

Why Our Kids Aren't Moving: A Multi-Media Generation*

A sedentary lifestyle contributes greatly to the overweight epidemic in this country. Concerns about the safety of allowing children to play outside, paired with exciting new advances in technology and media are bringing our children indoors. Multi-media—including television watching, video games, and computer games—are greatly contributing to increased sedentary lifestyles among children (Dennison, et al., 2002). “Research has shown that children who consistently spend more than 10 hours per week watching television are more likely to be overweight, aggressive, and slower to learn in school (American Medical Association, 1999).”

According to recent data, the average American child watches:

- 3–5 hours of television a day,
- 21–23 hours per week,
- 1,500 hours in a year (compared to the 900 hours a year spent in school), and
- 7–10 years of television by the time the average child reaches age 70.

Neilson data also show that it is the youngest children who tend to watch the most television.

Additionally, according to a recent study, children who have television sets in their bedrooms have a higher risk of overweight (Dennison et al., 2002). The study showed that

38 percent of 1–4 year olds, and 54 percent of 6th and 7th graders had television sets in their bedrooms. Children with access to television in their rooms watched more television overall (almost 5 hours more, often unmonitored by an adult), and were more likely to be overweight.

In addition to the hours of television watched, “American children have viewed 360,000 advertisements on TV before graduating from high school (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1995).” The most frequently advertised category during children’s television programs is food—

most often fast food and foods high in sugar content. Research has found that kids choose foods they have seen advertised (Dickey, 2002). Additionally, researchers have reported a correlation between TV, soft drink consumption, and obesity among adolescents. Long hours of television watching

are linked to diets high in junk food (i.e., foods with little nutritional value) and low in fruits and vegetables (Dickey, 2002).

Finally, as computers have become so prevalent, more and more children are spending time behind the screen with keyboards or joysticks (for computer game playing) in hand. Though children’s television programming and computer time can be educational and beneficial, it is important to help them balance sedentary activity with a more active lifestyle and healthy eating/snacking practices.

“Open your window on a sunny afternoon, and what do you hear? The chirping of singing birds? The yelling of playing children? Odds are these days that you’ll hear the birds but not the children. As kids spend more time in front of the television, computer and video screens, their physical activity levels have decreased. And their body weights have increased (Torgan, 2002).”

Teaching Good Media Habits: Establishing, Monitoring, and Modeling Good Habits*

Establishing, monitoring, and modeling good habits is important in all facets of life. Setting the standard for children by establishing the rules of your home or center and modeling a healthful lifestyle is a first step in guiding children to pursue lifelong healthy practices. It is the responsibility of parents and care providers to establish, monitor, and model good habits concerning the use of media. The following recommendations are intended to help you establish good media habits in your child care center or home:

- **Limit television viewing to no more than 1- 2 hours per day** (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1995). This means knowing how much TV children watch and not hesitating to reduce the time.
- **Plan television viewing in advance.** Use a TV guide or newspaper to select the shows you would like to watch (note the rating system for age-appropriateness). Help children and youth prioritize what they watch. Turn the set on for these programs only, or better yet, record the shows and eliminate the commercial viewing.
- **Be a good role model.** Though television may seem benign, our own habits and attitudes in front of the screen can influence children. If we are watching TV, we are also limiting important time that could be spent talking with each other and sharing in each other's lives (Dickey, 2002). We must practice what we preach. This means having self-discipline regarding TV, computer, and video games. It also means modeling good behaviors as alternatives to media, such as physical activity, constructive hobbies, reading, etc.
- **Minimize the influence of television.** To keep the TV from being a central part of your child care program ...
 - Keep the TV off during mealtimes.
 - Make conversation a priority.
 - Don't center furniture around the TV.
- **Avoid television viewing for children under the age of 2 years.** Research on early brain development shows that young children have a critical need for direct

interactions with parents and caregivers for healthy brain growth, as well as development of appropriate social, emotional, and cognitive skills (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1999).

- **Don't use television, video games, or recreational computer time as a reward.** Using these media as rewards may make their use seem more important to children.
- **Support the Children's Television Act of 1990**, which mandates programming of educational and instructional benefit to children and limits the amount of advertising allowed during children's programming.



- **Educate children to be responsible consumers.** Don't expect children to ignore commercials for snack foods and candy. Watch programs with children, and teach them that commercials are designed to sell products. Help children develop healthy eating habits and become smart consumers by recognizing a sales pitch. Studies document that children under age eight are unable to understand the intent of advertisements and accept advertising claims as true. These young viewers cannot distinguish advertising from regular television programming. Additionally, while older children understand the nature and intent of advertisements, many of the products advertised may be harmful to their health (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1995).

- **Provide alternatives to television, video games, and recreational computer use.** Parents and care providers are responsible for how much time their children spend in front of the TV, computer, or video screen. Encourage both indoor and outdoor activities for children—particularly those activities that encourage active play (i.e., fun physical activity).



Making a Move on Movement*

We know that getting children moving is important, but where do we begin? How often/long/hard should they exercise? What types of exercise should they do? How can children be motivated to want to exercise?

How often/long/hard should children exercise?



The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity

recommends that adults get at least 30 minutes of

moderate physical activity on most days of the week, while children should aim for at least 60 minutes. The 60 minutes can be accumulated throughout the day (e.g., six 10-minute sessions, four 15-minute sessions, two 30-minute sessions, etc.). Physical activity should be built into regular routines and playtime for children.

Additionally, physical activity should be done at an intensity that causes the child to breathe hard (mild discomfort), but not to the point of pain. Physical activity should be started gradually among normal, sedentary children. It is a good idea, however, to consult a doctor before beginning physical activity to rule out any medical condition or modification that should be considered.

What types of exercise should children do?

The answer to this question is three-fold...

1. Children should do any type of activity that causes their body to be in motion.
2. Children should do activities that are age appropriate.
3. Children should do activities they enjoy.

Activities that make the body move...

Children should be involved in a variety of activities that make their bodies move. In fact, a recent study suggests that variety may be a helpful tool in keeping kids motivated. Children can get physical activity through active play, leisure time activities, and even household chores.

Age-appropriate activities... Always consider the age-appropriateness of



an activity. For instance, competitive sports are usually considered appropriate beginning between ages 8–12. Different children will be ready for new activities at different ages. Decisions should be based on the developmental level of each individual child. This is true for all age groups because children develop and mature at different rates.

Activities for enjoyment... We can spend so much time taking children to organized events that we forget that “active play” and free play can be some of the most beneficial ways to simply enjoy the goodness of feeling the body move while encouraging fitness. Whether guided or free, active play can keep children just as fit as organized programs and has the added advantage of disguising itself as play/fun rather than athletics/exercise for those who don't have a desire or readiness to participate in organized activities.

Additionally, active play is not limited to any age group or developmental level—even adults can participate. Choosing activities that include adults and children can provide you with an opportunity to model a physically active lifestyle, support behavior through action among children who are overweight, and increase chances that children will continue to maintain a physically active lifestyle. Children who see parents and adult caregivers who are physically active are more likely to be physically active.



When helping children make choices about enjoyable activities, also consider each child's personal needs and feelings. Fun, success, variety, freedom, family involvement, peer support, and enthusiastic leadership encourage and maintain participation. Failure, embarrassment, competition, boredom, regimentation, and injuries can discourage further participation.

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An Employer Toolkit: Reducing Child & Adolescent Obesity — Addressing Healthy Weight for Employees and Their Children ,

National Business Group on Health

http://www.businessgrouphealth.org/prevention/et_childobesity.cfm

HealthHints Newsletter, *Texas Cooperative Extension, Texas A&M University System*

http://fcs.tamu.edu/health/Health_Education_Rural_Outreach/index.php

Overweight Children – Prevention & Treatment

<http://pediatrics.about.com/cs/obesity/l/aa012503a.htm>

Overweight & Obesity, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/obesity/index.htm>

Physical Fitness: Be Physically Active Each Day, Healthier US.GOV

<http://www.healthierus.gov/exercise.html>

Preschoolers & Physical Fitness, University of Illinois Extension

<http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/nibbles/health-fitness.html>

Prevention of Pediatric Overweight & Obesity, American Academy of Pediatrics

<http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/pediatrics;112/2/424>

Helpful Web Resources

Prevention & Treatment of Overweight in Children & Adolescents, American Family Physician

<http://www.aafp.org/afp/20040601/2591.html>

Promoting Physical Activity & Exercise among Children, Kid Source Online

<http://www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content4/promote.phyed.html>

The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight & Obesity, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services

http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity/calltoaction/fact_adolescents.htm

Why P.E. for Preschoolers?

<http://www.movingandlearning.com/Resources/Articles10.htm>



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