

## 86 percent of disadvantaged preschoolers lack basic motor skills

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Disadvantaged urban preschoolers aren't only at risk for failure in the classroom - they are likely to struggle on playgrounds and athletic fields as well, research suggests.

A new study found that more than eight out of every ten disadvantaged preschoolers from two urban areas showed significant developmental delays in basic [motor skills](#) such as running, jumping, throwing, and catching.

That means that they are at risk of giving up on physical activities and becoming obese teenagers and adults, said Jackie Goodway, lead author of the study and associate professor of [physical activity](#) and educational services at Ohio State University.

"These fundamental motor skills - running and catching and throwing and kicking - are the movement ABCs," Goodway said.

"If children don't learn the ABCs, they can't read. And if they don't learn basic motor skills they won't participate in sports or exercise. That's the problem we may be facing with the children in this study."

Goodway conducted the study with two of her former doctoral students: Leah Robinson, now at Auburn University and Heather Crowe, now at Towson University. Their study appears in a recent issue of the journal *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*.

The researchers studied 469 preschool students enrolled in urban, state-funded programs serving disadvantaged youth. Included were 275 children, mostly African American, from a Midwestern city and 194 children, mostly Hispanic, from a southwestern city.

The children were evaluated using a standardized test of motor skills. They participated in tests of locomotor skills which included running, jumping, hopping, leaping, sliding and galloping. They were also evaluated on object control skills through tests of throwing, catching, kicking, striking, dribbling and rolling.

Results showed that 86 percent of the children scored below the 30th percentile of children nationwide, which is considered developmentally delayed.

While girls and boys had similar scores on the locomotor skills, girls did significantly worse than boys on object control activities in which they used an object such as a ball or a bat. Boys' average scores were at the 22nd percentile on object control, while girls' were at the 11th percentile.

In general, girls of every socioeconomic category perform more poorly than boys do in the object control tests, Goodway said. However, disadvantaged girls do much worse than do other girls on these tests.

These findings may surprise people who believe children don't need instruction in motor skills, Goodway said.

"Most people, even many educators, believe that motor skills just naturally develop in children, but our study shows that's clearly not true," Goodway said.

"Like any skill, there needs to be instruction, there needs to be practice,

there needs to be feedback. That's how children master these motor skills."

The problem is that children from disadvantaged, urban neighborhoods don't get the opportunities that other children have to play outside in parks and backyards where they can learn how to run and jump and catch footballs and dribble basketballs.

"Their parks may be full of gangs, they don't have backyards that are safe, they are often raised by single mothers who are working multiple jobs and don't have time to supervise them outside," Goodway said.

"These children spend most of their time sitting in school and then going home and sitting in front of the TV."

While the children in this study were mostly minorities, Goodway said the results would apply to any children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

"Ethnicity doesn't matter. It's about poverty," she said.

Goodway said she has developed an intervention program to help preschoolers like those in this study and is currently studying its effectiveness. Preliminary results suggest that disadvantaged children who are taught motor skills as preschoolers can make "huge gains."

She said she hopes that Head Start and other programs designed for disadvantaged preschoolers begin to include more physical education as part of what they offer. Preschool teachers also need to learn more about teaching motor skills.

"We have a window of opportunity during early childhood when we can teach disadvantaged [children](#) motor skills and help get them back to where they need to be," Goodway said.

"But once they get to late elementary school, it is very hard to changed their attitudes and behaviors."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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