

Physical Activity with Toddlers

Toddlers should have opportunity for physical activity throughout each day. Regular physical activity promotes large muscle development, including strength and endurance, cardiovascular endurance, flexibility, reduced risk of becoming overweight, feelings of accomplishment and independence, and development of lifelong healthy habits. Watch and play with toddlers to encourage movement and skill building!

Encourage movement throughout each day.

Toddlers are naturally active and have spurts of energy, although short attention spans. Toddlers often enjoy vigorous high energy activities for 5-10 minutes, followed by quieter activities or rest. Except when sleeping, toddlers should not be sedentary for over an hour of time or for multiple times throughout the day. Do not expect toddlers to sit still or restrain movement.

“Screen time” is inappropriate for toddlers in early childhood settings. Screen time includes television and video programming, computer games, and tablet games.

Physical activity throughout each day includes both “structured” and “unstructured” play. Structured physical activity is intentional movement directed by and supported by the caregiver, such as a parade, moving to music, or acting out story time. Most toddlers enjoy engaging in any activity that includes movement. Unstructured physical activity is free play and movement such as playing independently with toys and vehicles, climbing obstacles, walking around the room, etc.

Provide a safe environment.

Encourage exploration, movement, and learning! Provide the least restrictive environment for active movement with at least 5 X 7 feet of space per child. Indoor play space should be out of the walking path and away from shelving or objects that could fall. Help children learn to negotiate environmental challenges through both indoor and outdoor play opportunities. Allow children to explore and experience age-appropriate obstacles, frustrations, and risks. Arrange colorful materials and equipment to support physical activity and learning. Spread out equipment and allow plenty of room for activities.

Provide appropriate equipment for indoor and outdoor play.

- * Non-pedaled riding and push toys.
- * Large, soft balls and toys. Be sure these are washable.
- * Large blocks created of a variety of materials and colors. For example, create blocks with empty shoe boxes.
- * Objects to safely climb up, jump down, and crawl through. Create obstacle courses with large boxes to crawl through or cushions to climb over.
- * Pretend play tools, such as digging tools and small brooms.
- * Child-sized musical instruments. Be sure instruments do not create loud noises that may damage hearing.

Smile, praise, and applaud all of the children's efforts.

Children are just beginning to develop physical skills, and each child will progress at his or her own rate. Vary activities so that each child has challenges and successes. Physical activity should be enjoyable play for every child. Do not create competition.



Examples of Physical Activity with Toddlers

Walk, March, and Jump

Securely tape a hula hoop to the floor or use tape to mark out a large circle on the floor. Let children practice stepping and then jumping in and out of the circle. Count jumps out loud to integrate number recognition. Vary the activity by placing two or three hoops so they touch each other. Integrate color recognition by using colored tape or hoops. Help children recognize differences by creating differently sized circles.

While playing music or singing, encourage children to stand with legs apart and knees bent, and to rock left to right with the rhythm. Sway and dance to the music. As toddler skills develop, vary the activity by clapping, jumping, and marching to the music.

Toddler Parade

Play lively music and have a toddler parade. Vary the activity by giving children small scarves to wave, hats to wear, or musical instruments to play. Be sure objects are soft – no sticks or flags! Practice walking, marching, and jumping.

Pretend to be a train. Encourage sounds and movements. Conduct parades both indoors and outdoors. Take the outdoor parade over small hills and around trees.

Obstacle Course

Set up a simple obstacle course, both indoors and outdoors. The course should encourage children to climb over, under, through, around, in, and out. Encourage toddlers to crawl over large cushions; crawl through tunnels made of sheets or large cardboard boxes; and walk, jump, and march over squares of different surfaces, such as grass, colorful textured carpet squares, sand, pea gravel, etc.

Catch and Throw

Sit across from the toddler with legs spread apart; both your legs and the toddler's legs will form a large "V." Say "Here comes the ball" and roll a large ball toward the child. The child will trap the

ball with his legs, arms, and chest. Encourage the child to roll the ball back to you. As skill develops, repeat with various sizes of balls.

Roll old socks into balls and practice tossing the socks into a large laundry basket. Let children decide what distance they stand from the basket. Vary the activity with different sizes of baskets or multiple baskets. Integrate color recognition by using variously colored socks.

For an outside activity, fill a small bucket with clean water and soak small sponges. Encourage children to throw the wet sponges at the side of a building or onto a flat surface. Watch the water splash and see the mark the water makes.

Move to songs and action words

Sing songs that describe actions, such as Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes; Row, Row, Row Your Boat; and Wheels on the Bus. As children develop skills, vary the action movements.

Lead children in creative movement—sway like a tree, swim like a fish, and jump like a frog. Describe an animal that most children have seen. Ask children to show what that animal does. Read stories about animals. Act out the movements in the story.

Let children move in their own ways! Smile, applaud, and encourage all movements. There is no "correct" way to move—all movement is good!



Use Colorful Fun Materials

Place a single object, such as a teddy bear, in a different, yet visible, place each day. Help children look up, down, and all around to find the object each day. Create ownership by naming the bear and creating a class mascot. Dress the bear in different clothing to match the season or weather.

Vary the activity by placing several plastic apples or colorful balls around the classroom. Objects should be similar (e.g., red apples, green balls) so children easily recognize what they are looking for. Objects should be visible, but placed in various positions (e.g., on a shelf, behind a chair, in an open box). Walk, crawl, and hop with the children to look for the missing objects. Remember—this is play, not competition!

Blow bubbles upward and encourage children to watch, chase, and catch bubbles. If bubbles land on the ground, encourage children to stomp on them. Vary the activity by dropping scarves, large

feathers, or other soft objects. Use a hand held fan to create a breeze and watch the objects move.

Encourage pretend play with toy brooms, rakes, and other household objects.

Wheeled Toys

Set up indoor courses for children to push and pull toy cars, trucks, and other wheeled toys. Provide ramps, tunnels, and obstacles.

For outdoor and other large spaces, provide push and pull toys, such as toy lawn mowers and wagons.

Create a large and level riding area. Provide four-wheel riding toys for toddlers to push and ride (no pedals). Add three- or four-wheel pedal toys for children age 30 months and older. Remember, safety helmets are required! Begin teaching toddlers to ride the safe way, even on non-pedal wheeled toys.

