

Physical Activity: How Much Is Needed?

Young Children (2 to 5 years)

Children ages two to five years should play actively several times each day. Their activity may happen in short bursts of time and not be all at once. Physical activities for young children should be developmentally-appropriate, fun, and offer variety.

Children and Adolescents (6 to 17 years)

Children and adolescents should do sixty minutes or more of physical activity each day. Most of the sixty minutes should be either moderate- or vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity, and should include vigorous-intensity physical activity at least three days a week. As part of their sixty or more minutes of daily physical activity, children and adolescents should include muscle-strengthening activities, like climbing, at least three days a week and bone-strengthening activities, like jumping, at least three days a week. Children and adolescents are often active in short bursts of time rather than for sustained periods of time, and these short bursts can add up to meet physical activity needs. Physical activities for children and adolescents should be developmentally-appropriate, fun, and offer variety.

What is Meant by “Age-Appropriate” Physical Activities

Some physical activity is better-suited for children than adolescents. For example, children do not usually need formal muscle-strengthening programs, such as lifting weights. Younger children usually strengthen their muscles when they do gymnastics, play outside, or climb on playground structures. Also, the skill and coordination needed for complex physical activities may not allow for younger children to participate safely. It is important for child care facilities to promote a variety of physical activities that are structured and unstructured so children of all ages can enjoy physical activity and increase their likelihood of life-long adherence.

Many physical activities fall into several categories (moderate- and vigorous-intensity and muscle- and bone-strengthening), making it possible for children to gain multiple benefits with each type of activity.

Sources: U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2011. How much physical activity is needed? http://www.choosemyplate.gov/foodgroups/physicalactivity_amount.html.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2011. Physical activity for everyone: Aerobic, muscle-, and bone-strengthening: What counts? http://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/everyone/guidelines/what_counts.html.