

Physical Activity At Child Care: Not Enough, And Too Much TV

Dr. Todd Huffman, for the Eugene *Register-Guard*, 2010

The rapidly increasing prevalence of childhood obesity is of great public health concern. Nationwide data show that the percentage of obese children aged 2 to 5 years increased more than 30 percent in recent years. This is nothing less than a national tragedy occurring in slow motion.

As is by now hopefully well known, obesity can lead to such chronic health problems as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol leading to heart attacks and strokes much earlier in adulthood.

These conditions may be even more serious if obesity develops at younger ages; however, regular physical activity seems to help protect against obesity during the pre-school age period. In addition, physical activity contributes to the development of a young child's muscles and coordination, and enhances the young child's ability to learn.

One of the best opportunities to promote the development of physically active lifestyles among a large number of young American children lies in child care settings. In the United States, more than half of all 3- to 6-year-olds are enrolled in center-based child care, and those who attend such centers spend an average of 25 hours there per week.

Recent research has revealed that the child care center plays a very strong role in the overall physical activity level of a pre-school aged child. However, the same research reveals that child care centers are too often not adequately supporting children's physical activity needs. The average child spends 80 percent of their time in sedentary activities while at child care, and only 2 to 3 percent of their physical activity could be classified as moderate or vigorous.

In 2002, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education put forth the first physical activity guidelines specifically for pre-school aged children. They recommended that children accumulate at least 60 minutes of unstructured (free-play) and at least 60 minutes of structured (adult-led) activities daily. Weather-permitting outdoor active playtime should be provided at least twice daily for the full-time cared child, and teacher-led physical activity should additionally be provided twice-daily.

An ideal child-care center would have outdoor play space that includes open, grassy areas and a track or path for wheeled toys. An open, hazard-free indoor play space would also be available for group physical activities during inclement weather. A wide variety of fixed and age-appropriate play equipment should be provided that can accommodate many children simultaneously.

Visible support for physical activity should be provided in classrooms and common areas through the use of posters, pictures, and displayed books. Written policies on physical activity should be available and followed. The staff should regularly encourage children to be active, and should join children in active play. Active playtime should never be withheld as punishment, and additional active playtime should be given as a reward.

The prominent display of sedentary equipment, such as televisions, videos, and electronic games, should be limited. Televisions and videos should rarely or never be shown, and if shown should

not exceed 30 minutes in duration and in daily total. Of course, all of these recommendations apply as well to home-based child-care programs.

Disturbing data was reported recently in pediatric medical journals regarding preschool-aged children's television viewing in child care settings. A large multi-state study found that children in home-based child care programs were exposed to significantly more television on an average day than were children in center-based programs.

The average toddler in an in-home daycare is exposed to 1.6 hours of television daily, as compared to 0.1 hours in a child care center. For preschool-aged children, the number of screen hours in an in-home daycare rose to a daily average of 2.4 hours, compared to 0.4 hours in a child care center. Children in center-based programs were found to view an average of nearly two fewer hours of television each day.

Clearly, too many in-home daycare providers are not so much letting the children in their charge watch television as asking television to watch the children.

Time spent in front of the television or playing video games is time not spent learning, interacting with peers, being creative, and playing and being physically active. Watching displaces doing, at the cost of weight problems, language delay, aggression, and decreased attention spans now and in the future.

Would it surprise you to know that toddlers and preschool-aged children conditioned to watch television for any longer than 30 minutes daily are far more likely as older children to spend excessive hours sedentary, in front of some sort of screen? And that they are more likely to have difficulty sustaining attention and learning at school?

Parents, ask your child care provider – whether an in-home program or one center-based – their policy on television viewing. Infants and toddlers should not be exposed to television but on occasion, if at all. The television should be kept off during child care hours, as the flickering screen, even while not actively viewed, distracts children's play and constantly tempts them to watch.

Preschool-aged children may be allowed a maximum of 30 minutes of educational television or video-game viewing per day while in child care, and a maximum of one hour daily in all settings. Not until a child reaches school age should their daily average of screen viewing reach two hours.

Child care centers and in-home daycare programs have important influences on young children's diet and activity behaviors and, hence, their physical, cognitive, and weight development. Providing opportunities for and promoting participation in physical activity are prime examples of how child care providers can contribute to children's energy balance, and to their future ability to learn and thrive.

Parents should not forget that their child's daycare setting is more than simply a place for adult supervision until the workday's end. Indeed, child care centers and in-home daycare programs play a vital role in the present and future health and wealth of our children.