

Physical Activity Tips for Preschool Children

- 1. It is recommended that adults should accumulate at least 30 minutes of physical activity each day. Is the recommendation of 180 minutes too much for preschool children ?**

Ans: The recommendation of adults covers only moderate to vigorous physical activity, and excludes light intensity activities (e.g. slow walking). The 180-minute physical activity recommended for preschool children includes light intensity activities (e.g. playing with toys, dressing up, packing school bags, etc.) on top of more vigorous ones (e.g. brisk walking, rope skipping, playing hide-and-seek, etc.). Also, preschool children tend to be physically active in an intermittent pattern, with short bouts of rest in between. Thus, the recommended 180 minutes should be accumulated throughout the whole course of the day. Some evidence shows that the physical activity level of children may decline progressively as they grow. Also, it could be reduced after they have started primary one due to the changes in schooling environment. Therefore, it is necessary to help preschool children form an active lifestyle with regular physical activity during their pre-primary stage.

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- 2. Should the recommended 180 minutes of physical activity be of moderate or vigorous intensity?**

Ans: Not necessarily so. A summary of the guidelines from various countries and regions about the subject suggests that the 180 minutes should cover physical activity of any

intensity level. For preschool children, it is more important to accumulate adequate amount of physical activity rather than to put emphasis on a particular intensity level. However, it is worth noting that higher intensity of activities can promote cardio-respiratory fitness and bone growth more effectively. Therefore, as they grow up, it is necessary to encourage them not only to build up an active lifestyle, but also to participate more in higher intensity physical activity for additional health benefits.

3. What are the adverse effects of screen time activity to young children; why should their screen time be limited?

Ans: Excessive amount of screen time activity, not only hinders children's participation on physical activity, but also negatively influence on their dietary habits and behaviours. Screen time is commonly referred as a sedentary activity. It undermines young children's motivations to explore environments and learn new things. The time spends on physical activity will be relatively reduced, which in the long run, could result in health problems such as obesity. Parents should keep their children away from TV while dining as this would spoil their appetite and hinder them from developing the ability of feeding themselves. Moreover, unhealthy foods with high salt, fat and sugar as well as high-calorie content advertised on the electronic media can contribute to adoption of unhealthy eating habits by young children. Furthermore, some electronic media may compose of content of sex, violence and false messages etc. Evidence has revealed that excessive amounts of TV viewing and playing violent video games by children is associated with their more aggressive behaviour, attention problems and declined learning performance. Hence, it is vital for teachers and parents to restrict children's screen time activity and substitute it by active physical

plays for maximising their health benefits.

4. How should we arrange physical activity for preschool children who are overweight or obese?

Ans: Preschool children who are overweight or obese may have weaker exercise endurance and poorer agility due to lack of physical activity, so a step-by-step approach can be adopted for them. Parents are advised to refer to StartSmart Parent Guide in particular the “Physical Activity Pyramid for Preschool Children” (Part 1), for recommendations on the targeted amount of physical activity for preschool children. Based on the recommendations, parents can make suitable adjustment according to the children’s needs (for example, setting the duration of initial bouts at 15 to 20 minutes each). Besides, intermittent rests should be provided during exercise. Activities which require weight bearing such as frame-climbing, running and rope skipping may be too strenuous for them; cycling, jogging or swimming can be considered as alternatives. Once improvement in their physical fitness and body weight is achieved, the amount of physical activity can be increased accordingly for more health benefits.

5. Childhood obesity is temporary only; preschool children’s body weight will be normalised as they grow up. Should we ignore it?

Ans: Lack of physical activity may result in a decline in exercise endurance and agility in obese children. Subsequently, their ability to endure physical training and develop related skills may also be affected. More importantly, studies show that obesity is likely

to persist from childhood to adolescence and even adulthood. Therefore, parents should help children cultivate an active lifestyle since preschool age by engaging them in habitual physical activities, which help maintain an optimal body weight and improve physical fitness.

6. Does profuse sweating indicate that the physical activity is too vigorous and needs to be discontinued immediately?

Ans: Sweating is a normal body response for regulation of body temperature during physical activity. As the physical activity intensity and duration increase, sweating increases as well. Therefore, it is not necessary to stop children from exercising when they sweat. However, measures to prevent heat stroke should not be overlooked during hot summer months. An indoor venue is preferable if the weather is hot. When an outdoor game is necessary, it should be scheduled for any time but noon. More importantly, parents should make sure that children drink plenty of water for rehydration so as to avoid heat stroke.

7. Should preschool children focus on academic learning rather than spending much time doing physical activity at schools?

Ans: It is stated in the *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum (2006)*, issued by the Education Bureau, that “physical fitness and health” is one of the six key learning areas. This highlights the essential role of physical activity in the growth of preschool children. Indeed, physical activity can have positive impact on their learning performance with potential to improve children’s attention span, patience, obedience and learning ability.

Parents should value the health benefits of physical activity for preschool children; and engage home-school cooperation to encourage children to exercise frequently and regularly for fun and healthy development.

8. Can playing with toys help children's motor development?

Ans: Yes. Although playing with toys may not be an energetic activity, it is good motor training for small muscles. Games like puzzles and building blocks can enhance children's fine motor skills whereas activities involving large muscles such as tossing, throwing and catching of small soft balls can promote eye-hand coordination. As such, parents should provide children with adequate activities for training both large and small muscle, so as to promote their overall physical development.

9. Should children with asthma avoid doing any exercise?

Ans: It is safe for children who have asthma to engage in a suitable amount of physical activity, which can improve heart and lung functions, increase physical fitness and boost immunity. In the long run, it has a positive effect on asthma control. For children's safety, however, parents should keep in touch with teachers constantly informing the children's health conditions; teachers should also be well informed whether children are taking drugs or bronchodilators as instructed. Children should always bring along their relieving medicine (including bronchodilators). Parents should also closely observe their conditions and watch out for any asthmatic symptoms during physical activities. Should there be any signs and symptoms of

asthmatic attack, stop exercising and administer the appropriate relieving medicine at once, and send for further medical care if necessary. Besides, children with asthma should avoid exercising in cold and/or dry weather for fear of a greater likelihood of triggering acute attacks.