Back to the Basics: A Movement Approach Through Active Play

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Apply It!

Through this article, readers will learn about the importance of promoting active play among young children (aged 2–6 years). Readers will gain a better understanding of the complexities of sedentary behavior and how children naturally connect with the fun nature of active play as a way of reducing sedentary behavior and increasing physical activity. Readers will learn about the different forms of active play and will be able to facilitate active play sessions with children.

Key words: Active Play, Physical Activity, Movement Guidelines, Sedentary Behavior

INTRODUCTION

Promoting physical activity is essential for encouraging and nurturing the development of children's health and well-being. The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommend that children and adolescents should participate in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) per day (1). For young children (aged 2–6 years), the recommendations call for a minimum of 3 hours of activities of varying intensities (1). Although this may seem like a lot, the Canadian 24-hour Movement Guidelines for the Early Years provide a new perspective on movement (2). Because structured physical activity only makes up a portion of a child's day, the 24-hour movement guidelines focus on all-day movement at varying intensities to reduce sedentary behavior (2).

One of the challenges of promoting these recommendations is that children are more likely to express greater enjoyment of screen-time activities compared with physical activities. New technology has conditioned children to spend more time on screens, exacerbating sedentary behaviors, especially among children younger than 3 years (3). This is problematic because opportunities for outdoor play and physical activity at school are already limited and contribute to increased sedentary behavior (4). Thus, intervening early in life is crucial because research suggests that physical activity levels tend to decline between ages 6 and 8 years (5). Furthermore, interventions to reduce sedentary time among young children have had mixed results (6).

Fitness professionals work in an industry with a broad scope of assisting and influencing children. Some fitness professionals (*e.g.*, physical education teachers, sport coaches) work directly with children, whereas others (*e.g.*, personal trainers, health club owners) work with many clients who have children and are part of influencing the health and fitness industry. Therefore, fitness professionals are in unique positions to shift physical activity messaging for young children.

When promoting physical activity, it may be beneficial to shift current health messaging from intensity- and time-based measures to something children connect to the most — play. For example, instead of asking how hard or how long a child was active, fitness

professionals should ask children if, and how they played. Reframing physical activity messaging is important for children because they are more likely to participate in physical activities they view as fun, creative, game-like, or enjoyable (7). Within this article, active play is defined as the energetic play of children where they use their large muscle groups to create movement while also stimulating their brain to support neurological and cognitive development. Active play inherently allows for creativity or games to be built into programming, which can be more powerful in promoting physical activity for young children.

When children find physical activity to be fun, they are more intrinsically motivated to participate (7). Active play promotes enjoyable physical activity and also has been shown to increase energy expenditure through bouts of MVPA (8). In addition to being fun, active play supports motor, cognitive, and social skill development (9). Thus, active play can be an effective strategy to complement the comprehensive approach of the 24-hour movement guidelines. Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to highlight the importance of active play on the growth and development of children and provide a lens for fitness professionals to engage children in active play.

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ACTIVE PLAY AND THE 24-HOUR MOVEMENT GUIDELINES

To combat sedentary behavior, fitness professionals can promote movement from a holistic perspective using the 24-hour movement guidelines. An adapted version of these guidelines is presented in Table 1, which emphasizes movement throughout the day, quality sleep, and limiting sedentary behavior (10). The guidelines aim to disrupt the cycle of sedentary behavior by adapting blocks of physical activity, such as active play, throughout the day (10).

PLAYING FOR HEALTH: THE BENEFITS OF ACTIVE PLAY

Active play benefits children through the development of fundamental movement skills, promoting healthy weight, enhancing cognitive function, promoting socio-emotional skills, and supporting enjoyment and intrinsic motivation. For example, active play helps develop fundamental movement skills, which are part of the typical human developmental patterns that prepare children for more complex tasks (9). Active play is versatile, it can be structured or unstructured, can occur anywhere, and can produce moderate to vigorous energy expenditures (8). In addition, research suggests that active play can help children with cognitive learning and memory tasks (9,11). Specifically, active play supports executive function, which is the foundation for cognitive processes (9). For young children, executive function allows them to sustain attention and regulate impulsivity (9). From a psychological perspective, active play has been shown to lower cortisol levels, which can help regulate anxiety levels (9). Lastly, active play offers children a range of activities that are self-motivated, peer-led, and lead to joyful discovery (9,12). This can lead to increased intrinsic motivation, which results in children becoming more self-determined and more likely to continue participating in active play (7,12). Compared with

TABLE 1: An Adapted Version of the 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for the Early Years (2)

Age Group	Move	Sleep	Sit
Infants (<1 year)	• Being physically active several times a day • Do tummy time or floor-based play if infant is not mobile • More is better	• 14–17 hours of sleep (0–3 months) • 12–16 hours (4–11 months) • This includes naps	• No more than 1 hour of being restrained (*e.g.*, stroller or high chair) • Avoid screen time and opt for reading or storytelling
Toddlers (1–2 years)	• At least 180 minutes of PA at any intensity throughout the day • Does not have to be all at once • More is better	• 11–14 hours of sleep with consistent bedtimes and wake-up times • Can include naps	• Not being restrained for more than 1 hour at a time • Screen time is not recommended for those <2 years • Sedentary screen time for those aged 2 years should be limited to 1 hour
Preschoolers (3–4 years)	• At least 180 minutes of PA at any intensity throughout the day • At least 60 minutes is energetic play • More is better	• 10–13 hours of sleep with consistent bedtimes and wake-up times • Can include naps	• Not being restrained for more than 1 hour at a time • Sedentary screen time should be limited to 1 hour

sedentary behavior, active play supports physical, mental, and psychosocial health (9,13). Thus, active play has the potential to be a great tool for promoting health and well-being among children.

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THE DIFFERENT FORMS OF PLAY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Different kinds of play offer children a variety of health benefits, Table 2 describes some of the main active play domains, including object, physical, and rough-and-tumble play (9). For example, object play involves using sensorimotor skills to explore objects such as toys to learn about their functions (9). Physical play is crucial for the development of fundamental movement skills, which can be effective in promoting an active lifestyle (9). Lastly, rough-and-tumble play simulates risk-taking and enables children to enhance communication, negotiation, and emotional intelligence.

A promising strategy for helping children find activities they enjoy is to view active play from a multilevel perspective. For example, as children play with their peers, they enhance their social skills, which sets the foundation for their negotiation and cooperation skills that are needed in adolescence and adulthood (9). Adults are key role models in this process and influence children's social play because children mimic the observed roles of adulthood. When looking at play from a multilevel perspective, both peer-to-peer and child-parent relationships benefit from active play breaks. When children play together, they are not only developing physical, cognitive, and social skills, but also positively reinforcing each other (4). Likewise, when parents play with their children, they model behaviors that encourage physical activity (4), which from a broader perspective aligns with the 24-hour movement guidelines because parents also benefit from the physical activity breaks.

REIMAGINING PLAY SPACES TO PROMOTE ACTIVE PLAY USING NATURE-BASED PLAY SPACES

Much like the different types of play, different environments and settings offer unique benefits, including outdoor play (12). Given the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to consider promotion of outdoor play, which can be done anywhere, both in rural and urban settings, and is adaptable and inclusive for children of varying capabilities. Providing greater outdoor opportunities allows children to accumulate more MVPA (14). Outdoor play has been shown to improve sensory integration and supports motor, cognitive, social, and

TABLE 2: The Benefits of the Different Types of Active Play

Type of Play	Definition	Benefits	Take Action Today
Physical play	Children use their bodies and activate small and large muscle groups to create movement and build their motor skills.	• Development of fundamental movement skills • Supports brain development and functioning • Decreases anxiety and disruptive behavior • Supports emotional intelligence • Promotes communication skills • Children learn to negotiate and take risks	❒ Introduce beach balls to throw and kick ❒ Rough-and-tumble play ❒ Play tag
Outdoor play	Play that takes place outdoors. Many of these activities also are adaptable for indoor spaces.	• Increases PA time • Improves sensory integration • Supports cognitive, social, and linguistic skills • Can be used in urban and rural settings	❒ Follow the leader ❒ Bubble chase ❒ Obstacle course ❒ Build a fort
Social play	Incorporates others such as family and peers. It can be semi-structured and adult-led, or it can be unstructured and serve as free play among youth.	• Develops negotiation and cooperative skills • Develops self-regulation skills • Activities are inclusive and adaptable	❒ Play tag ❒ Follow the leader ❒ Hopscotch challenge ❒ Have a dance party
Object play	Introduce toys or everyday objects to children and let them reimagine their function for play.	• Stimulates sensorimotor skills • Enhances creativity and curiosity • Activities are inclusive and adaptable	❒ Transform the way kids play with toys ❒ Get creative with Hula-Hoops ❒ Use natural play spaces

linguistic skills (9). Specifically, children enhance their compliance and expressive social skills, both of which help foster communication, leadership, and cooperation skills (9). As children play outdoors with their peers and family, they weigh their options, take risks, and communicate roles through the nature of play. In addition to improving development, outdoor play also has been shown to be effective in reducing screen time activities (9). Outdoor play is one of the most optimal settings for children (4), especially since children are more likely to be engaged during outdoor activities compared with indoor activities (4,12). Therefore, outdoor play should be an important pillar in promoting youth physical activity because it acts as an important link to the 24-hour movement guidelines.

One of the more unique approaches to promoting outdoor play opportunities is by transitioning from traditional play spaces into nature-based play spaces. Unlike traditional play spaces, which are characterized by the "KFC" model of a kit, fence, and carpet, nature-based play spaces incorporate natural elements such as rocks, sand, and water, allowing for creative exploration, climbing, and scaling (12). These spaces offer inclusivity for children with different physical and developmental competencies to explore features such as blocks, planks, tires, or pails. Figure 1 offers inclusive active play ideas for those who want affordable indoor play ideas, don't have access to natural outdoor play spaces, or are concerned with safety. Active play can happen anywhere, and rethinking play areas can help provide more ideal opportunities for children. To adequately create an inclusive nature-based play space, Herrington and Brussoni outlined seven special considerations called the "7 Cs" (Figure 2) for optimal design (12).

SUMMARY

Increased sedentary behavior by children predisposes them to adverse health outcomes such as diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease, and poor mental health and cognitive outcomes. Sedentary activities are increasingly normalized for children across different domains, indicating the need for a multifaceted approach to address this issue. Due to the magnitude and severity of sedentary behavior, it is crucial to promote active play as a proxy for physical activity among young children.

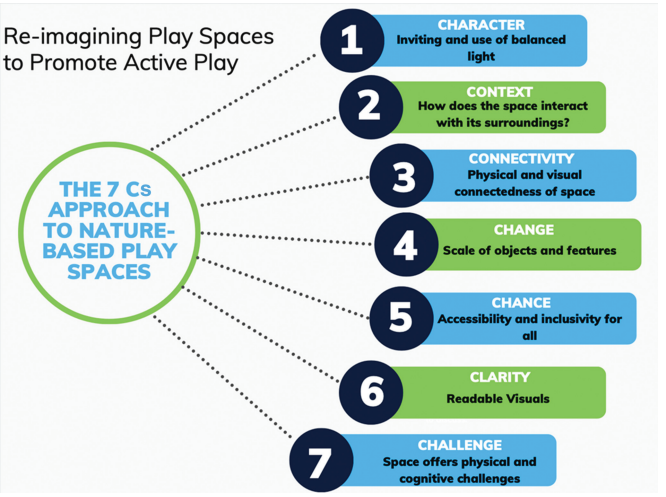
Figure 1. Inclusive active play ideas.

Inclusive Active Play Ideas	
Item	**Activities**
Beach Balls 	• Underhand toss • Overhand throw • Practice throwing at targets • Catching with both hands • Play kickball
Bubbles 	• Bubble chase • Bubble pop • Bubble count
Bubble Wrap	• Pop the bubble wrap • Hop with one foot • Jump with both feet • Use both hands to make sure each bubble is popped
Chalk 	• Great for promoting outdoor play • Create an obstacle course • Draw fun shapes to encourage movement

Fitness professionals are uniquely positioned to advocate for the importance of active play for children through influencing parents and teachers. Spanning different sectors of the industry, fitness professionals can help promote movement from a holistic standpoint as outlined by the 24-hour movement guidelines. By doing so, they can help ensure children are meeting the recommended levels of physical activity and limiting sedentary behavior.

Consistent active play helps facilitate optimal growth and development, and it helps set the foundation for essential motor skill development. In addition, frequent play helps formulate positive health behaviors and the social norms surrounding physical activity, which can increase a child's willingness to engage in play. Because active play can occur anywhere, it is important to advocate for play in a variety of settings, including the home, daycare, preschool, and parks. Giving children active play opportunities can begin a foundation for promoting physical fitness and cognitive health across their lifespan.

Figure 2. The 7 Cs approach to nature-based play spaces. Adapted from Herrington & Brussoni (12).



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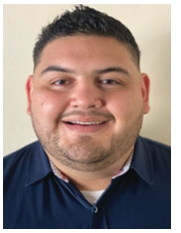

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BRIDGING THE GAP

Children are enticed by sedentary behavior anywhere they go; thus, during these formative years, it is important to offer many active play opportunities. As children play, their motivation for physical activity sparks and they begin to create healthy habits that support their physical, social, and cognitive development. Active play is a great strategy to complement 24-hour movement guidelines for children because play is something that children connect with the most, making it easy to incorporate bouts of physical activity throughout the day. Another complementary tool is the emergence of nature-based play spaces that create environments that offer inclusive active play opportunities for children of all ages and development.