

Physical Activity for Preschoolers during the COVID Pandemic

Introduction

Physical activity exerts a powerful influence on the health and development of young children. It is well documented that higher levels of physical activity are associated with better bone health and more favorable weight status in 3- to 5-year-old children.¹ Further, it seems certain that children's physical activity experiences early in life lay the groundwork for their physical activity behavior later in life. Accordingly, the *2018 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* includes two recommendations that are specific to preschool-aged children:

- Preschool-aged children (ages 3 through 5 years) should be physically active throughout the day to enhance growth and development.
- Adult caregivers of preschool-aged children should encourage active play that includes a variety of activity types.

To comply with these physical activity guidelines, some expert groups have recommended that preschoolers should achieve the standard of 300 or more minutes of total physical activity per day.² This includes physical activity intensities ranging from light to vigorous. Research has shown that many preschoolers do not meet the recommended amounts of physical activity, and therefore actions are needed to ensure that preschoolers engage in the physical activity they need to develop in a healthy manner.

Actions to support physical activity in U.S. preschoolers were needed *before* the COVID-19 pandemic, and such actions are needed even more as the pandemic continues to challenge families and many other elements of society. While formal surveys in The U.S. are lacking, it appears likely that the pandemic has produced changes in homes, schools, and communities that have restricted young children's access to the settings and programs where they normally engage in physical activity.

This document is intended to provide guidance for parents and a wide range of professionals whose actions can influence young children's physical activity behavior. Recommendations are presented with regard to the unique demands that prevail during the COVID pandemic. However, most of the recommendations are important steps that our society should take at all times.

Recommendations

The recommendations in this document follow the model of the National Physical Activity Plan (NPAP).³ The NPAP is a comprehensive set of strategies and tactics aimed at increasing physical activity in all segments of the U.S. population. The Plan is organized around nine societal sectors, and many of the Plan's strategies and tactics are targeted at increasing physical activity in children, including preschoolers. While some of the recommendations provided below are drawn directly from the NPAP, others complement the content of the NPAP.

The recommendations below call for actions by professionals and policymakers who are positioned to take actions that support appropriate physical activity behavior in preschool-age children. However, it is critical to note that the home environment exerts a major influence on children's overall physical activity. Further, parents and guardians have a primary responsibility for ensuring that their children engage in the physical activity needed for good health and normal development. Parents can support their children's physical activity by creating a home environment that encourages physical activity and by encouraging leaders of a wide range of community-based organizations to act on the following recommendations.

Cross-Sectoral COVID 19 Pandemic Safety Precautions

The recommendations provided below are specific to physical activity promotion activities that can be implemented by professionals and policymakers in each of several societal sectors. However, in the era of the COVID 19 pandemic, there are important safety precautions that should be applied consistently across the various settings in which young children can and should be physically active. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have provided detailed guidelines on safety measures to reduce transmission of the COVID 19 virus. Particularly relevant for young children are the guidelines for [Child Care Programs](#), [Youth Sports](#), and [Parks and Recreation Facilities](#). The guidelines for these settings include specific recommendations for social distancing, cleaning of surfaces and objects, hand washing and sanitizing, mask wearing by adult supervisors, screening of participants, and isolation of children who become ill.

Education

Providers of early childhood care and education programs should:

- Incorporate both structured and unstructured activities into the preschool day. Structured activities should be age-appropriate, fun, engaging, and non-competitive in nature.
- Plan safe, engaging activities outdoors, even in adverse weather. Children enjoy playing outside and can do so as long as they are dressed appropriately.
- Model the enjoyment of physical activity by participating with children in active games.
- Make learning more active by integrating physical activity into classroom learning activities.
- Modify indoor and outdoor games, so children are not eliminated from the activities or spend time being sedentary.

In the time of COVID, providers of early childhood care and education programs should:

- Build multiple short periods of outdoor playtime into the schedule. This time could also be used to give children a break from wearing a mask, if needed.
- Develop movement stations outdoors that allow children to practice motor development and locomotor skills while maintaining social distance.
- Provide fixed and portable play equipment (that is properly disinfected) during outdoor playtime.

Public Health

Public health agencies should:

- Consider the importance of physical activity in children when they hire and train their workforce.
- Develop policy and advocacy efforts and build partnerships to support those efforts.
- Improve surveillance of children's physical activity.
- Create and disseminate tools and resources to support children's physical activity.
- Provide funding and resources, where possible, to support children's physical activity.

In the time of COVID, public health agencies should:

- Develop materials to help families find ways to be active together.

- Provide physical activity materials and resources for health and social service professionals to use when they engage with families during the course of their work (e.g., federal- or state-funded health clinics, WIC, SNAP, other state-based programs).
- Encourage families to spend time with children outdoors and provide practical information for doing so regardless of the weather.
- Plan activities that will enable families to spend time outdoors.

Healthcare

Healthcare providers should:

- Explain to parents and guardians, during well-child visits, the impact of physical activity and sedentary behavior on children's health and provide information about community physical activity resources.
- Create a waiting room that allows children to be active and/or provide children's books highlighting physical activity.
- Encourage physical activity that places emphasis on fun, playfulness, exploration, and experimentation while being mindful of safety and proper supervision.
- Talk to children about the types of activities they like and offer suggestions.

In the time of COVID, healthcare providers should:

- Explain to parents and guardians the benefits of physical activity on children's health, with a focus on children's mental well-being.
- Inform parents and guardians about the importance of letting children be active and spending time outside while practicing social distancing and wearing a mask.
- Recommend family activities that promote physical activity, such as spending time outside in nature. Provide information about community physical activity resources that families can access or resources on how parents can be active with children at home.
- Encourage parents and guardians to limit sedentary activity such as screen time, which should not exceed one hour per day. Advise parents to encourage children to be active during screen time.

Parks and Recreation

Parks and recreation agencies should:

- Improve access to safe, clean, and affordable community recreation, fitness, and parks facilities that provide physical activity opportunities for young children.
- Enhance existing resources and/or develop new resources that facilitate and accommodate physical activity for young children.
- Recruit and train a diverse cadre of recreation, parks, and fitness leaders, staff, and volunteers who understand the importance of physical activity for young children and can integrate them into facilities and programming.
- Improve monitoring to evaluate the participation of young children in community-based physical activity programs.

In the time of COVID, parks and recreation agencies should:

- Increase their offerings specifically for preschool-age children to address gaps caused by COVID.
- Create family activities that can take place outdoors, provide age-appropriate activities for young children, and focus on fun, engaging, and active play.
- Modify outdoor spaces that are currently underutilized (e.g., basketball courts, football fields) to safely accommodate more children and families.
- Allow individual families to reserve playground time in one-hour blocks (clean and disinfect equipment between families).

Faith-based Settings

Faith-based organizations should:

- Include physical activity promotion in health ministries, and partner with other sectors to promote physical activities for children and families.
- Offer physical activity programs for all members of the congregation, including preschool-age children.
- Identify or develop marketing materials about physical activity that are specifically tailored to the faith-based setting and address children and their families.
- Encourage physical activity and public health organizations to partner with faith-based organizations to develop and deliver accessible and tailored physical activity programs for families with preschoolers.

In the time of COVID, faith-based organizations should:

- Include movement activities in the portions of online and remote services that focus on children.

- Look for new opportunities to provide active faith-based activities for children. This might open up new ways to engage children in the organization’s teachings, using active learning principles.
- Promote family physical activity as an important component of a faith-based life during the pandemic.
- Include physical activity as one component of the organization’s support for families.
- Consider new ways to promote family life through activity, such as creative active games.

Sport

Youth Sports organizations should:

- Focus on exposing children to different forms of activities to broaden their basic skills.
- Emphasize fun activities that promote enjoyment of physical activity.
- Provide children with opportunities to explore a wide range of body movements.
- Incorporate natural breaks within sporting activities for young children.
- Engage all children, minimize instruction time, and focus on non-competitive activities.

During the time of COVID, sports organizations should:

- Modify the sport to enable children to participate safely.
- Move practice outside whenever possible.
- Focus on *individual* skills to support motor skill learning
- Limit the use of shared equipment whenever possible
- Provide families with digital or print materials that demonstrate activities they can play indoors or outdoors together to help kids maintain basic sports skills and encourage body movement.
- Identify additional adult volunteers who can help maintain social distance between children, with the goal of keeping kids both safe and active.

Mass Media

Mass media organizations should:

- Develop and implement a national physical activity campaign.
- Create a standardized brand for promoting physical activity.

- Educate other media professionals about the effects of physical activity on children’s health.
- Use traditional as well as new media channels to support children’s physical activity.

During the time of COVID, mass media organizations should:

- Use TV, radio, print, and social media to reinforce children’s need to be active and problems created by COVID.
- Engage local or national personalities to promote children’s activity and help parents and other adults understand the pandemic’s negative effects on young children.
- Provide information on the physical and mental health benefits of physical activity for young children and its role in young children’s overall well-being.
- Provide stories in print media on ways to help children stay active and places to go to be active.
- Offer strategies for “replacement” activities that provide new ways for kids to be active, even during a pandemic.
- Suggest outdoor learning as a strategy.

Summary

Children of preschool age need physical activity throughout the day to support healthy growth and development. Because young children spend substantial amounts of time at home, parents and guardians play a key role in ensuring that children are appropriately physically active. However, most young children also spend time in structured child care programs and in a range of community-based settings. Accordingly, policymakers and practitioners in early care and education programs, public health, healthcare, parks and recreation, faith-based settings, mass media, and sports programs should take action to ensure that preschoolers meet federal physical activity guidelines. During the COVID pandemic, special actions should be taken such that young children are physically active in ways that are safe for them and their adult supervisors.

Produced for the Physical Activity Alliance by: Russell R. Pate, PhD, University of South Carolina; Sofiya Alhassan, PhD, University of Massachusetts; and Dianne S. Ward, EdD, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

1. Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Committee. *2018 Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Committee Scientific Report*. Washington, DC: US DHHS;2018.

2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, Second Edition. 2018. <https://health.gov/paguidelines/second-edition/>.
3. National Physical Activity Plan Alliance. The U.S. National Physical Activity Plan. http://physicalactivityplan.org/docs/2016NPAP_Finalforwebsite.pdf. 2016.