

# Hopping to a healthy future

It is worth spending time thinking in-depth and developing knowledge about children's physical activity, enabling you to plan imaginatively for inclusive exercise sessions and the outcomes you want to achieve, says Tanya Davie.



Guidelines from the NHS and chief medical officers across Britain state that pre-schoolers should be getting three hours of physical exercise a day. This is an important requirement for children in the early years but if three hours seems like a lot, bear in mind that it should be fragmented during the day and 'exercise' very much includes activities such as rolling and playing as well more strenuous activity such as hopping, running and jumping. Being active every day is key for this age group and promotes healthy growth and development. It is also a fun and interactive way for them to learn about their bodies.

While many day-to-day activities in your setting will include

physical exercise it is good practice to aim to maximise this and plan carefully.

### Planning activities

Before you set out to run a physical activity, think about what your major objectives are and what you are trying to achieve. Do you want this to be about cardiovascular exercise or an activity that includes only a small element of getting the heart rate up? These factors will determine your planned activity.

It is important to be aware that the heart is a muscle and needs to be treated with the utmost respect and knowledge. For some activities, you may want to use teachers that are fully qualified in physical exercise and understand the

physiology and limitations of the body in this age group.

If you have done any sort of cardiovascular workout as an adult, you will know that it is imperative that the session includes a warm-up, a pulse raiser and a cool-down; and the same basic rules apply for a toddlers' session.

But it is very important to know the children's limits and to remember the session should flow in peaks and troughs. You cannot expect a three-year-old to sustain a high level of cardiovascular exercise for any length of time.

### Lead by example

Be seen to be active at every opportunity and try and ensure

that adults get involved with the practical sessions. Children need active role models.

### Engagement

A theme is a great way to engage children and get them motivated to enjoy the session, rather than it being presented as 'exercise'. Get creative: how about picking one of the favourite books off the shelf and turn a storytelling session into an activity half hour? Bring the narrative to life through actions, ask the children to interpret the story and copy your actions.

Make the most of the seasons: in spring, have races for who can find different types of leaves that will be back on the trees. In autumn,



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get them kicking their legs through the dry leaves, racing between trees. An element of competition can help to get the group engaged.

Cool down by asking children to scoop up the leaves in their arms, these could then be used in arts and craft sessions.

Above all, create a fun and inclusive atmosphere and as with all learning areas, remember that different children's development happens at different stages – what might be achievable for one three-year-old could be more difficult for another, so do keep an eye on expectations.

I can clearly remember one occasion when I was leading a session near my home in Cheshire and hopping formed part of the session.

For weeks, one little boy struggled with the hopping element, then one session everything came into play and he hopped! His entire being lit up with pride and achievement – for all the staff and myself this was a very special moment and one that I will never forget.

## The basics

- Be aware of the importance of good posture and core stability with this age group. Have equipment such as hoops, bean bags and floor spots available for the children to experiment with.
- In terms of length of time for a session, I find between 30-40 minutes is about right with early years children

■ There are number of things that should not be done without expert guidance supervision and specific qualifications. Do not attempt to ask the children to do any sort of ballet moves or yoga-based activity, and weight bearing activity should also be avoided.

## Activity ideas

The following ideas should also help act as a springboard for how you can include more physical exercise linked with other activities.

### Walking the fine line

Use lines in the setting (either permanent ones or chalk drawn). Play 'follow the leader' or driving games to work on coordination and balance. These are vital skills that are key factors to future success in learning.

### Crawling

Get the children down on the floor, encourage them to crawl around – they could be minibeasts or bugs. Crawling is a fundamental motor skill, a bilateral movement using both sides of the brain. It develops the ability of the left and right hemispheres of the brain to communicate and work together for smooth, coordinated movement and thought processing; it also aids the future development of reading and writing.

### Crucial years

Though my practice has always had a link with physical development, since specialising in early years over a decade ago. I have become increasingly

passionate about this group and the importance of physical development in the early years.

The formative years up to the age of five are crucial to a child's long term development right into adulthood; it is imperative we get children moving from an early age to help avoid issues such as obesity in later life. Although physical activity is only one part of the jigsaw, it is a key one.

If we can teach children in early years the basics of proper exercise, nutrition, and related health issues, we are setting them up for a great start. We have the opportunity to establish patterns and a positive attitude at an early age that will be the foundation for

continuing physical activity and good health, preparing them for participation in physical education and athletic programmes, both at school and hopefully as something they will choose to do in their own time.

Activity professionals are also in a position to provide parents, caregivers, and educators of young children with current information concerning proper exercise and nutrition, and other related issues, in an effort to encourage families to participate together in a healthy and active lifestyle. Long term, we can work to improve the health of today's children and future generations.

Tanya Davie, early years health and fitness expert and director of Stretch-n-Grow UK.

For more information on running Stretch-n-Grow sessions in your setting, visit [www.stretch-n-grow.co.uk](http://www.stretch-n-grow.co.uk) or call 07792858205 to find your local contact. Free trials are available to see the team in action first hand.

