

# Self Regulation and Movement: How Physical Activity Supports Development in Young Children

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Self-regulation is an essential developmental skill in early childhood, closely tied to a child's academic success and overall well-being. It involves a child's ability to manage their emotions, behaviors, and thoughts to achieve long-term goals. In recent years, research has shown that physical activity plays a crucial role in supporting self-regulation. Regular movement, especially during the school day, helps children improve attention, memory, and behavioral control, allowing them to engage more effectively in learning activities. Read more about how self regulation and movement are related and what you can do to help children develop these important skills.



## WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY ABOUT SELF REGULATION AND MOVEMENT?

Previous studies show that early childhood is a critical period for developing self-regulation, and physical activity can play a significant role in this process. Self-regulation is not a singular skill but a set of abilities, including working memory, attention control, and inhibitory control, which allow children to plan, monitor, and adjust their behaviors. Research indicates that movement, particularly in the form of energetic play, helps to develop these cognitive functions, which are foundational for academic success and social development.

## HOW IS PHYSICAL ACTIVITY RELATED TO SELF REGULATION?

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Physical activity has been linked to improvements in various components of self-regulation, such as attention, impulse control, and working memory. When children engage in movement, especially activities that involve coordination and spatial awareness, they activate brain areas responsible for executive functioning. As children learn to navigate physical tasks, they also learn to control their impulses and focus on goals. Energetic play provides opportunities for children to practice these skills in a natural, enjoyable context.



## IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY THROUGHOUT THE SCHOOL DAY

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Despite the benefits of physical activity, research indicates that children in early care settings spend a large portion of their day being sedentary. Some studies suggest that up to 94% of their time in these environments is spent inactive. Barriers such as limited space, time constraints, and concerns about managing behavior in the classroom can prevent educators from integrating movement throughout the day. However, increasing physical activity, even in short bursts, can lead to better classroom engagement, improved behavior, and enhanced learning outcomes.

## HOW MUCH PHYSICAL ACTIVITY DO CHILDREN NEED?

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According to guidelines suggested by health organizations, young children should engage in a mix of light, moderate, and vigorous physical activities throughout the day. Research indicates that young children need around 3 hours of physical activity daily, which can be

spread across various intensities. For optimal benefits to self-regulation, children should engage in energetic play for at least 9 to 13 minutes per activity session, with higher intensity bursts helping to develop both physical and cognitive skills.

Keep in mind that effective teachers offer a variety of opportunities that promote a wide range of motor skills, such as hopping, skipping, galloping, twirling, jumping, tossing, tiptoeing, and more. These foundational motor skills are essential building blocks for more complex movements later on. However, to ensure inclusivity, educators need to adapt these activities to accommodate children with varying mobility needs, including those with disabilities. The focus in early childhood education should be on engaging children in movement and helping them develop fundamental motor skills, rather than perfecting the exact movements themselves.

## 10 RESEARCH-BASED STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT YOUNG CHILDREN'S SELF-REGULATION

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1. **Incorporate Movement Breaks:** Short, frequent movement breaks during classroom activities help reset children's focus and reduce disruptive behavior.
2. **Use Energetic Play to Teach Academic Skills:** Incorporating movement into lessons, such as counting while hopping or solving puzzles while moving, supports learning and enhances self-regulation.
3. **Encourage Child-Led Activities:** Allowing children to choose how they move within structured environments helps them develop decision-making skills and autonomy.
4. **Model Physical Activity:** Educators and caregivers who participate in movement activities with children serve as positive role models, encouraging more active participation.
5. **Integrate Movement into Transitions:** Simple activities like marching or stretching during transitions between tasks or lessons can keep children engaged and physically active.
6. **Create Movement-Friendly Classrooms:** Ensuring that classrooms have enough space for safe physical activity encourages children to move without disruption.
7. **Incorporate Cultural Diversity:** Offering culturally responsive activities, such as traditional dances or movement games, helps include all children in physical activities.
8. **Balance Structured and Unstructured Play:** A mix of teacher-led and free-play activities provides opportunities for children to engage in self-regulation at their own pace.
9. **Promote Mindfulness in Movement:** Introducing calming activities like yoga or breathing exercises helps children become more aware of their bodies and emotions.
10. **Adapt Physical Activities for All Abilities:** Ensuring that movement opportunities are inclusive for children with different physical abilities supports overall development and self-regulation for all learners.

## Self-Regulation and Movement



### MAKE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY A WAY TO CONNECT WITH FAMILIES

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Involving families in physical activity can further enhance the benefits of movement on children's self-regulation and overall wellbeing. Research indicates that children who engage in physical activity with their families are more likely to develop healthy habits that last into adulthood. Teachers can promote family involvement by sharing activities that parents and children can do together, such as going for walks, playing games, or participating in community events. This not only strengthens family bonds but also reinforces the importance of physical activity in daily life.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS ABOUT SELF REGULATION AND MOVEMENT IN CHILDREN

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- Self-regulation is critical for young children's academic and social success, and physical activity plays an essential role in its development.
- Physical activity supports self-regulation by improving skills like attention, impulse control, and working memory.
- Short bursts of energetic play throughout the school day enhance classroom engagement and reduce disruptive behavior.
- Children need around 3 hours of physical activity per day, with a mix of light, moderate, and vigorous intensity for optimal self-regulation and physical benefits.
- Inclusive and culturally-responsive movement activities help ensure all children, regardless of ability or background, can participate and benefit from physical activity.
- Teachers can model active behavior to encourage more movement among children both inside and outside the classroom.

- Family involvement in physical activity helps reinforce healthy habits and strengthens the bond between children and their caregivers.
- Movement should be integrated meaningfully into academic learning to support both physical and cognitive development.

## REFERENCE

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McGowan, A.L., Chandler, M.C. & Gerde, H.K. Infusing Physical Activity into Early Childhood Classrooms: Guidance for Best Practices. *Early Childhood Educ J* (2023).  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-023-01532-5>