

**THE CHILD HEALTH CONNECTION, INC.**

6642 NILE COURT  
ARVADA, COLORADO 80007  
(303) 431-2446

**CAREGIVER/TEACHER ENCOURAGEMENT  
AND DIRECTION OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

Schools are a key setting for kids to get their recommended sixty minutes of play with moderate to vigorous activity. Since young children learn best by doing, where better to begin than at the preschool level.

Getting young children started in the direction of a more active lifestyle begins with helping them improve motor skills. When kids are comfortable with the way they move, physical activity increases. Even at the tender age of three, four, or five, a child needs lots of opportunities for physical activity, both for good health and for skill building. At this age, kids are busy developing gross motor skills . . . learning to use the large muscles in their legs, arms and trunk to run, jump, throw, catch, and kick. They are also working on fine motor skills, although these develop a bit later than gross motor skills. Still, you will want to provide your preschooler with plenty of time to work all their muscles, big and small.

There are a myriad of university researchers across the country working on, and developing programs for activities at the preschool level. Right in our own back yard, Colorado State University researchers have been studying preschoolers in a nutrition and physical activity program for the past ten years. Dubbed Mighty Movers/Fun with Food, this program covers nutrition as well as physical activity. Their nutrition and activity program is currently in 450 classrooms in Colorado. For our purposes here, we will be dealing primarily with the physical component of this and other programs.

**LET'S GET MOVING . . . INDOORS!**

Research has shown that children who are encouraged to be active in their preschool years are more likely to develop healthy exercise habits as they get older, so programs like Mighty Movers go a long way to promote healthy living.

Young children learn best by doing. They need to engage their whole bodies through hands-on experience to fully activate the brain in the learning process. Movement exercises are optimal for brain development and constant interplay. They also learn through curiosity, exploration and play. In order to appeal to their sense of fun and play, the Mighty Movers program uses puppets — Bella Bean, Ollie Orange, Tina Tortilla, Marty Milk, Howie Hamburger, Corrine Carrot, Gertie Gouda and Rudy D. Radish to introduce gross motor skills and movement concepts to children.

Through the years we have primarily been dependent on the playground for exercise. With the advent of Mighty Movers, and programs like this, exercise has been brought into the classroom in a fun and innovative way. When the Mighty Moves music starts, children know it's time to get active! Children jump, run in place, skip, and work their arms to the music, developing their gross motor skills. Below are a few of many activities that can be utilized in the classroom to build . . . .

### Gross Motor Skills

- Dancing, either freestyle or through songs with movements, such as "I'm A Little Teapot," "The Wheels on The Bus," etc.
- Marching, jogging, skipping, and hopping, in parade format.
- Balancing: Have child walk on a piece of string or tape.
- Playing pretend: Kids boost gross motor skills when they use their bodies to become waddling ducks, airplanes, stiff legged robots, etc.
- Building and navigating obstacle courses with pillows, boxes, furniture, etc.

### Small Motor Skills

- Sand play.
- Puppet shows.
- Finger play (Itsy Bitsy Spider).
- Manipulative toys such as blocks and puzzles.
- Cooking: includes pouring, kneading, tearing, cutting with butter knife.

## **CONTINUE MOVING . . . OUTDOORS!**

Time spent outdoors has been found to be a strong, consistent predictor of children's physical activity. Running games, swinging, sliding, swimming, climbing, riding toys, pulling wagons or pushing large trucks are all well utilized outdoor activities. Children can accumulate opportunities for activity over the course of several shorter segments of at least ten minutes each both indoors and out. Because structured activities have been shown to produce higher levels of physical activity in young children, it is recommended that caregivers/teachers incorporate two or more short structured activities (five to ten minutes) or games daily that promote physical activity. Turning on the music before lunch (while the teacher is setting up for the meal), keeps the children engaged and occupied in a physical endeavor, while allowing the teacher some time to complete her lunch tasks. Using the indoor model in addition to outdoor play, will quickly use up these allotted minutes and before we are aware, the recommended sixty minutes of physical activity has come and gone.

## **ADDITIONALLY . . . LET'S BE A ROLE MODEL**

While establishing structured activities for the children is beneficial, so too is engaging in some of those activities along with them! They learn by doing, but

certainly imitating a respected adult who actually engages in the activity along with them leads to lasting benefits. Not only are we modeling for the children but gaining some benefit of our own in the process! What can be bad about that?

**Resources:**

[www.foodfriend.org](http://www.foodfriend.org). Colorado State University. *Mighty Movers/Fun With Food*, information site.

[www.healthychildcare.org](http://www.healthychildcare.org). *Playing Outdoors*, Standard of the Month, March 2011.

Holecko, Catherine. *Physical Activities to Build Your Preschooler's Gross Motor Skills*. Found at [www.familyfitness.about.com](http://www.familyfitness.about.com).

[www.letsmove.gov/activeschools.php](http://www.letsmove.gov/activeschools.php).

Rupnow, Allan and Morain, Vikki. (March 2000). *Growing Up Fit. Preschool Fitness Activities*. Iowa State University.

[www.sparkpe.org/early-childhood](http://www.sparkpe.org/early-childhood).

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