



MEALTIME MEMO

DECEMBER
2024

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN THE CHILD CARE SETTING



In the face of chilly temperatures, engaging in outdoor activities may seem less inviting. Yet, the importance of maintaining an active lifestyle is vital. This *Mealtime Memo* highlights the importance of physical activity and provides a variety of opportunities for staying active, both indoors and outdoors, within the child care setting.

HEALTH BENEFITS OF REGULAR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

While the importance of staying active is widely recognized, many Americans still lead a sedentary lifestyle. Check out the wealth of health benefits associated with being physically active:

- **Boosts Mental Health:** Increases self-confidence, reduces stress, decreases negative behaviors and acting out, and helps you feel less anxious or depressed.
- **Enhances Social Skills:** Promotes cooperation when engaging with others.
- **Improves Muscular Fitness:** Builds strong muscles and bones and improves coordination.
- **Increases Academic Performance:** Improves attention, memory, and active imagination.
- **Maintains Healthy Weight:** Helps regulate body weight and reduce body fat.
- **Optimizes Long-Term Health:** Improves blood pressure, strengthens the heart, and prevents illness and chronic diseases.
- **Promotes Better Sleep:** Improves sleep quality and increases energy levels.



HOW MUCH PHYSICAL ACTIVITY?

- **Infants** should be encouraged by their caregivers to interact in daily physical activities that promote movement and active play. Aim for several short sessions throughout the day.
- **Preschool-aged children under 6** should be physically active throughout the day and aim for at least 3 hours per day.
- **Children over 6 years old** should be active for at least 60 minutes or more each day.



EQUIPMENT

You don't need expensive equipment to get children active inside or outside. Your best tool is creativity.

Inside

Ensure safe access to equipment, like push-pull toys or low, carpeted blocks for climbing. You can also create a variety of large motor objects using lightweight items such as:



- **Softballs:** rolled-up socks or small stuffed animals
- **Scarves:** colorful bandanas or any piece of light fabric
- **Streamers:** strips of wide ribbon
- **Shakers:** plastic containers filled with buttons, beads, or other small pieces
- **Parachute:** sheet

Painter's tape is a low-cost item to use indoors to make hopscotch or four-square lines.

Outside

- Ensure outdoor areas offer safe and age-appropriate opportunities for climbing, running, and jumping.
- Provide inexpensive play equipment such as jump ropes, balls, hula hoops, and tricycles for outdoor play.
- Keep chalk, a low-cost item, on hand for children to draw hopscotch or four-square lines.



PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES

Being active can be simple and fun, whether spontaneous or planned. Encouraging children to move through active play and safe, engaging physical activities supports their physical development and overall health.

Teach children simple movements that can be done inside or outside, with equipment or no equipment. The main idea is to let children have fun. Here are some activities children can enjoy:

- Balancing
- Building something from sand or snow
- Climbing
- Crawling
- Dancing (Hokey Pokey, freeze dance, clapping and stomping to the beat)
- Gardening
- Gymnastics or tumbling
- Hiking
- Hula hooping
- Imitating animals
- Jumping rope
- Keeping a balloon in the air
- Participating in an obstacle course or relay race
- Playing catch or tag
- Practicing yoga* and stretching
- Riding tricycles or bicycles
- Shoveling
- Sledding
- Sweeping with a broom



*Yoga for kids? [Research](#) shows that introducing children to yoga and mindfulness at a young age helps them develop emotional intelligence and ways to deal with stress. Incorporate age-appropriate poses and stretches to promote flexibility and relaxation.

Here are a few more games to play with children to get them up and moving.



- **Active Storytelling:** Combine storytelling with physical activity by having children act out parts of the story.
- **Hula Hoops:** Run, jump, or hop from one hula hoop to the next. Play games of follow-the-leader balancing or marching inside the hula hoops. Imitate different animals while in the hula hoops, such as leaping like a frog, crawling like a lion, and swimming like a shark.
- **Musical Chairs:** If you don't have chairs, you can use stools, carpet squares, or pillows. To keep all children active, instead of having them sit out when they don't get a chair, have them dance to the music each time it plays.
- **Scavenger Hunt:** When the children are outside, have them explore nature and collect items such as leaves, nuts, and stones for an inside art project.

ACTIVE TRANSITIONS

Children transition to and from many activities throughout the day, whether they are moving from group activities, lunchtime, outdoors, or indoors. Transitions provide an excellent opportunity to weave spurts of movement into the day.

When children are waiting for the next activity, encourage them to keep moving. They can engage in movements like jumping jacks, whacky jacks, or jogging in place. They can also gallop, hop, jump, side shuffle, or skip rather than walk from one space to another.



ROLE MODELS

Adults also need to stay active throughout the day. Staff and parents should role-model positive behaviors by being physically active with children indoors and outdoors.

Encourage parents to continue physical activity at home by offering suggestions for indoor and outdoor activities. Share information about the benefits of physical activity and its role in child development.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Spark positive conversations with children about physical activity with these questions:

- What do you like to do to move your body?
- What is your favorite [outdoor or indoor] activity to do [here and at home]?
- What is your favorite [group or family] activity or game?



MENU IDEAS

The following menu ideas provide a variety of foods, colors, and textures to fuel active bodies.

Breakfast	Lunch/Supper	Snack
Mini Waffles Strawberry Compote 1% Milk	Barbecue Beef Slider Whole Wheat Bun Spinach Salad Fruit Cocktail 1% Milk	Whole Wheat Crackers Cucumber Coins Water

RECIPES



- The [Child Nutrition Recipe Box](#) has USDA-standardized recipes for child care centers and family child care homes.
- The [Child Nutrition Recipe Box: New CACFP Lunch/Supper Recipes](#) has standardized recipes per age group (3–5 and 6–18 year-olds) and for 6, 25, and 50 servings.

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Suggested Reference Citation:
 Institute of Child Nutrition. (2024). *Mealtime memo: Physical activity in the child care setting*. University, MS: Author.

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