Running, jumping, sliding, swinging, playing tag, and hide and seek were once the hallmarks of early childhood. These traditional physical games are rapidly being replaced by sedentary technology such as multi-channel television, videos, DVDs, electronic games, and computer programs. Children of today spend much of their time at home locked safely behind closed doors or at school where they are busy with sit-down-and-learn paperwork.

This societal shift from active to inactive lifestyles is a detriment to children’s health (see Denton, this issue). PBS has announced that the content of its popular children’s program, Sesame Street, will be revised to reflect the concern about increasing numbers of children who are overweight or obese. Annual developmental screenings conducted at the Family Center Village Preschool at Nova Southeastern University in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, confirm the sociological trend of inactive children. Screening results over the past 3 years have indicated a pattern of decline in gross motor ability among preschoolers. Last year, results revealed that 25% of the 3- and 4-year-old children in the program performed in the “questionable” or “significant concern” ranges of the motor domains screened (fine motor planning, visual perception, proprioception, vestibular perception, balance, and gross motor planning).

Early childhood professionals understand that movement is a critical factor in healthy development. Through movement, children learn about the world in which they live. For example, by playing on a balance beam children construct information about weight, balance, and cooperation. As children independently master physical skills, such as hopping on one foot and skipping, they gain self-confidence. Consequently, gross motor deficiency can affect children negatively: physically, cognitively, socially, and emotionally. Therefore, it is important to stimulate and educate children’s bodies as well as their minds.

The goal of the Family Center Village Preschool’s movement/education project is to respect and teach the whole child, body, mind, and spirit. Children’s natural instincts to move and explore are valued and capitalized upon. Teachers strive to offer daily indoor and outdoor activities that entice sedentary children to be physically involved, and offer regular movement activities that help active children focus their energy.

Equally important is attention to individual physical accomplishment. The intention is to establish an appropriate physical education program where children are given the tools and opportunity to build basic gross motor skills. A range of activities is carefully planned to encourage balance, coordination, flexibility, and strength. This acquired knowledge base will in turn provide a solid foundation for

Children’s natural instincts to move and explore are capitalized upon.

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children’s future physical advancement and success. Consequently, young children are expected to demonstrate a positive attitude toward life, see themselves as smart and strong, believe in themselves, and trust their own capabilities.

Encourage balance, coordination, flexibility, and strength.

Lessons From Movin’ and Groovin’

The first step in integrating movement into the early childhood curriculum is to create a culture that respects and celebrates appropriate movement. Two resources that are especially useful to the Family Center Village staff in understanding the topic are Active for Life (Sanders, 2002) and the physical development, gross motor section of Creative Curriculum Developmental Continuum for Ages 3 to 5 (Dodge, 2002).

Given a strong background about the value of movement, staff can then plan effective
• physical environments
• learning experiences
• daily routines
• schedules
• strategies for parent involvement

Recommendations for appropriate practice based on experiences at the Family Center Village Preschool are offered here.

Physical Environments to Support Movement

Indoors, teachers deliberately set up classroom learning centers that invite children to use different body positions. For instance, children sit at a table for snack, cross their legs on the floor to do puzzles, stand and bend at the sensory table, lie down in the reading corner, push shopping carts in dramatic play, stand at the easel to paint, and kneel at the block table.

It is also important to create a movement center where contained large motor activity is expected and accepted (Moomaw, 1997; Sanders, 2002). The movement center is often set up to reinforce a motor skill, such as throwing or tossing. Or it could be established to extend a theme. For example, in winter children throw

Photographs courtesy of the authors

Provide outdoor equipment that encourages gross motor development such as riding and scooting vehicles, pushing and pulling toys, construction materials such as big blocks, as well as digging and carrying tools.
aluminum foil snowballs at a target or skate on laminated paper.

When planning the overall environment, allow enough space for comfortable movement during group gatherings such as circle time. Children can even help move low, light furniture as a transition technique for circle time, which is a good gross motor activity in itself.

Outdoors, playgrounds should have ample space for children to freely run, ride, climb, build, and dig safely. Set up comfortable areas with shade and benches for resting and water for drinking. Provide equipment that encourages gross motor development such as riding and scooting vehicles, pushing and pulling toys, construction materials like big blocks, as well as digging and carrying tools.

**Learning Experiences to Support Movement**

Purposeful movement activities can be integrated into all phases of standards-based learning.

*Math* plans typically include hopscotch and beanbag games to help children learn number concepts, sorting, ordering, and patterning while they toss, hop, bend, and balance.

*Art* activities may include large mural spatter painting, easel painting on various sizes of paper, and drawing on covered walls or floors. Each of these activities encourages upper-body development. Puddle-jump painting and giant-footstep painting encourage lower-body exercise. With all of these activities, extremely careful supervision is essential to ensure that children do not slip.

Puddle-jump painting can be done indoors or outdoors. Indoors, tape a large strip of butcher paper to the floor. Place large, low trays (piddles) with a little water (and perhaps washable paint) in the center of the paper. Children take off their shoes and socks, roll up their pants, and jump, hop, or stomp, in and out of the trays onto the paper.

After rainy days, puddle jumping can be done outside. Each child places white construction paper near a puddle and jumps from the puddle to the paper to create puddle prints. A change of clothing may be necessary.

For giant-footstep painting, tape a long sheet of butcher paper to the

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**Create a culture that respects and celebrates movement.**
floor or hard outdoor surface. Children paint the bottoms of each other’s shoes and make giant steps across the paper. Children enjoy trying to identify each other’s shoe prints. This activity is also a good follow-up for stories such as “Jack and the Beanstalk.”

Science learning might use children’s lotion to identify body parts and increase sensory exploration. Children engage in hands-on experiments such as filling different- and same-size bottles with water to compare weight and volume, or measuring each other’s length when lying down to compare size.

Literacy is expanded by acting out favorite stories, with or without props and music. Listening, following directions, and using vocabulary words such as stretch, lean, and breathe also enhance emerging literacy skills. With young readers, active games can boost reading comprehension. For example, children could read and follow directions on exercise cards with pictures and words.

Problem-solving tasks can be set up to challenge children’s physical skills. Open-ended obstacle courses that promote body awareness and movement exploration are just one possibility for figuring out how to navigate one’s body. Obstacle courses can be as simple as zigzagging chairs for children to maneuver around.

Physical development skills can also be deliberately taught and practiced. At the Family Center Village Preschool, children engage in physical activities daily at circle time and once a week in a preschool fun and fitness class. Skills children learn, such as correct ball-kicking techniques, are reinforced throughout the day in the movement center and during transitions.

Daily Routines to Support Movement

Circle time includes a planned and varied physical movement learning component to promote physical development. Circle time often incorporates music, dance, musical games, rhythmic activities (Wirth, Stassevitch, Shotwell, Stemmler, 1983), musical instruments, yoga (Koch, 1999), Brain Gym (Dennison & Dennison, 1989), stretching and exercise, movement stories (Landalff & Gerke, 1996), movement props such as a large parachute (Wilmes & Wilmes, 1985), and/or specific movement activities (Warren, 1996).

Transitions are thoughtfully planned to reinforce physical exercises. For instance, children may slither like a snake to the playground, or spin and stop when they come to circle time.

Schedules That Support Movement

Every day is a scheduled balance of active and quiet times. Active times, indoors and out, are purposefully structured and arranged so that children have a variety of movement experiences. Playground time is unstructured, giving children the opportunity to play freely and challenge themselves independently. The playground environment is set up to include a variety of enticing active play opportunities.

Once a week, a special gross motor fun and fitness class is scheduled. This class playfully concentrates on appropriate gross motor development. A knowledgeable early childhood physical education teacher uses an assortment of music and a variety of movement props such as a mini-trampoline, hoops, and balls to encourage physical participation.

During the class children learn about general health and fitness, including the importance of stretching and exercise. The teacher purposefully articulates fitness-related vocabulary such as healthy hearts, mighty muscles, and lunging legs. In this class, children

- focus on individual large-motor skill building such as sliding and galloping;
- engage in partner games such as “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” and throwing and catching scarves or balls;
- take part in whole-group activities with objects such as buddy bands (a large stretchy loop) and dancing in conga lines; and
- play cooperative team-building games through a variety of relay races.

Teachers attend the class as well, so they can reinforce children’s learning throughout the week, particularly during circle and transition times.

Once a week active outdoor water play is scheduled when weather permits, which is most of the time in South Florida. This promotes safe and fun whole-body sensory integration. A hose and/or sprinkler are used for open, active play and movement. Organized water games such as Fill the Bucket/Empty the Bucket relay races may also be part of the fun.

Children and teachers seem noticeably happier.
Parent Involvement That Supports Movement

Fitness for Preschoolers Tidbits are sent home once a week. These notes describe a large motor activity that parents can play and enjoy with their children. The Tidbits reinforce actions that were introduced during the week’s fun and fitness class.

Family Members who know about a sport, dance, or physical activity are encouraged to share their expertise with children in the preschool.

Playground Parties are held every other month in the early evening on the preschool playground. Parents sign up to bring potluck dishes. Tables and chairs are set up outside. Students, siblings, parents, and grandparents come, eat dinner, talk, and enjoy the playground together. Children love to play at night on the well-lit playground with their friends and family members. It is great family fun and exercise. Playground parties could also be held on weekends.

Values of Movin’ and Groovin’

Many other early childhood teachers already incorporate ideas such as those mentioned here. They create environments that prompt a variety of physical postures, they plan hands-on curriculum activities, they dance and move during circle and transition times, and they involve parents in children’s learning.

Adopting a curriculum framework that thoughtfully supports comprehensive movement activities adds an important dimension to early childhood programs that seek to facilitate child development. When teachers know about and focus on physical development, think specifically about movement, and honor what young children do best—move and groove—children’s development is greatly facilitated.

Movin’ and Groovin’ has been implemented since September 2004. It is a school-wide collaborative effort. Since it began, spirits have lifted. Children and teachers seem noticeably happier. Exercise does seem to make people feel better. According to the teachers, cooperating with young children’s natural instincts to move does make teaching more rewarding. The entire staff feels that they are making a difference. Put on some sneakers, take the children, and GO PLAY!

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Suggested Sources for Movement Activities

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