

# Active Start



The importance of physical activity in the first six years of life

## Helping Children Play - The Adult Role

Although children play naturally, there are things that parents and caregivers can do to make play more fun, and help children get the full benefit from playing. It is also critically important for adults to do BOTH of the following: play with the children in their care, and, at other times, leave them to play on their own (but under supervision for safety).

Active adult role models are important. Recent advances in brain science are beginning to show why role models are so important. When children see some activity being done by an adult, their brain cells start to copy what the adult is doing, and over time, this helps children learn to do what the adult does.

When parents and caregivers take children to the park, or out in the back yard to play with a ball, it is good if adults are active with them. This teaches children that being active is fun. Children really do pick up on adult attitudes, and these early years are the time when the child's attitude towards being active begins to develop.

### How to help

Early childhood is a time when children learn by doing, and they can only learn "to do" if they have the opportunity for active play. Parents and caregivers can help children play in a number of ways:

**Setting the stage:** This means finding a safe space for children to play in, and providing them with some safe toys to play with.

**The space:** Children need enough space to run around, such as in backyards, the local park, an empty parking lot, a large room, or local community space. Even when there is not a lot of indoor space, pushing back the furniture to make room is often enough; pushing back the furniture signals to the child that it is "time to play."

**Markings:** Recent research in Europe has shown that one very simple and cheap way to increase the amount of physical activity that children do is to put marking on the floor. These can be chalk markings on the pavement, or masking tape on the carpet; the shape of the marking doesn't matter. Straight lines, squiggles or squares all work well. The children see the markings, and spend time walking along them, jumping over them and using them as part of their games.

**Toys/equipment:** A huge amount of equipment is available for children that can be used to build their skills, but often the

### Key Ideas:

Be an active role model and have fun - children will copy your attitude and the things you do.

Provide opportunities for children to play and expose them to different skills.

Be a role model, but also let children lead the activities

simple, basic equipment is best. A few balls, a plastic bat or hockey stick, and a wheeled toy, such as a tricycle, are more than enough. Cardboard boxes are another great cheap toy. Toys that children can push and pull are also useful. Bright colours help, but are not necessary. It is often better to put out a few toys, and change the toys every day, than to put everything out all of the time.

**Joining in the play:** Remember, being active with children and having fun with them is important.

**Be a retriever:** Children learn when they have the chance to practice - if they are kicking a ball, roll it or bring it back to them so that they can try again.

**Repetition is good:** Children often love repetition both in books and games, so be prepared to play the same thing over and over again.

**Chase and be chased:** Take turns with children, chasing them and letting them chase (and catch) you. Learning to take turns is an important social skill that is best learned through physical play.

**Leave them alone:** When the child is really engaged in play on their own, let them be! Play doesn't have to be adult directed all the time.

**Actively supervise:** Stay close by, pay close attention, and anticipate risks.



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