

Get them while they are young, call for closer examination of preschooler physical activity levels

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Australian researchers need to investigate the specific physical activity levels required by preschoolers to encourage better exercise habits later in life, academics argue.

In a paper recently published in the [Medical Journal of Australia](#), Deakin University's Associate Professor Helen Skouteris said guidelines on how much time and at what intensity preschoolers should spend being physically active varied around the world but were mostly developed from knowledge about adults.

"There is a distinct lack of research on this age group, particularly the relationship between physical activity and preschooler health, which means it is difficult to tell parents what is the appropriate amount of physical activity for a preschool child to ensure positive outcomes," she said.

"Age groupings are needed because toddlers and preschoolers, school-aged children and [adolescents](#) are physiologically and developmentally different from each other.

"Yet we know physical activity is one factor which influences the healthy growth and development of children.

"Its value is beyond doubt and the lack of it is viewed as a major

contributing factor to [overweight and obesity](#) which can track into [adulthood](#) and pose other cardiovascular and [health risks](#)."

Associate Professor Skouteris argued that strategies to ensure children under five years developed healthy levels of physical activity should start as early in life as possible.

"Behaviors are more malleable in the early years," she said.

Associate Professor Skouteris said different research studies had shown [physical activity levels](#) for Australian children aged 3 to 5 years fell below the recommended three hours per day.

"The differences in methodology in this research means it is difficult to ascertain whether the preschoolers were sufficiently active or not," she said.

"By Australian standards they are inactive, however if they lived in Ireland, the [Nordic countries](#), Singapore or the US most would be deemed to be sufficiently active."

"What is needed urgently are age-related studies of healthy children looking at their natural levels of activity and the most reliable way of capturing it.

"Without this information interventions designed to address childhood obesity and related health issues by encouraging recommended levels of physical activity during the formative preschool years will continue to be limited."

How we compare: Guidelines/recommendations endorsed specifically for preschoolers:

- United States (guideline): preschoolers should accumulate at least 60 minutes of structured physical activity each day and up to several hours of unstructured physical activity each day, and should not be sedentary for more than 60 minutes at a time, except when sleeping.
- United Kingdom (recommendation): Children of preschool age who are capable of walking unaided should be physically active (light-to-vigorous) daily for at least 3 hours, spread throughout the day.
- Ireland (guideline): all children and young people should be active, at a moderate to vigorous level, for at least 60 minutes every day.
- Australia (recommendation): toddlers (1–3 years) and preschoolers (3–5 years) should be physically active (light-to-vigorous) every day for at least 3 hours, spread throughout the day.

Provided by Deakin University

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