

Getting pre-schoolers into SHAPES

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Giving kindergarten teachers a little guidance and a lot of freedom seems to be the best way to get sedate pre-schoolers moving.

Curtin University's Dr Erin Howie came to this conclusion after a three-year trial of her Study of Health and Activity in Pre-school Environments (SHAPES) program.

The SHAPES program saw pre-schoolers get involved in everything from mock ice-skating games in the classroom through to kick-starting their stage career by acting out plays for visitors, all in an effort to get the kids moving.

Whereas traditional [physical education programs](#) involve a strict curriculum, SHAPES offers less rigid guidelines and encourages teachers to think of exercise in three ways.

These ways are traditional learning, such as phys-ed (Move Inside), movement during recess (Move Outside) and exercise as part of an academic lesson (Move to Learn).

While some parents might feel that exercise takes away from learning, research shows that [physical activity](#) improves concentration, behaviour and motor skills.

SHAPES is designed to capitalise on the [teacher's](#) knowledge of her students and setting, as well as her creativity as a preschool teacher, Dr Howie says

For example, in the trial, Teacher A used her background as a dancer to get kids active in high-intensity activities.

She took a goal-oriented approach, including setting up timed-stations such as ice-skating using wax-paper skates.

Recess wasn't for relaxing either, as she led races and set up obstacle courses.

In contrast, Teacher B had health issues that limited her ability to take part in physical activities.

She adapted SHAPES through her love of stories, having students act out plays for parents, other classrooms and the community and other imaginative activity centres.

Kids could also access an online library, including dance videos.

"This became a daily activity, highly requested by the students," Dr Howie says.

As a result, Teacher B's students increased their physical activity from 31.5 minutes per day in the first year to 78 in the second and 67.5 in the final year.

Meanwhile, Teacher A had a more dramatic outcome, seeing her students increase from 2.7 minutes of exercise each day in the first year up to 73.3 minutes by year three.

SHAPES could be an ideal addition to WA classrooms.

In a separate [survey](#) of 27 government-funded state primary schools, UWA's Active Schools Project found [students](#) got only an average of 37 minutes of moderate to [vigorous exercise](#).

This ranged from 88 minutes at one school to only three minutes at the worst performer.

More information: Erin K. Howie et al. A Tale of 2 Teachers: A Preschool Physical Activity Intervention Case Study, *Journal of School Health* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/josh.12352](https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12352)

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