

Amid rising childhood obesity, preschoolers found to be inactive

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The rate of childhood obesity has risen significantly in the United States, with many children becoming overweight at younger ages. At the same time, the number of preschoolers in center-based programs is also on the rise. Now a new study finds that, contrary to conventional wisdom, preschoolers don't move around a lot, even when they're playing outside.

The study, by an interdisciplinary team of researchers at the University of South Carolina (USC), Michigan State University, and East Carolina University and led by Professor Russell R. Pate (at USC), is published in the January/February 2009 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

Using information from the Children's Activity and Movement in Preschools Study (CHAMPS), a project funded by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), the researchers looked at 3-, 4-, and 5-year olds enrolled in 24 community-based preschool programs.

They found that the preschoolers were inactive for much of their preschool day, with 89 percent of physical activity characterized as sedentary. Even when they played outside, a time when children are expected to move around, 56 percent of their activities were sedentary.

Furthermore, teachers very rarely encouraged the children to be physically active. But when balls and other items were made available, especially outside, and when they had open spaces in which to play, the children were more likely to be active.

"The low levels of children's activity and the lack of adult encouragement point to a need for teachers to organize, model, and encourage physical activity," according to William H. Brown, professor in the College of Education at USC and the study's lead author. "Because children's health and physical well-being are an important part of development, their physical activity needs to be increased in order to promote healthy lifestyles, particularly for preschoolers who are growing up in low-income families and who are at greater risk for poor health outcomes."

Source: Society for Research in Child Development

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