages educators to be aware of the importance of physical play and to provide early learning experiences that emphasize health-promoting physical play and basic motor skills, such as running, jumping, throwing, and striking.

Educators at the Health and Human Performance Department of Auburn University, in Alabama, have made significant strides in developing and implementing a theoretically based physical activity program, High Autonomy Physical Play Environment (HAPPE). HAPPE motivates and engages toddlers in physical play and builds basic motor skills that are the foundation for lifetime activity. The program is based on the classroom research of Ames (1992), who suggests that teachers focus on six principles and strategies—task, authority, recognition, grouping, evaluation, and time—to promote a child’s intrinsic motivation to learn. The HAPPE program applies these principles and strategies as follows:

- Toddlers engage in a variety of authentic and meaningful *tasks* that match their skills and abilities. The tasks allow children to make choices according to individual interests and abilities.

- The primary *authority* within the classroom rests with the teacher, who serves as a facilitator of learning. Toddlers are actively involved in making decisions, self-management, and self-monitoring, and they have opportunities to develop leadership roles.
- Teachers offer *recognition* to individual children in response to their effort and engagement in learning. Teachers give feedback and encourage toddlers' attempts to learn a skill.



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- *Groupings* emerge naturally as toddlers choose to play alone or with another child and as they decide which skill they want to practice. More experienced toddlers may choose to play in small groups.
- Toddlers are encouraged to *evaluate* their own performance, and teachers guide toddlers through solving problems typically encountered during physical play.
- Toddlers have plenty of *time* to fully explore and practice physical play.

How to develop a HAPPE program

After 10 years of implementing HAPPE with toddlers and preschoolers, we have developed a number of strategies and activities to create a motivating, safe, learning environment that encourages effective physical play.

Introduced below are a number of strategies that have been empirically supported (Wall & Rudisill 2004; Parish, Rudisill, & St. Onge in press). These strategies promote motor skill learning and development as well as motivation to engage in healthy physical play.

Consider toddlers' developmental skills and needs

It is important to consider toddlers' skills and needs when setting up a HAPPE program. Toddlers have limited spatial and kinesthetic awareness, so they are not very skilled in maneuvering their bodies and respecting the personal space of others (Wall & Rudisill 2004). Toddlers typically have an egocentric outlook, although they will advance to a more altruistic outlook over time if given opportunities to practice. With egocentrism there is potential for conflict and misunderstanding. Toddlers tend to focus on a destination and are not likely to attend to objects or people standing between them and the destination. For instance, if they want to slide down the sliding board, they may be unaware they have pushed or pulled children off the ladder.

Egocentrism also explains why some toddlers take toys from others even if the same toy is lying nearby. Awareness of this developmental characteristic helps explain many of the toddlers' behaviors during physical play. Toddlers need help and guidance from adults as they advance toward being more altruistic.

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child-size hockey stick and ball in several areas, away from each other, and in areas where only a few children play. This decreases the possibility of children hitting each other with the stick. Offering different size balls to kick, throw, and catch in different places within the outdoor play area also reduces the chances that the children will get in each other's way.

Demonstrate active appreciation for physical play

Teachers' attitudes are extremely influential during physical play. If the teacher does not show enthusiasm and interest in going outside to play or does not engage in physical play, neither will the toddlers (Wall & Rudisill 2004; Parish, Rudisill, & St. Onge in press). Our research suggests that toddlers receive greater health benefits from physical play when the teachers model physical play and also engage in play with them. (For great ideas to get you started, see "Toddler Activities to Promote Motor Skills Inside and Outdoors" on p. 4.)

Summary

Many young children do not get the physical activity they need to grow up to be healthy adults. It is critical that children be exposed to motivating and challenging movement experiences that promote the desire to engage in physical play as well as enhance fundamental motor skill development and health-related fitness. Through developmentally appropriate, planned physical play, children advance their skills and prepare for a lifetime of physical activity and healthy living. HAPPE has been shown (Valentini, Rudisill, & Goodway 1999) to advance motor development of toddlers, positively impact their physical well-being, and improve children's understanding in other content areas.

References

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For more information on how to implement a HAPPE, see Valentini, Rudisill, and Goodway (1999) or contact Loraine E. Parish at parisle@auburn.edu or Mary E. Rudisill at rudisme@auburn.edu.

Toddler Activities to Promote Motor Skills Inside and Outdoors

Running Road. Weave a path throughout the playground with bright orange plastic squares. Toddlers can run, gallop, and mimic things moving along the running road. Vigorous aerobic activity helps develop a healthy heart and lungs.

Target Time. Around the playground hang various size targets, laminated or on bedsheets, with bells sewn on them (to give children, especially those with visual impairments, instant feedback when they hit the target). Targets may be hung on the side of a building or on a fence. Toddlers stand close to or far away from the targets to aim and throw objects of different sizes, shapes, and weights (tennis balls, beanbags, lightweight floating balls, foam cubes with dots similar to dice, balls with nubs, and so on). This activity lets toddlers challenge themselves and evaluate their own performance.

Weeble Wobble and Stilt Cups. Provide wooden balance boards or inflatable balance pads filled with varying amounts of air, so toddlers can “weeble wobble” their way to improved strength and balance. Sing songs and recite nursery rhymes to keep the children’s attention and make balancing fun. Encourage them to problem solve—for example, to discover that arms help with balance. Toddlers also like the challenge of stilt cups, which promote balance and eye-hand and eye-foot coordination.

Mountain Climbers. Set up soft play equipment and ladders so toddlers can climb and develop upper-body strength. Climbing builds strength in arms, chest, and back. A nearby adult is a must for assistance and safe play.

Jumping Beans. Offer raised surfaces (such as pads of different thicknesses—soft surfaces for unstable landings) and jumping sacks (like pillowcases) to invite toddlers to jump. Jumping builds leg strength, critical for developing fundamental locomotor skills (running, jumping, leaping, galloping, sliding, hopping, and skipping). For safety, provide adult supervision.

Chase Games. Invite toddlers to run, especially at impromptu times—let them chase you, and you chase them. Toddlers also like to chase moving objects, such as balls, rings, and floating scarves.

Bear Breaths. Recover after a session of intense physical play by taking a break for bear breaths—to breathe big and deep. This is a good way to relax and calm down before going to another activity, especially one inside the classroom.

More Games and Giggles. Toddlers love to create their own games, and teachers can encourage new ideas and novel ways to use play equipment. For example, children may tip hobbyhorses upside down to use them as brooms; fill stilt cups and turtles (sturdy plastic domes for children to stand on and balance) with sand to make birthday cakes; or wear scarves for masks. One day a child discovers that if she throws a ball up the sliding board, the ball rolls back down. The excitement builds in the group. Toddlers practice and expand the activity with gusto. Soon they try to visually track the returning

ball—and catch it.

Tracking is an important skill, whether for striking a ball or reading a book.

