



# GUIDANCE MATTERS

Dan Gartrell and Kathleen Sonsteng

## Promote Physical Activity— It's Proactive Guidance

**FIVE-YEAR-OLD JACOB** attends the preschool where I (Jackie) am student teaching. Jacob often instigates rough-and-tumble play, which sometimes gets him in trouble. One day during outdoor time, Jacob wanted to play catch with a foam football. Even though I am not athletic, I took the opportunity, hoping for a one-on-one conversation.

**Jacob:** Jackie, do you want to play catch with me?

**Jackie:** Sure I would love to play catch with you.

*(We start tossing the ball.)*

**Jackie:** You like to play catch.

**Jacob:** I play with my dad all the time. He is really good.

*(Jacob throws a really nice spiral.)*

**Jackie:** Wow! That was a nice throw. How did you do that?

**Jacob:** You put your fingers across the laces.

*(Jacob comes over and shows me where to place my fingers on the ball.)*

**Jacob:** You do it like this. Then you throw the ball. My dad taught me how to throw like that. That is how the quarterbacks throw the ball.

*(Jacob tosses the ball really hard at me.)*

**Jackie:** Hey, you threw that really hard!

**Jacob:** Yeah, I did. I work out my muscles. I do push-ups like this *(shows me the arm movements)* and I do these things *(does an impression of a sit-up)*. My dad does them too. He does them all the time.

**Jackie:** So, Jacob, what else do you like to play?

**Jacob:** I play football, baseball, soccer, and basketball.

*(I wait for him to talk again.)*

**Jacob:** I like to play games. I like to play checkers. It's a game where you have little round disks, and they are red and black. You go and jump over other people and take their pieces away from them. *(He jumps.)*

*(We continue playing catch for a while.)*

**Jacob:** Do you want to sit down and play catch?

**Jackie:** Sure, if you want to.

*(I sit on the bench and Jacob sits on the play picnic table and we start to play catch again.)*

**Teacher Emily:** OK, everyone, come in and wash your hands!

**Jackie** understood here what early childhood educators increasingly recognize: healthy child development relies on physical activity. From enjoyment in using movement skills to blood circulation that builds brains and bodies, to obesity prevention, to concept formation, the benefits of physical activity make it a must in the schedule every day. In one interaction, when Jacob describes playing checkers and suggests sitting down, he showed cognitive, linguistic, and even social-emotional learning—complete with a physical demonstration.

Because Jackie ventured outside her comfort zone in joining Jacob in physical activity, she made this situation richly educational—for herself and for Jacob. Through their shared experience, Jackie got to know Jacob better. In the future, she can use games and increased physical activity to help him and his buddies become more consistently engaged in the center program.

### Rough-and-tumble play

Some teachers worry that vigorous activity, if permitted, will degenerate into rough-and-tumble play and someone will be hurt. Many teachers have witnessed the *superhero phenomenon* in which children assume the role of make-believe heroes and become overly aggressive. Problems can be reduced, however, by using class meetings to set limits for rough-and-tumble play:

**Dan Gartrell**, EdD, is director of the Child Development Training Program and professor of early childhood and elementary education at Bemidji State University in northern Minnesota.

**Kathleen Sonsteng**, EdD, is assistant professor of early childhood and elementary education at Bemidji State University.

Thanks to student teacher Jackie McDevitt for sharing her anecdote and to Chris Amble, Jami Eischens, and Emily Erickson of Child's Garden Preschool in Bemidji. Please send your guidance anecdotes and other comments to [dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu](mailto:dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu). Children's names in all anecdotes are changed.

After a class meeting about “friendly touches only,” a teacher found this reference point helpful when he came upon a “World Wrestling Federation match” of four boys, one being sat on and yelling! The teacher discussed with them what friendly touches meant, and he got the boys to wrestle instead some “invisible space invaders.” The four got bored with the make-believe wrestling and soon became firefighters—still rough-and-tumble play, but without the aggressive undertones. (Gartrell 2000, 98)

Two practices can assist teachers in maintaining a balance between addressing children’s need for rough-and-tumble play and limiting aggression during this play. First, have guidelines that clearly ensure children’s safety. Second, promote imaginative and creative play to move beyond “narrowly scripted play that focuses on violent actions” (Levin 2003, 62). The teacher in the above example used both of these practices.

### Melding movement and learning

If teachers see the need, they can progress beyond the informal inclusion of vigorous play in the schedule. New curriculum models are effectively integrating physical activity in the educational program. Such models ensure that movement will have diverse expression in the daily schedule—a growing essential in this sit-down world. Overviews of three models follow.

**S.M.A.R.T.** (Stimulating Maturity through Accelerated Readiness Training) combines physical and learning activities to stimulate high levels of preacademic and early academic development among children (Farnham 2007). In the S.M.A.R.T. program, children complete 8–10 repetitions of an obstacle course, followed by 10–12 activity stations. The 30-minute sessions are done every day and consist of activities designed to improve hand/eye coordination, distance acuity, fine motor skills, sequencing, left/right awareness, and spatial relations.

Spinning is an example of a S.M.A.R.T. activity that encourages body awareness. While it provides focused body movement, which often helps young children sit still for longer periods of time, spinning also has been shown to stimulate the same part of the brain stimulated by prescribed impulse-control medications. Daily spinning activity may lead to doctors rethinking medication dosages for some children (Farnham 2007).

**Kids in Action** is based on the premise that children love to move. Helping children to be active in appropriate ways can have a tremendous impact on their physical, intellectual, and emotional development. Kids in Action incorporates cardiovascular endurance, muscular strength and endurance, flexibility, and body composition into activities for children in three age groups: infants (birth to 18 months), toddlers (18 to 36 months), and preschoolers (3 to 5 years) (President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports 2003).

An example of an activity recommended for preschoolers that helps to teach cooperation is the mirror game. While facing the child, ask her to do exactly as you do, as if she were looking in a mirror. This game supports children’s social-emotional development when they take turns being the leader. It also means that children have to do with their bodies what their eyes are seeing, enhancing sensory integration that will help with the development of reading and writing skills.

**I Am Moving, I Am Learning** is a proactive approach for addressing childhood obesity in Head Start children. This approach reinforces the mind-body connection and the relationship between physical fitness and early learning. One of the goals of I Am Moving, I Am Learning is to increase the amount of time spent in moderate to vigorous physical activity during daily routines. The model encourages participating centers to include at least 30 minutes daily of structured physical activity as well as 30 minutes daily of unstructured physical activity.

Some of the activities in I Am Moving, I Am Learning are rhythm stick dancing, hoop maze, dancing scarves, balance board, and scooter weaving. One outcome of this model is individual children experiencing moderate improvements on the body-mass index for age. In another outcome, teachers found that children who previously needed considerable redirection required less redirection as music and movement increased in the daily routine (Region III ACF 2006).

Centuries of cultural traditions pressure teachers to think that classrooms must be quiet places that socialize rambunctious children into sedate students. The new learning about child development means that guiding children’s energy, rather than fighting it, is at the core of developmentally appropriate practice. In workshops, we often say that the daily schedule should keep teachers in shape! We figure then the children will also be getting the movement program they need—one that respects and responds to the naturally active nature of the young child.

### To increase your knowledge

Learn more about the three models:

**Stimulating Maturity through Accelerated Readiness Training (S.M.A.R.T.)** is being used in 235 elementary schools in 12 states. S.M.A.R.T. is also being field-tested in two Head Start settings in Minnesota, with expected availability for preschool use in May 2009. Visit [www.themlrc.org](http://www.themlrc.org).

**Kids in Action: Fitness for Children** is a joint venture of the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, and the Kellogg Company. For more information, visit [www.fitness.gov](http://www.fitness.gov).

**I Am Moving, I Am Learning** is easily integrated into other community initiatives designed to address childhood obesity and family wellness. For further information, contact Amy Requa, Region III Administration for Children and Families, at (215) 592-1684, ext. 225.

Learn more about developmentally appropriate movement activities:

**Healthy Young Children: Encouraging Good Nutrition and Physical Fitness**, the cluster focus in *Young Children*, May 2006, presents a number of articles and a list of resources on movement and nutrition. Further resources appear in *Beyond the Journal*, May 2006, at <http://journal.naeyc.org/btj/200605>.

*Active for Life: Developmentally Appropriate Movement Programs for Young Children*, by S.W.Sanders, and *Follow Me Too: A Handbook of Movement Activities for Three- to Five-Year-Olds*, by M. Torbert and L. Schneider, are books on exercise and movement from NAEYC.

### Steps you can take

- Plan a change to your program that promotes physical activity. Most specialists feel that structured physical activity is just as important as vigorous free play, so together with your colleagues, plan how to enhance both.
- Research and decide on a program of indoor and outdoor activities that are developmentally appropriate for your group of children. (Remember, the object is participation, not competition nor immediate skill mastery.)

- Model and participate enthusiastically in the vigorous activities you have implemented. Involve other staff and classroom volunteers.
- Review the nutrition aspects of your program together with your colleagues. Brainstorm refinements so that nutritious meals and snacks complement your new “mind and body” program.

### References

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