

GUIDING PRINCIPLES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S ACTIVE PHYSICAL PLAY IN GROUP SETTINGS

Seven guiding principles support each child's active physical play in group settings.

Principle I: Adults set safe and appropriately challenging environments for daily active physical play.

Children learn well by playing, making almost any environment their playground. They will play with a tin can in a mud puddle, if that is what is available to them. Those who work in early childhood settings have a mandate as professionals to support children in the safest environments possible. Professional ethics require that those working with young children provide developmentally appropriate activities for children. Active physical play environments, then, must be both safe and appropriate for age and stage.

Principle II: Children engage in active physical play both to develop their bodies and for fun and enjoyment.

When young children master physical skills, they feel a sense of well-being physically, and the emotional sense of achievement and accomplishment. Staff see these reactions when children in their care take their first steps or go down a slide for the first time. The enthusiasm showing in a child's eyes and squeals of delight are unmistakable. A common phrase that young children use as they move up a level in physical skills is "I did it!"

Principle III: Each child has opportunity for frequent and vigorous active physical play.

In a busy and sometimes unsafe world, children may not have space, time, or supervision for frequent and vigorous active physical play. A quality early childhood setting has outdoor and inside areas that are safe from physical and social hazards, and that are stocked with age-appropriate challenges. Each day, every day of the week, teacher-directed activities and child-chosen play are available several times a day to support running, jumping, climbing, hopping, throwing, pedaling, pushing/pulling, and other vigorous activities.

Principle IV: Each child has time for and support for uninterrupted, sustained play.

Each child in an early childhood program deserves to develop the highest level of physical skills possible. When adults pay attention to each child's level of physical ability, and each child's need to practice a skill, they will know when to offer assistance. They will also know when to simply step back and give a child uninterrupted space and time to reach potential. Lack of time and opportunity for practice can interrupt children's attempts at advancing their skills.

Principle V: Each child has access to many and varied active physical play options.

Running, jumping, kicking, pivoting, climbing, throwing, squatting, hopping, pushing, lifting, balancing, and pedaling...all of these skills are targets of a young child's physical development. As young children master skills, play becomes richer, creativity emerges, and children have a repertoire of basic skills to help them live healthy lives. When children can practice skills in many different ways in many different settings, the skills become enduring.

Principle VI: Active physical play is supported by adult-child relationships and child-to-child interactions.

Relationships influence a child's initiation of active physical play, choices of types of physical play, and the culture of dramatic play themes that arise from active physical play. Relationships among teachers and children, and interactions between children can encourage or discourage a child's active physical play. Here are examples: "Teacher, teacher, look how high I climbed" "When I'm five, I'm going to get a basketball hoop at my house like this one" "Mannie and I are both soccer players, aren't we, Mannie?" "No, teacher, I don't want to ride. I can't ride a tricycle, teacher." "Benni took my ball. Benni, that's my ball. You can play with it when I'm done." "Charlize, stop running into me. I can't walk on this if you run into me." "Come on. Go down the slide. Go with me." "My dad plays golf. Me, too. I play like this." "Let's climb up this ladder. Pretend it is a mountain and there's a volcano coming. Climb faster. Hurry or we'll get burned!"

Principle VII: Adults advocate for children to have opportunities and environments that support active physical play.

Good health and optimal physical development are foundations for a satisfying childhood for young children. Children have small voices when it comes to designing buildings and playgrounds, purchasing equipment, and setting schedules, routines and plans. Staff who work with young children can speak up on behalf of young children. They are obvious advocates for supporting young children's active physical play.