

Beyond local: Are children in childcare getting enough physical activity?^[1]

Research has linked outdoor play among young children to improved self-confidence, self-awareness and decision-making

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EXCERPTS

Many children are now enrolled in some type of childcare while their parents work, many for multiple hours a day, several days a week.

Given the increasingly busy schedules of today's families, parents often rely on early childhood educators (ECEs) in childcare centres to supply children with their daily physical activity, as well as other opportunities for nurturing their development.

But are they prepared for the challenge? The evidence suggests we may be placing an unfair burden on these education specialists.

Physical activity, in the form of active play, offers many benefits — physically, cognitively and socially. New Canadian and international guidelines from the World Health Organization identify the need for young children to participate in daily heart-pumping physical activity.

We both have doctoral degrees in health promotion, with a particular emphasis on physical activity in the early years. Our research in the Child Health and Physical Activity Lab at Western University shows that young children in childcare are not meeting national or international guidelines on physical activity. Specifically they are not getting enough moderate to vigorous-intensity activity.

This places our kids at a huge disadvantage from a physical, psychological and social development perspective.

Childcare providers need better training

In one study of Ontario-based childcare providers, ECEs identified that they lack confidence to develop opportunities and to engage young children in physical activity during childcare hours.

This means that teacher education and professional development opportunities that teach “how much” and “how to” lead physical activity opportunities are essential training.

We also need to support ECEs with appropriate equipment and resources. Dedicated gross motor space (outdoors and indoors, for when the weather is bad) and portable play equipment, such as balls, hoops and logs, are essential for getting kids to hop, skip, jump and run.

Children 10 times more active outdoors

Finally, the importance of outdoor free play needs to be emphasized — as an easy and inexpensive way to increase physical activity levels among this young population.

Our research suggests that children are 10 times more active outdoors than indoors in childcare. So getting kids (and adults) outside, regardless of the weather, supports their movement endeavours.

Outdoor play among young children has been associated with improved self-confidence, self-awareness and decision-making.

Outdoor play is also associated with increased access to better air quality (compared to indoors) — thus decreasing children's exposure to common allergens (e.g., dust, mould, pet dander) and infectious diseases.

Research into action

Research has identified the influence of childcare centres and staff on the physical activity levels of young children. Now is the time to put this knowledge into action.

Creating physical activity policies, supporting professional development and training in ECE diploma programs prior to entering the workforce, and consistent provision of varied portable equipment and outdoor play are key places to start.

However, there is still lots we need to know. How can we integrate more movement into educators' daily programming with kids? How can we make lesson plans more active? What can be done to maximize opportunities for gross motor movement indoors? More research is needed.

We are addressing this need with research which we hope will support and inform early childhood care settings. Such supports could include daily opportunities for short, frequent outdoor play periods. It could include educating children about the importance of moving their bodies daily along with active role modelling and positive prompts to kids when they engage in active play.

Related link:

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