



# UK Physical Activity Guidelines for Early Years (walkers)

Information for stakeholders, early years  
practitioners and health professionals



BHF National Centre  
**physical activity+health**

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Early years settings play a key role in providing enabling environments which can help contribute towards young children achieving their daily physical activity requirements for health and well-being.

## The Early Years Physical Activity Guidelines

The introduction of UK early years physical activity guidelines reflect a growing awareness of their importance and follows the lead of other major international countries. They are based on evidence from research and the combined input from experts in this field of study.

These guidelines are relevant to **all children under the age of five** irrespective of gender, race or socio-economic status, but should be interpreted with consideration for individual physical and mental capabilities, and are aimed at the following groups:



**Early years (under fives) - Infants who cannot yet walk unaided:** Physical activity should be encouraged from birth, particularly through floor-based play and water-based activities in safe environments.

**Pre-school children who can walk unaided:** Children of pre-school age who are capable of walking unaided should be physically active daily for at least 180 minutes (3 hours), spread throughout the day.

**Sedentary guideline:** All under fives should minimise the amount of time spent being sedentary (being restrained or sitting) for extended periods (except time spent sleeping).

These guidelines are designed to help early years professionals and practitioners understand the type and amount of physical activity under fives should do to benefit their health. Leaflets which translate the guidelines for parents are available from [www.bhf.org.uk/publications](http://www.bhf.org.uk/publications).

## Why do we need physical activity guidelines for the early years?

There has been a growing concern in recent years about a lack of physical activity and increased sedentary behaviour among young children. Children under five have not previously been included in UK public health guidelines and those

devised for the 5-18 age group are neither suitable nor appropriate for most under fives. Children under five need time to play and master their physical environment and develop fundamental movement skills.

## The importance of physical activity for children in the early years

During the period from birth to five years, physical activity is critical to optimal growth and development. During this time babies and young children undergo rapid and wide-ranging physical and psychological developments which lay the foundation for their future health and well-being.

The early years is also an important time in the establishment of physical activity and sedentary behaviours. Data from tracking studies show support for a link between higher levels of physical activity leading to more sustained participation in physical activity in later years. Therefore it is important to establish a high level of activity at the earliest age in order to provide the best start to encourage activity patterns and habits later in childhood that are sufficient to benefit long term good health.

At no other point will children learn so many physical skills as they do in the first five years of life! The benefits of young children being physically active go way beyond just the physical benefits. Research has shown that being physically active can help with the development of:

- **motor skills**, eg, balance, coordination
- maintaining a **healthy weight**
- **strong bones, muscles and heart**
- **social skills**, ie, how to interact, take turns and getting on and caring about others.

It is also widely believed that physical activity can help with the development of:

- **self confidence**
- **communication skills** including how to solve problems and make decisions
- **establishing good habits for being active** so they will continue to be active throughout the rest of their childhood and beyond
- developing **important brain structures**
- developing immediate and long-term **good health outcomes**.

## How do the guidelines reflect differences in the under five population?

‘Under fives’ encompass a diverse range of children from new-borns through to children about to start school. As developmental rates can vary a great deal in children of the same age, the key distinction to make between the two guidelines is therefore between those not yet able to walk and those who can.

## The importance of movement for infants not yet walking

Unrestricted floor-based activities in the home and early years settings are an essential source of physical activity for infants not yet walking and are important for helping them to:

- maintain a healthy weight
- build social and emotional bonds with parents, siblings and other children
- develop good posture, strength and balance
- develop all their senses
- teach them about their bodies and the world around them
- interact with others and develop language and communication skills
- keep their bodies and minds active.

**Tummy time** (any time when babies are carried, positioned or played with on their stomachs), plays a critical role in enabling babies to develop sensory, visual and movement control, helping to strengthen the muscles in the legs, arms, back and neck and to establish head control. This eventually helps babies to push up, roll and move into a crawling position and in turn helps develop shoulder stability, hand strength and coordination - all important for later movement skills including writing

development. Muscles developed in the neck during head control are important for the development of speech and language skills.

## What types of physical activity are appropriate for infants not yet walking?

Babies from when they are first born need to have daily opportunities to move freely on their stomach, or back in a variety of stimulating, safe spaces, without being constrained for long periods by clothing, wraps, straps (ie, in car seats or baby chairs or bouncers). They need opportunities to practise important movements such as: **reaching for and grasping objects, turning the head toward stimuli, pulling, pushing and playing with other people, objects and toys.**



Appropriate water-based activities with parents or carers, provide similar opportunities for movement and are recommended.

*For more information about physical activities for infants who cannot walk download the information booklet for non-walkers*



## Typical activity patterns for walkers under five

Young children don't need to do their 180 minutes (3 hours) of physical activity all at once. Children under five have a natural tendency to be active in sporadic bouts and **accumulating physical activity throughout the day** suits their natural movement behaviour and protects against long periods of inactivity. However, most UK toddlers only spend 120-150 minutes a day in physical activity, and so achieving the guideline would mean adding another 30 to 60 minutes a day to their current levels of physical activity.

## What intensity of physical activity is appropriate?

The 180 minutes can be activity of any intensity. For this age group, the amount of physical activity is more important than the intensity. Therefore, whether they are **light**, eg, moving about, standing up, walking at a slow pace, or **moderate** or

**vigorous** (more energetic activity), eg, climbing, dancing to music, running and skipping, will all contribute towards the 180 minutes a day. More energetic play will make children 'huff and puff' and this will encourage the development of their heart and lungs and this is good for their health. It will also burn calories and this is important to help young children maintain a healthy weight.

## What types of physical activity are best for under fives who are walking?

1. **Physically active play** is the best way for young children to be physically active. Enabling environments which foster, encourage and provide opportunities for physically active play (eg, providing space and variety of equipment) at home and within the childcare setting, are essential. Physically active play opportunities should encourage young children to:

- use large muscle groups, eg back, shoulders, legs, arms etc
- engage in more energetic forms of physical activity, eg, running and chasing games. These need to be encouraged through short bouts of activity, rather than be expected to take place for extended periods of time.
- practise a wide range of different movements, eg, locomotor, stability and object control skills
- experience a variety of play spaces and equipment
- set up their own play areas
- make up their own physically active play
- have fun and feel good about themselves and what they can do.

2. **Developmental activities** are important to give children chances to practise their motor skills. By the age of three, children should have opportunities to practise:

- **locomotor skills** (running, jumping, hopping galloping and skipping, dancing and water-based activities)
- **stability**, (balancing, riding a bike and climbing)
- **object-control skills** (kicking, catching, throwing, striking and rolling a ball).

Adult encouragement, regular positive feedback and support are important to help young children develop these skills.

3. **Everyday activities** have the potential to contribute a large proportion of a young child's physical activity. These can include:

- **active travel** - walking, tricycling or biking, scootering to the shops, early years setting, friend's house, park etc
- **physical tasks** - tidying up toys, gardening, setting up for meal times.

## The importance of active parents and carers

Parents and carers should be made aware of the importance of physical activity for their child or children in their care and encouraged to interact with them in a physically active way as often as possible. This will encourage a child to be more active, enjoy the experience and stimulate further participation. Parents and carers are important role models for their children and being physically active themselves has many health benefits too. Research suggests that parental physical activity impacts positively on how much physical activity their children participate in.

*Leaflets which translate the guidelines for parents are available from [www.bhf.org.uk/publications](http://www.bhf.org.uk/publications) (code G611).*



### Opportunities to be physically active - a typical weekday

**Please note:** This is simply one example and there are many variations on how the 3 hours of physical activity can be incorporated into a day.

Activity	Approximate time
• Early morning play at home, eg, playing with toys, moving around from one activity to another	15 minutes
• Walk (or tricycle, cycle or scooter) to the early years setting	15 minutes
• Play at early years setting before start. (Some early years settings provide an area for parents and their children to play)	15 minutes
• Two active breaks	30 minutes
• Two structured or adult-led activity sessions, eg, action rhymes, music and movement session, play with small equipment facilitated by an adult	30 minutes
• Walk (tricycle, cycle or scooter) home (perhaps incorporating some play on way home, eg, stop at park, meet and play with some friends)	30 minutes
• Play with parents and/or siblings in the home/garden, eg, active games, dancing to music, play with bubbles/balloons/steamers, play equipment in garden	25 minutes
• Play alone, eg, dressing up/play acting, play with toys	20 minutes

*Parents and carers are important role models for their children and being physically active themselves has many health benefits too*



*Early years settings are ideally placed to provide children under five with opportunities to be physically active*

### Opportunities to be physically active - A typical weekend day/holiday time

*Use this example to show parents how they can encourage more physical activity. For more physical activity ideas, order or download the parent leaflet (code G611) at [www.bhf.org.uk/publications](http://www.bhf.org.uk/publications) or call the BHF orderline on 0870 600 6566.*

- Play with siblings in the home/ garden
- Family activities eg games, walk in green space, eg, local forest, open space/countryside
- Meet up and play with friends/siblings at their home or agreed venue, eg, park, indoor play area
- Play alone, eg, with toys
- Play with parents, eg, action rhymes or games, small equipment, outdoor play equipment, dancing together
- Walk to shops, local library, place of worship, community event, run an errand, eg, post a letter
- Organised activity sessions, eg, early years session, swimming pool family session, community events
- Play in outdoor play areas, eg, park, playground
- Engage children in everyday tasks, eg, sorting out washing, tidying up and sorting out toys, laying the table for meals



## Tips for promoting more physical activity and reducing sedentary behaviour in an early years setting

Research evidence suggests that physical activity levels in UK childcare settings appear currently to be very low. Early years settings are ideally placed to provide the many UK children under five who now regularly access childcare settings, with opportunities to be physically active.

## Physical activity provision in the setting

### Free play opportunities

- Plan for and provide enabling environments with plenty of stimulating, fun, active, play opportunities and challenges, where children can generate and direct their own physically active play and engage in imaginative play. This will encourage independence and exploration.
- It is important to provide free space for free play to enable children to run around freely and spontaneously and to experience whole body movement.
- Facilitate free play by putting out lots of small play equipment and toys, every day objects or props, eg, balls, streamers, cardboard boxes, empty

containers, and get the children to use their imagination to explore and play.

**Remember, not all children are naturally active or creative and some are shy and avoid groups, so support, facilitate, demonstrate and prompt when necessary.**

### Structured or adult-led play

- Balance free play with more formal structured learning opportunities where adults may facilitate play by providing enabling environments to encourage the learning of new movement patterns and motor skills, eg, music and movement, action rhymes and songs, organised games or guided discovery sessions, ie, where adults prompt children to work out alternative ways to move and use equipment.

### Utilising all available space

- Allow children to spend plenty of time playing outside. Lots of small bouts of focused play time results in more physical activity than extended periods.
- When inside, clear tables aside to make more space to allow more physical activities. If space is tight, use any outside space at the setting or close by in the community, eg, open green spaces, parks, community venues such as church hall, Children's Centre etc.

## Adults joining in

- Be a good role model and demonstrate physical activities as being fun to join in with. This does not mean always directing, but participating, facilitating, supporting and encouraging where needed. Let the children see you enjoying the activities!

## Everyday tasks

- Get children involved as much as possible in physical tasks such as tidying up and putting away equipment/ materials in both inside and outside play spaces, helping to set up activities and meal times and getting them involved in gardening.

## Working with parents

- Encourage parents to send children prepared to play out in all weathers, eg, wellies, warm coat, hat, scarf and gloves for winter months; sunhats, sun creams, thin long-sleeved tops for summer months. This could be incorporated into the setting's physical activity policy. Settings could provide a box of spare clothes (collected from charity shops) for those children whose parents may forget. Providing a covered area such as a gazebo can help to provide some shady areas to play in the summer.

- Providing 'take-home bags' which include a variety of small equipment, everyday objects and cards with activity ideas, can be a useful way of encouraging parents to stimulate active play with their child at home.
- Encourage active travel, especially to and from the setting. Settings can encourage this by providing a secure parking area for buggies, bikes, scooters etc. If distances are long, young children can walk, trike, bike or scooter some of the way. As children get older and stronger, the distance covered can be gradually increased.
- Make parents and carers aware of the enormous benefits of enabling the children in their care, to be physically active and reducing their sedentary time.

*Distribute the parent leaflet available from [www.bhf.org.uk/publications](http://www.bhf.org.uk/publications) (code G611)*

*Under fives spend a large amount of time being sedentary and this is associated with overweight and obesity as well as lower cognitive development*

## Sedentary behaviour

There is evidence that under fives spend a large amount of time being sedentary and this is associated with overweight and obesity as well as lower cognitive development. Sedentary behaviour refers to activities that typically occur whilst seated or lying down and which require very low levels of energy expenditure.

In addition, patterns of sedentary behaviour, (especially TV viewing) established in the early years are more likely to be continued through to adulthood. It is important therefore to establish healthy behaviours in the early years in order to protect their health against possible less healthy behaviour in the future.

It's true that nowadays there are many opportunities for young children to spend excessive time in sedentary behaviour such as watching television, travelling by car, sat in a buggy or sitting whilst playing games. Even for babies, spending too much time strapped into car seats, buggies and other baby equipment, is not good for their health as it limits the opportunities for movement. All children need quiet 'down time,' however reducing these sedentary times, breaking up extended periods of sitting and replacing them with more active options, is strongly advised for children in the early years.

## Reduce sedentary behaviour by:

- reducing time spent in front of media screens, eg, TV, computer
- breaking up bouts of sedentary activities by encouraging more movement, eg, alternating table-top activities with more physically active options; if offer 'free-flow' (where children can move freely between activities both inside and outside) - encourage children to move around different activities
- interacting with children regularly - facilitating, supporting, prompting etc when necessary
- making parents aware of the importance of reducing sedentary behaviour.



## Physical activity resources to help promote movement and reduce sedentary behaviour

### **Chief Medical Officers Report 2011 (Department of Health)**

'Start Active, Stay Active' updates the existing guidelines for children, young people and adults, and includes for the first time in the UK, new guidelines for early years and older people. Available to download at [www.dh.gov.uk/publications](http://www.dh.gov.uk/publications)

### **Start4Life and Play4Life (Department of Health)**

The early years section of the Department of Health's (DH) Change4Life campaign, aimed at healthcare and childcare professionals. Active play resources are available which can be downloaded from [www.nhs.uk/start4life](http://www.nhs.uk/start4life).

### **Early movers (British Heart Foundation)**

A physical activity guide designed to help early years practitioners plan and organise physically active play environments. Consists of seven booklets, two parents leaflets, a height chart, sticker booklet and six posters for the setting. Available to order or download at: [www.bhf.org.uk/publications](http://www.bhf.org.uk/publications) (search Early movers), call the BHF Orderline (quoting order code G609) on 0870 600 6566 or email [orderline@bhf.org.uk](mailto:orderline@bhf.org.uk)

### **Get Up and Grow (Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing)**

A series of four downloadable booklets and leaflets specifically written for early years managers, practitioners and families which give lots of information and ideas for promoting physical activity and healthy eating for the early years. Available to download at: [www.health.gov.au](http://www.health.gov.au) (search 'Get up and Grow').

### **Artie's Olympics (British Heart Foundation)**

An activity-based fundraising scheme for young children, aimed at nurseries and other groups working with the 3-8 year old age group. It encourages children to get active through a number of games and activities. Groups get to keep 20% of funds raised. Visit [www.bhf.org.uk/schools](http://www.bhf.org.uk/schools) (search 'Artie's Olympics').

### **Start to Play (Youth Sport Trust)**

Aimed at those engaging with children between 0 and 5 years old, Start to Play provides a number of resources to encourage play and physical activity opportunities for young children, their parents, guardians and carers. Available to order at: [www.ystdirect.org.uk](http://www.ystdirect.org.uk) Training is also available, although not compulsory, call: 01509 226624. Visit [www.youthsporttrust.org](http://www.youthsporttrust.org)