

Moving With Feeling

Nurturing preschool children's emotional health through active play

Five-year-old Marcus has been up all night because of violent thunderstorms. The next morning he reenacts this frightening experience on the playground of his Head Start classroom. "Thunder! There's thunder coming! Quick, we need to get in our house or we get the 'lectricity!" He makes a loud thunder noise as he climbs up onto the platform of a climber. "Get on, Sean, you have to climb up here. I'll save you." He reaches down, takes his peer's hand, and pulls him up onto the climber. "If you climb up, the thunder can't get you, because you're safe in the house." (Trawick-Smith, 1992, p. 112)



We all know that regular physical activity promotes children's physical health and development. But active play—especially outdoor active play—also supports children's social and emotional health. Social and emotional health is a critical area of development—being able to get along with other children and control one's behavior is just as important to a child's success in life as is learning to read and write. One way to support this important area of development is to promote children's active play.



Social and emotional benefits of active play

Research shows that active play provides many benefits to children's social and emotional development.

- **Experiencing positive emotions:** Children of all abilities exhibit many signs of positive emotions—smiling, laughing, and sounds of excitement—when engaged in active motor play. Running around and playing outside is often the part of the day that children enjoy most, and it can influence their mood and behavior for the entire day.
- **Learning to express and identify emotions:** Active play can also include negative emotions, such as peer rejection, conflict, frustration at not being able to do certain things, and hurt feelings. Children express emotions easily during play and are highly influenced by the emotions that their playmates express. Since active play includes such varied emotions, it is the ideal context for children to learn to notice, identify, and name feelings—their own and others'. In fact, children who are competent in motor skills possess greater knowledge of various emotions than do children who are delayed in their motor abilities.
- **Gaining feelings of confidence and control:** As they play, children bring all kinds of feelings to the surface and try to understand and master them. Things that are frightening, confusing, or worrisome to them are played out in make-believe. Stress is reduced with every step when they run, gallop, jump, or climb. Normally less-powerful in their lives, preschoolers become mighty and brave in their play and completely in charge of their own actions. In play, children often feel successful and confident.
- **Forming strong relationships:** Feelings of security and attachment form on the playground as children form bonds with peers and caregivers through warm, joyful, and even humorous interactions, and as they learn to resolve conflicts with their peers during play.

The adult's role in supporting active play

Research findings can guide teachers and caregivers in how to foster play that promotes healthy social and emotional development.

- **Make play enjoyable:** Although this seems simple, children's unique preferences for certain play materials and activities make it somewhat challenging. Even the most experienced teacher will plan experiences that just don't engage children, as interests may vary from month to month. But when adults carefully observe play to identify children's preferences, they can plan activities that will spark children's excitement and passion and ensure that children of all abilities can find activities that inspire happiness and feelings of self-control. They can also ensure that children have access to a variety of play equipment that may interest them, such as balls, hula hoops, and tricycles.
- **Regularly provide new motor challenges for children:** When a child masters a new skill on the playground, she feels a strong sense of pride and self-satisfaction, and she is likely to have a huge smile on her face. Feelings of delight and happiness appear to be greatest when children are engaged in motor tasks that are appropriately challenging. Adults can help to foster these positive feelings by encouraging children to try new things, and by sharing in children's enthusiasm and excitement when they have a new accomplishment. Playing games that challenge children to move in new ways ("Try to hop on one foot all the way to the swings!") and setting up obstacle courses

can provide children with opportunities to experience the joy of learning and mastering new motor skills.

- Help children to learn about emotions in play: When a child shows great joy at running down a hill, pretends to be an angry monster trying to catch and eat up other playmates, or laughs uproariously at a peer's silly antics on a tire swing, an adult can point out and comment on the emotions involved. ("That monster sounds pretty angry. Look at that frown on his face!" or "Look at Samantha smiling and laughing. She must really be having fun on that swing.") Adults can also ask children to reflect on their own feelings while at play. ("How did it feel to jump off that high climber? Was it a little scary?" or "Which did you think was the most fun—running or rolling down the hill?")
- Ask children to reflect on the movements their bodies make and the sensations involved in their play: Adults can ask questions such as, "How did your body feel while you were running so hard? How does it feel now?" Such a strategy has been found to promote motor ability and a child's awareness of how his body feels during and after movement. Developing this awareness of body sensations can help children develop an awareness of their emotions as well.
- Model how to join a play group or to make contact with peers: Just being outdoors does not ensure active social play. Some children will need adult support to play with others. This is particularly true for those with disabilities, who may lack motor or social skills to enter into play activities. Research suggests that adults might begin supporting social abilities in play activities that are less physically challenging. In such settings, children can focus on the social demands of play, without having to contend with task difficulty. Walking, running, dancing, and other simple movement activities will allow all children to join their peers in play. Adapting play settings can also support the social interactions of children—particularly those with disabilities. For example, teachers at one center added recorded music, singing, and other noises to the playground to assist a child with a visual impairment to locate and interact with peers in play.



Developing confidence

One of the most significant emotional benefits of motor play for young children is gaining a feeling of competence and self-control. But some children lack what researchers call mastery motivation, which is an internal desire to master skills. Children with mastery motivation are driven to try new things. They take pleasure and pride in their accomplishments and need little encouragement from adults. While many children possess this drive from the time they are young infants, others lack this desire. They show hesitation in trying new play activities and give up easily

on motor tasks. As these children get older, their lack of mastery motivation may lead them to give up easily on academic tasks well, so it's important to support the development of mastery motivation early on. Adults can do several things to support this motivation to learn new skills:

- Identify play activities that are enjoyable and interesting to children. Children are more motivated to achieve motor skills when engaged in activities that are fun. Adults should try a variety of activities—such as shooting baskets, riding tricycles, or playing stop and go games—to learn which ones engage children the most.
- Take it outside: Research suggests that children move with a great deal more vigor and show off their most elaborate motor abilities outdoors. Even quieter, less social children will interact more frequently with peers when outside. The benefits of outdoor play are magnified when natural elements—hills, grass, trees, water—are included in the play space. Getting children off the playground and into the woods or on a hilly field might inspire new play activities and skills.
- Introduce novel challenges on the playground. Children show their highest levels of mastery motivation when play activities are challenging. Introducing a new ball-throwing game, obstacle course, or run-and-freeze activity on the playground might encourage even the most reluctant child to move and learn.
- Support more independence on the playground. When teachers give children greater choice and control over how they move and play on the playground, mastery motivation soars. Why? Children who can select their own motor play activities will choose those they are interested in and in which they can be successful. Even in adult-guided motor activities, choice can be included to promote a desire to master tasks. Asking children to try different ways to stand with five parts of their body touching the ground, to run under different imaginary conditions (in a strong wind, up a hill, down a hill), or improvise dances to different types of music will inspire children to use those skills they already possess and to learn new ones that match their own movement ideas.

“Queen Wonder Can Do Anything!”

Four-year-old Natasha struggles for several minutes to get to the top of a climber. Finally, she reaches the top, waves to her peers on the ground and proudly announces, “I am Queen Wonder, and Queen Wonder can do anything!” In active motor play, most children acquire this same belief: With effort and tenacity, they can be competent and powerful. They can do anything.

Additional Resources

For more information about supporting children's physical play, including videos with ideas you can try in your own classroom, visit www.easternct.edu/cece.

For **references** for this tip sheet, visit: www.easternct.edu/center-for-early-childhood-education/about-us/publications.html.

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Authors: Jeffrey Trawick-Smith and Julia DeLapp
Graphic Design: Kai Hansen, '15*