

Kids more active when playground has balls, jump ropes, study shows

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Children play harder and longer when their child care centers provide portable play equipment (like balls, hoola hoops, jump ropes and riding toys), more opportunities for active play and physical activity training and education for staff and students, according to a study published in the January 2008 issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

Researchers at the University of North Carolina School of Public Health examined environmental factors that encourage children to be active with greater intensity and for longer periods of time. Increased activity levels help children maintain a healthy weight, the researchers say, which is critical as obesity rates climb nationwide, especially among children.

“Childhood obesity is an epidemic that threatens the future health of our nation,” said Dianne Ward, EdD, MS, director of the School of Public Health nutrition department’s intervention and policy division and a co-author of the study. “We know that about 57 percent of all 3- to 5-year-olds in the United States attend child care centers, so it’s important to understand what factors will encourage them to be more active, and, hopefully, less likely to become obese.”

Researchers assessed the physical and social environmental factors thought to influence healthy weight at 20 childcare centers across North Carolina. Then they evaluated the physical activity levels of children attending the centers. Additional data were gathered through interviews and documents provided by the child care directors.

The study showed that children had more moderate and vigorous physical activity and fewer minutes of sedentary activity when their center had more portable play equipment, including balls, hoola hoops, jump ropes and riding toys, offered more opportunities for active play (inside and outside), and had physical activity training and

education for staff and students. Stationary equipment, like climbing structures, swings and balance beams, were associated with lower intensity physical activity, researchers said, but are beneficial to other aspects of child development, such as motor and social skills.

The researchers also noted that centers with more computer and TV equipment actually scored better on activity levels. “It’s unlikely that TV and computers promoted active behavior,” Ward said, “but it could be that centers that have the resources to buy media equipment may also spend more on equipment and activities that promote physical activity and provide supplemental training and education for staff.”

Although previous research pointed to a link between physical activity and the child care center that children attend, there had been little data explaining which aspects of the child care environment actually promoted vigorous physical activity. Not surprisingly, researchers said, children in centers that ranked higher on supportive environment criteria in the study receive approximately 80 more minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity and 140 fewer minutes of sedentary activity per week compared to centers having less supportive environments.

“Child care providers can play a huge role in encouraging children to be active and developing habits and preferences that will help them control their weight throughout their lives,” Ward said. “The easiest way of increasing physical activity may be as simple as providing more active play time, and providing relatively inexpensive toys, like balls and jump ropes. Our data doesn’t go this far, but parents buying toys and games for children this time of year might consider stocking up on jump ropes and hoola hoops. And for their own health, they should get outside with their children and run, jump and play, too.”

Source: Elsevier Health Sciences

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