Promote Physical Activity—
It’s Proactive Guidance

Five-year-old Jacob attends the preschool where I (Jackie) am student teaching. Jacob often instigates rough-and-tumble play, which sometimes gets him in trouble. One day during outdoor time, Jacob wanted to play catch with a foam football. Even though I am not athletic, I took the opportunity, hoping for a one-on-one conversation.

Jacob: Jackie, do you want to play catch with me?
Jackie: Sure I would love to play catch with you.
(We start tossing the ball.)

Jackie: You like to play catch.
Jacob: I play with my dad all the time. He is really good.
(Jacob throws a really nice spiral.)
Jackie: Wow! That was a nice throw. How did you do that?
Jacob: You put your fingers across the laces.
(Jacob comes over and shows me where to place my fingers on the ball.)

Jacob: You do it like this. Then you throw the ball. My dad taught me how to throw like that. That is how the quarterbacks throw the ball.
(Jacob tosses the ball really hard at me.)
Jackie: Hey, you threw that really hard!
Jacob: Yeah, I did. I work out my muscles. I do push-ups like this (shows me the arm movements) and I do these things (does an impression of a sit-up). My dad does them too. He does them all the time.

Jackie: So, Jacob, what else do you like to play?
Jacob: I play football, baseball, soccer, and basketball.
(I wait for him to talk again.)

Jacob: I like to play games. I like to play checkers. It’s a game where you have little round disks, and they are red and black. You go and jump over other people and take their pieces away from them. (He jumps.)
(We continue playing catch for a while.)

Jacob: Do you want to sit down and play catch?
Jackie: Sure, if you want to.
(I sit on the bench and Jacob sits on the play picnic table and we start to play catch again.)

Teacher Emily: OK, everyone, come in and wash your hands!

Jackie understood here what early childhood educators increasingly recognize: healthy child development relies on physical activity. From enjoyment in using movement skills to blood circulation that builds brains and bodies, to obesity prevention, to concept formation, the benefits of physical activity make it a must in the schedule every day.

In one interaction, when Jacob describes playing checkers and suggests sitting down, he showed cognitive, linguistic, and even social-emotional learning—complete with a physical demonstration.

Because Jackie ventured outside her comfort zone in joining Jacob in physical activity, she made this situation richly educational—for herself and for Jacob. Through their shared experience, Jackie got to know Jacob better. In the future, she can use games and increased physical activity to help him and his buddies become more consistently engaged in the center program.

Rough-and-tumble play

Some teachers worry that vigorous activity, if permitted, will degenerate into rough-and-tumble play and someone will be hurt. Many teachers have witnessed the superhero phenomenon in which children assume the role of make-believe heroes and become overly aggressive. Problems can be reduced, however, by using class meetings to set limits for rough-and-tumble play:

Dan Gartrell, EdD, is director of the Child Development Training Program and professor of early childhood and elementary education at Bemidji State University in northern Minnesota.

Kathleen Sonsteng, EdD, is assistant professor of early childhood and elementary education at Bemidji State University.

Thanks to student teacher Jackie McDevitt for sharing her anecdote and to Chris Amble, Jami Eischens, and Emily Erickson of Child’s Garden Preschool in Bemidji. Please send your guidance anecdotes and other comments to dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu. Children’s names in all anecdotes are changed.
After a class meeting about “friendly touches only,” a teacher found this reference point helpful when he came upon a “World Wrestling Federation match” of four boys, one being sat on and yelling! The teacher discussed with them what friendly touches meant, and he got the boys to wrestle instead some “invisible space invaders.” The four got bored with the make-believe wrestling and soon became firefighters—still rough-and-tumble play, but without the aggressive undertones. (Gartrell 2000, 98)

Two practices can assist teachers in maintaining a balance between addressing children’s need for rough-and-tumble play and limiting aggression during this play. First, have guidelines that clearly ensure children’s safety. Second, promote imaginative and creative play to move beyond “narrowly scripted play that focuses on violent actions” (Levin 2003, 62). The teacher in the above example used both of these practices.

**Melding movement and learning**

If teachers see the need, they can progress beyond the informal inclusion of vigorous play in the schedule. New curriculum models are effectively integrating physical activity in the educational program. Such models ensure that movement will have diverse expression in the daily schedule—a growing essential in this sit-down world. Overviews of three models follow.

**S.M.A.R.T.** (Stimulating Maturity through Accelerated Readiness Training) combines physical and learning activities to stimulate high levels of preacademic and early academic development among children (Farnham 2007). In the S.M.A.R.T. program, children complete 8–10 repetitions of an obstacle course, followed by 10–12 activity stations. The 30-minute sessions are done every day and consist of activities designed to improve hand/eye coordination, distance acuity, fine motor skills, sequencing, left/right awareness, and spatial relations.

Spinning is an example of a S.M.A.R.T. activity that encourages body awareness. While it provides focused body movement, which often helps young children sit still for longer periods of time, spinning also has been shown to stimulate the same part of the brain stimulated by prescribed impulse-control medications. Daily spinning activity may lead to doctors rethinking medication dosages for some children (Farnham 2007).

**Kids in Action** is based on the premise that children love to move. Helping children to be active in appropriate ways can have a tremendous impact on their physical, intellectual, and emotional development. Kids in Action incorporates cardiovascular endurance, muscular strength and endurance, flexibility, and body composition into activities for children in three age groups: infants (birth to 18 months), toddlers (18 to 36 months), and preschoolers (3 to 5 years) (President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports 2003).

An example of an activity recommended for preschoolers that helps to teach cooperation is the mirror game. While facing the child, ask her to do exactly as you do, as if she were looking in a mirror. This game supports children’s social-emotional development when they take turns being the leader. It also means that children have to do with their bodies what their eyes are seeing, enhancing sensory integration that will help with the development of reading and writing skills.

**I Am Moving, I Am Learning** is a proactive approach for addressing childhood obesity in Head Start children. This approach reinforces the mind-body connection and the relationship between physical fitness and early learning. One of the goals of I Am Moving, I Am Learning is to increase the amount of time spent in moderate to vigorous physical activity during daily routines. The model encourages participating centers to include at least 30 minutes daily of structured physical activity as well as 30 minutes daily of unstructured physical activity.

Some of the activities in I Am Moving, I Am Learning are rhythm stick dancing, hoop maze, dancing scarves, balance board, and scooter weaving. One outcome of this model is individual children experiencing moderate improvements on the body-mass index for age. In another outcome, teachers found that children who previously needed considerable redirection required less redirection as music and movement increased in the daily routine (Region III ACF 2006).

Centuries of cultural traditions pressure teachers to think that classrooms must be quiet places that socialize rambunctious children into sedate students. The new learning about child development means that guiding children’s energy, rather than fighting it, is at the core of developmentally appropriate practice. In workshops, we often say that the daily schedule should keep teachers in shape! We figure then the children will also be getting the movement program they need—one that respects and responds to the naturally active nature of the young child.

**To increase your knowledge**

Learn more about the three models:

**Stimulating Maturity through Accelerated Readiness Training**
(S.M.A.R.T.) is being used in 235 elementary schools in 12 states. S.M.A.R.T. is also being field-tested in two Head Start settings in Minnesota, with expected availability for preschool use in May 2009. Visit [www.themlrc.org](http://www.themlrc.org).

**Kids in Action: Fitness for Children** is a joint venture of the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, and the Kellogg Company. For more information, visit [www.fitness.gov](http://www.fitness.gov).

**I Am Moving, I Am Learning** is easily integrated into other community initiatives designed to address childhood obesity and family wellness. For further information, contact Amy Requa, Region III Administration for Children and Families, at (215) 592-1684, ext. 223.
Learn more about developmentally appropriate movement activities:

**Healthy Young Children: Encouraging Good Nutrition and Physical Fitness**, the cluster focus in *Young Children*, May 2006, presents a number of articles and a list of resources on movement and nutrition. Further resources appear in Beyond the Journal, May 2006, at [http://journal.naeyc.org/btj/200605](http://journal.naeyc.org/btj/200605).

*Active for Life: Developmentally Appropriate Movement Programs for Young Children*, by S.W. Sanders, and *Follow Me Too: A Handbook of Movement Activities for Three- to Five-Year-Olds*, by M. Torbert and L. Schneider, are books on exercise and movement from NAEYC.

**Steps you can take**

- Plan a change to your program that promotes physical activity. Most specialists feel that structured physical activity is just as important as vigorous free play, so together with your colleagues, plan how to enhance both.
- Research and decide on a program of indoor and outdoor activities that are developmentally appropriate for your group of children. (Remember, the object is participation, not competition nor immediate skill mastery.)
- Model and participate enthusiastically in the vigorous activities you have implemented. Involve other staff and classroom volunteers.
- Review the nutrition aspects of your program together with your colleagues. Brainstorm refinements so that nutritious meals and snacks complement your new “mind and body” program.

**References**


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Conflict Mediation with Boys

Classroom Anecdote

(Contributed by a student teacher.) This is at the art center during choice time. Four students are playing with play-dough and Will comes to the table and wants to play with the play-dough also.

Will: (Walks to the table looks at Jerrod's play-dough for a second and proceeds to grab a chunk from Jerrod without asking.)

Jerrod: Hey that's mine! (Jerrod tries to grab the play-dough back)

Will: (Pulls away and screams) NO, I want to play too.

Me: (I am sitting at the table when this starts.) OK boys, hang on a second. I see that you are a little upset so could you both take some good deep breaths for me. (They look at me both really unhappy so I start by taking a deep breath my self and they follow my example.) OK, lets talk about this. Will, can you tell me what happened and then Jerrod can tell me what happened?

Will: I want to play play-dough but there is none in the box.

Me: So you wanted to play with some play-dough but there was no more left in the play-dough box.

Will: (Nods head)

Me: OK, Jerrod can you tell me what happened?

Jerrod: I was playing with the play-dough and then Will came and took my play-dough and I said it was mine.

Me: So you were playing with the play-dough and Will came up and took some of your play-dough.

Jerrod: Yeah.

Me: So the problem is that Will wants to play with play-dough also but there is no more left?

Both: (Nod heads)

Me: OK, lets think for a second. How can we solve this? (The boys sit for a few seconds and then Will says)

Will: I could ask.

Jerrod: Yeah! And I can share because you are my best buddy.

Me: So Will should ask if he can have some play-dough and Jerrod you are going to share some. Is that right?

Both: Yeah!

Me: (Will sits down and Jerrod shares some of his play-dough. A few seconds later one of the other children comes over with a piece of play-dough and gives it to Will. (Seems like the children were listening closely and wanted to make sure Will got enough play-dough.)

Merilee: You can have some of mine. (Gives play-dough to Will)

Will: Thanks!

Me: (The rest of the play-dough goes well. When the students are putting it away I go to Will) Thanks for asking if Jerrod could share his play-dough. Using words helps kids stay friends. It works better than grabbing, right?

Will: Yeah, Jerrod would share if I asked!

Me: (I also take a second to walk to Jerrod) Thanks for sharing your play-dough with Will; that helped you two to be friends again.

Jerrod: Yeah, we are going to play outside too.
In Ben’s Head Start class, the adults had been teaching conflict management, through mediation and guidance talks, all year. Ben’s successful mediation helped Will and Jerrod move past the conflict to a solution that allowed them to again be friendly. Children may not be “best buddies” before or after a conflict. Still, after calming down, they generally appreciate being shown how to resolve the matter so that they can get along. When teachers see children going with the agreed-to solution, and then often playing together, they should smile: On this day they have successfully modeled and reinforced the skills of conflict management. A Five Finger Formula for conflict mediation follows. Sometimes teachers merge the steps a bit, but see if you can sequence the steps in Ben’s mediation:

1Cool down (thumb). If necessary, the teacher calms down all parties (including her- or himself) and sets the scene for the mediation process. Note that the teacher may temporarily separate or remove children as part of this step—but only as a cooling-off period that leads to mediation, not as a punishment.

2Identify the problem (pointer). The children (with help from the teacher as needed) put the problem into words and agree on the cause of their disagreement.

3Brainstorm solutions (tall guy). The children (with the teacher’s help as needed) come up with possible ways to solve the problem. Children often come up with a different solution from the “ideal” one the teacher might have in mind. Try to use the children’s ideas, even when you believe justice is not completely served. If the children work it out and agree to it, the solution is logical to them and they benefit from the process.

4Agree on a solution (ringer). The parties decide on one solution and try it. The teacher encourages the children to agree on a solution, even if she or he must suggest one from the brainstorming step.

Often, before a solution is implemented, the teacher has a chat with the children, known as a guidance talk. She reviews what happened, talks about alternatives for the next time, and discusses ways to make amends. Occasionally the teacher follows up with one or both children later.

5Follow up (pinky). The children try the solution. The teacher follows up by encouraging, monitoring, and if necessary guiding their words and actions. A guidance talk with one or more children may also be a part of this step.


Email Dan at dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu