

Tips from Rae Pica on Physical Fitness and the Early Childhood Curriculum

As early childhood professionals we have a duty to educate the whole (thinking, feeling, moving) child.

The best strength training for children uses their own weight in physical activities they typically enjoy, like jumping, playing tug-of-war, and pumping their legs to go higher on a swing.

Physical activity, and particularly aerobic and muscle-strengthening activities, is the key to combating body fat.

Playing tag, marching, riding a tricycle, dancing to moderate-to-fast paced music, and jumping rope are other forms of moderate-to-vigorous-intensity exercise for children.

A brain break can be any kind of physical activity that gets the blood flowing and provides a change of pace.

When children jump like rabbits and kangaroos, they develop muscular strength and endurance and, depending on how continuously they jump,

Movement Suggestions

Here are some suggestions for encouraging children's active movement.

Arrange the environment to allow for movement. Is there room indoors for you and the children to dance or play Follow the Leaders, to set up an obstacles course, or to twirl hoops around various body parts? Does the outdoor environment have open areas for running, jumping, rolling, and other active play and games? Is there equipment for safe climbing, hanging, and swinging?

Buy equipment and props with movement in mind. Choose items like parachutes, plastic hoops, jump rope, juggling scarves, ribbon sticks, and balls in a variety of shapes, sizes, and textures. Purchase enough so all children have access. Invest in tricycles, scooters, and climbing equipment.

Demonstrate enthusiasm for physical activity. Children learn by watching the important adults in their lives. If you spend the majority of your time in sedentary activities, that is what the children will want to do. But if you spend time playing actively with them, the children will have a wonderful role model. If rainy or very cold weather forces the children to stay indoors, break out the juggling scarves. Do the children need to take a break or burn some energy? Take them for a walk. With all the excitement you can muster, set off to see and hear everything you can in the block around the school or center.

Too often activities such as running laps or doing pushups are melted out as punishment, linking negative associations with physical activity in children's minds. But a teacher's playful, enthusiastic attitude toward physical activity helps children form positive associations with movement.

Help children understand why movement is important.

Recognizing why physical activity is necessary promotes a positive attitude toward fitness that endures beyond childhood. All it takes is a well placed word or two. For example, as children stretch: "it's important to stretch after exercising so your muscles don't get all bunched up." Or to stimulate children's natural curiosity: "Wow! Chasing bubbles really got my heart pumping. It's healthy to do that sometimes. Is your heart going faster too?"

Children should understand why you offer activities like chasing bubbles, dancing, and pretending to jump like rabbits and kangaroos. And they should have a voice in deciding which physical activity they take part in. Would they rather play Statues and Cooperative Musical Chairs? Choice is necessary ingredient in fostering intrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation goes a long way toward ensuring lifelong fitness.