

Rae Pica

Why Preschoolers Need Physical Education

A preschool director proudly tells a group of parents that physical education (PE) is part of the curriculum at his school. One mother responds, “I remember having to climb the rope and run around the track in gym class. I don’t see why my daughter has to experience anything like that.”

“I agree,” a father chimes in. “What do dodgeball and jumping jacks have to do with 4-year-olds?” In response to the parents’ concerns, the director says, “Let me explain that physical education has evolved over the years. In our PE program the children develop body and spatial awareness and practice and refine their emerging motor skills, which contributes to the likelihood that they’ll become lifelong movers.”

UNLESS THEY WERE AMONG the athletic kids or those who thrived on competition, many parents of young children may have bad memories of gym class. Even if their recollections are positive, they may see PE as mere fun and games. Some families might wonder why teachers devote time to physical education when there’s so much for children to learn and so little time.

NAEYC, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, and the US Department of Health and Human Services all recommend that preschool programs offer physical education. There are many reasons why. First, young children form healthy habits early in life. Before entering elementary school they learn to brush their teeth, bathe themselves, and eat nutritious foods. Educators can teach children about the importance of physical activity and fitness during this impressionable time.

Also, early childhood is the ideal time for acquiring fundamental movement skills because it is during this unique period that children build the basic movement abilities that are the foundation for learning more complex movement skills later in life. Motor skills do not mature on their own (Pica 2008). Not even basic body management skills—body-part identification, spatial awareness, and abilities like stopping on signal—take care of themselves to the extent that we’d want for children. Adults need to offer instruction and provide opportunities for children to practice their growing skills.

Preschool educators can teach children where their elbows and shoulders are, about the space immediately surrounding their bodies (and what

it’s possible to do within it), how to stop and start, and the many ways in which it’s possible to move. Otherwise some children will arrive in elementary school not knowing much about their body parts and movement skills. They may be unable to line up without getting too close to someone else or unable to come to a timely halt when faced with an obstacle. Such children may lack confidence in their ability to play active games like the other children. Feeling clumsy and inferior, they may shun physical activity to avoid humiliation. They may grow up with the belief that they are uncoordinated and can’t throw, dance, or engage in any physical activities.

Early childhood teachers can help children progress toward mature patterns for basic motor skills, develop healthy fitness habits, and continue to enjoy the love of movement with which they were born by including developmentally appropriate PE as a part of the regular daily schedule. Children who feel good about their physical abilities have a better overall view of themselves (Strickland 1999). “Directed play and physical education programs contribute to the development of self-esteem in elementary children” and “may be the prime determiner of future behavior” (Gruber 1985, 42). In other words, children who feel good about their movement abilities are less likely to become sedentary later in life.

TO DO MORE

Plato said, “The right education must tune the strings of the body and mind to perfect spiritual harmony.” Early childhood teachers can help young children tune their strings by planning movement activities.

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This column is available in an online archive at www.naeyc.org/yc/columns.

Create and follow a plan that offers young children instruction, practice opportunities, assessment, and the chance to fine-tune motor skills. In addition to offering outdoor play once or twice a day, intentionally address children's physical fitness and motor development by leading a dance activity during circle time and providing climbing equipment and props for physical play. Design movement activities, facilitated in 10- to 20-minute time blocks, that teach young children specific skills, as do other parts of the early childhood curriculum.

Games like Simon Says (played without the elimination process) teach children body-part identification. When children stand inside a hoop, or on a carpet square, and you invite them to reach as high, bend as low, and stretch as wide as they can, they begin to understand the realm of their personal space and what they can do within it. When you challenge them to jump, first like rabbits and then like kangaroos, they practice the locomotor skill of jumping, while also using their own weight to strengthen muscles. Additionally, they will develop the bodily control necessary for moving both lightly and strongly. If possible, have a physical education professional regularly visit your classroom. However, remember that while that would be beneficial, early childhood professionals without specific training in physical education or motor development can plan and facilitate activities like those described here.

TO LEARN MORE

These resources can support teachers in making PE part of the early childhood curriculum:

Physical Education for Young Children: Movement ABCs for the Little Ones, by Rae Pica (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2008).

Active for Life: Developmentally Appropriate Movement Programs for Young Children, by Stephen Sanders (Washington, DC: NAEYC, 2002).

Early Steps Physical Education Curriculum: Theory and Practice for Children Under 8, by Evridiki Zachopoulou, Ian Pickup, and

Niki Tsangaridou (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2009).

Head Start Body Start National Center for Physical Development and Outdoor Play—www.headstartbodystart.org.

Follow Me Too: A Handbook of Movement Activities for Three- to Five-Year Olds, by Marianne Torbert & Lynne B. Schneider (Washington, DC: NAEYC, 2005).

101 Tips for Increasing Physical Activity in Early Childhood, by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (Reston, VA: Author, 2010). www.aahperd.org/naspe

References

Gruber, J.J. 1985. "Physical Activity and Self-Esteem Development in Children: A Meta-Analysis." *The Academy Papers* 19: 30–48.

Pica, R. 2008. "Learning by Leaps and Bounds: Why Motor Skills Matter." *Young Children* 63 (4): 48–9.

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Strickland, E. 1999. "ECT Interview: How to Build Confidence through Outdoor Play." *Early Childhood Today*. www2.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=12050.

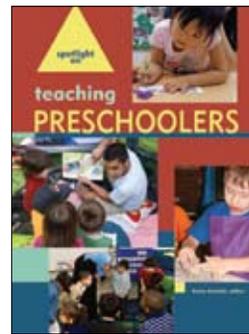
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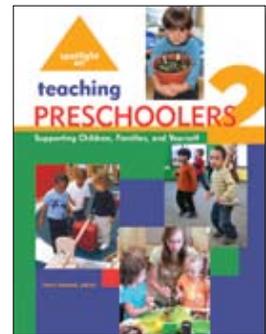
Derry Koralek, editor

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