



# UK Physical Activity Guidelines for Early Years (non-walkers)

Information for stakeholders, early years  
practitioners and health professionals



BHF National Centre  
**physical activity+health**

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Early years settings play a key role in providing enabling environments which can contribute towards helping young children achieve the daily physical activity requirement for their health and well-being.

## The Early Years Physical Activity Guidelines

The introduction of UK early years physical activity guidelines reflect a growing awareness of their importance and follows the lead of other major international countries. They are based on evidence from research and the combined input from experts in this field of study.

These guidelines are relevant to **all children under the age of five** irrespective of gender, race or socio-economic status, but should be interpreted with consideration for individual physical and mental capabilities, and are aimed at the following groups:

**Early years (under fives) - Infants who cannot yet walk unaided:** Physical activity should be encouraged from birth, particularly through floor-based play and water-based activities in safe environments.

**Pre-school children who can walk unaided:** Children of pre-school age who are capable of walking unaided should be physically active daily for at least 180 minutes (3 hours), spread throughout the day.

**Sedentary guideline:** All under fives should minimise the amount of time spent being sedentary (being restrained or sitting) for extended periods (except time spent sleeping).



These guidelines are designed to help early years professionals and practitioners understand the type and amount of physical activity under fives should do to benefit their health. Leaflets which translate the guidelines for parents are available from [www.bhf.org.uk/publications](http://www.bhf.org.uk/publications).

## Why do we need physical activity guidelines for the early years?

There has been a growing concern in recent years about a lack of physical activity and increased sedentary behaviour among young children. Children under five have not previously been included in UK public health guidelines and those

devised for the 5-18 age group are neither suitable nor appropriate for most under fives. Children under five need time to play and master their physical environment and develop fundamental movement skills.

## The importance of physical activity for children in the early years

During the period from birth to five years, physical activity is critical to optimal growth and development. During this time babies and young children undergo rapid and wide-ranging physical and psychological developments which lay the foundation for their future health and well-being.

The early years is also an important time in the establishment of physical activity and sedentary behaviours. Data from tracking studies show support for a link between higher levels of physical activity leading to more sustained participation in physical activity in later years. Therefore it is important to establish a high level of activity at the earliest age, in order to provide the best start to encourage activity patterns and habits later in childhood that are sufficient to benefit long term good health.

At no other point will children learn so many physical skills as they do in the first five years of life! The benefits of young children being physically active go way beyond just the physical benefits. Research has shown that being physically active can help with the development of:

- **motor skills**, eg, balance, coordination
- maintaining a **healthy weight**
- **strong bones, muscles and heart**
- **social skills**, ie, how to interact, take turns and getting on and caring about others.

It is also widely believed that physical activity can help with the development of:

- **self confidence**
- **communication skills** including how to solve problems and make decisions
- **establishing good habits for being active** so will they will continue to be active throughout the rest of their childhood and beyond
- developing **important brain structures**
- developing immediate and long-term **good health outcomes**.

## How do the guidelines reflect differences in the under five population?

‘Under fives’ encompass a diverse range of children from new-borns through to children about to start school. As developmental rates can vary a great deal in children of the same age, the key distinction to make between the two guidelines is therefore between those not yet able to walk and those who can.

## The importance of movement for infants not yet walking

Unrestricted floor-based activities in the home and early years settings are an essential source of physical activity for infants not yet walking and are important for helping them to:

- maintain a healthy weight
- build social and emotional bonds with parents, siblings and other children
- develop good posture, strength and balance
- develop all their senses
- teach them about their bodies and the world around them
- interact with others and develop language and communication skills
- keep their bodies and minds active.

**Tummy time** (any time when babies are carried, positioned or played with on their stomachs), plays a critical role in enabling babies to develop sensory, visual and movement control, helping to strengthen the muscles in the legs, arms, back and neck and to establish head control. This eventually helps babies to push up, roll and move into a crawling position and in turn helps develop shoulder stability, hand strength and coordination - all important

for later movement skills including writing development. Muscles developed in the neck during head control are important for the development of speech and language skills.

## What types of physical activity are appropriate for infants not yet walking?

Babies from when they are first born need to have daily opportunities to move freely on their stomach, or back in a variety of stimulating, safe spaces, without being constrained for long periods by clothing, wraps, straps (ie, in car seats or baby chairs or bouncers). They need opportunities to practise important movements such as: **reaching for and grasping objects, turning the head toward stimuli, pulling, pushing and playing with other people, objects and toys.**



Appropriate water-based activities with parents or carers, provide similar opportunities for movement and are recommended.

*For more information about the types of physical activities **under fives** who are walking should be doing to benefit their health, download the factsheet for 'Walkers.'*



## Tips for promoting more physical activity and reducing sedentary behaviour in an early years setting

### Increasing movement by:

#### Creating spaces

- Provide lots of soft areas both inside and outside to encourage babies, placed on their fronts and backs to use large muscle groups, (without being restricted by clothing), to kick, roll, crawl, pull up to standing position, creep and finally walk.
- Play spaces need to encourage young children to learn these new movements and they need plenty of time throughout the day to practise these.
- **Outdoor play** is important to help babies experience and learn about different surroundings.

### Using sensory toys/objects

- Provide lots of sensory, tactile, colourful and interesting age-appropriate toys/objects to stimulate baby's natural curiosity, this will encourage movement and develop their recognition of touch.
- Objects placed out of reach will encourage babies to move towards them.
- Moving objects that babies can follow with their eyes, reading books to them or placing them under colourful mobiles or play gyms will help develop eye strength and encourage movement.
- Once babies are moving, use tunnels for them to crawl through, cushions to climb over and sturdy structures to pull up on.

## Allowing lots of opportunities for 'tummy time'

- Very young babies can find it difficult to tolerate this position as they are unused to it, so distraction and 'little and often' are the best approaches to adopt.
- Get down on the floor with baby, place age-appropriate toys around baby that encourage grasping, leg kicking and head lifting.

**Remember 'tummy time' is only for when babies are awake and supervised. Babies should always be placed on their backs to sleep.**

## Interacting with baby

- Get down on the floor with baby. Talk, smile, interact and play with baby using simple toys and everyday objects, this will stimulate their senses and encourage them to move.

## Using noise

- Noise during play can help with areas of brain development and encourage movement, eg, rattles, noisy toys such as wooden spoons and saucepans, playing music, singing songs and nursery rhymes.

## Working with parents and carers

- Parents and carers should be made aware of the importance of providing regular unrestricted movement

opportunities and reducing sedentary time where possible (apart from sleeping) for the child or children in their care.

- Babies love to be around people and learn a lot from interacting with them. It is therefore important that parents/carers make time to interact with their baby, including playing with them.

*Leaflets which translate the guidelines for parents are available from [www.bhf.org.uk/publications](http://www.bhf.org.uk/publications).*

- Providing 'take-home bags' which include a variety of small equipment, everyday objects and cards with activity ideas, can be a useful way of encouraging parents to stimulate active play with their child at home.
- Encourage parents to send children prepared to play out in all weathers, eg wellies, warm coat, hat, scarf and gloves for winter months; sunhats, sun creams, thin long-sleeved tops for summer months. This could be incorporated into the setting's physical activity policy. Settings could provide a box of spare clothes (collected from charity shops) for those children whose parents may forget. Providing a covered area such as a gazebo can help to provide some shady areas to play in the summer.



*Patterns of sedentary behaviour established in the early years are more likely to be continued through to adulthood*

## Sedentary behaviour

There is evidence that under fives spend a large amount of time being sedentary and this is associated with overweight and obesity as well as lower cognitive development. Sedentary behaviour refers to activities that typically occur whilst seated or lying down and which require very low levels of energy expenditure.

In addition, patterns of sedentary behaviour, (especially TV viewing) established in the early years are more likely to be continued through to adulthood. It is important therefore to establish healthy behaviours in the early years in order to protect their health against possible less healthy behaviour in the future.

It's true that nowadays there are many opportunities for young children to spend excessive time in sedentary behaviour such as watching television, travelling by

car, sat in a buggy or sitting whilst playing games. Even for babies, spending too much time strapped into car seats, buggies and other baby equipment, is not good for their health as it limits the opportunities for movement. All children need quiet 'down time,' however reducing these sedentary times, breaking up extended periods of sitting and replacing them with more active options, is strongly advised for children in the early years.

### Reduce sedentary behaviour by:

- reducing time spent in walking aides or baby bouncers (these limit free movement)
- interacting with infants regularly - this encourages movement
- making parents and carers aware of the benefits of reducing their baby's time spent in infant carriers, high chairs and car seats and increasing their opportunities for free movement.

## Physical activity resources to help promote movement and reduce sedentary behaviour

### **Chief Medical Officers Report 2011 (Department of Health)**

'Start Active, Stay Active' updates the existing guidelines for children, young people and adults, and includes for the first time in the UK, new guidelines for early years and older people. Available to download at [www.dh.gov.uk/publications](http://www.dh.gov.uk/publications)

### **Start4Life and Play4Life (Department of Health)**

The early years section of the Department of Health's (DH) Change4Life campaign, aimed at healthcare and childcare professionals. Active play resources are available which can be downloaded and/or ordered from the DH's orderline [www.orderline.dh.gov.uk](http://www.orderline.dh.gov.uk) or click on [www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk) (search Start4Life).

### **Learning, Playing and Interacting: Good practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage**

A toolkit to support early years practitioners' work with advice on pedagogy, practice and assessment. Available to download at: [www.nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/earlyyears](http://www.nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/earlyyears)

### **Get Up and Grow (Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing)**

A series of four downloadable booklets and leaflets specifically written for early

years managers, practitioners and families which give lots of information and ideas for promoting physical activity and healthy eating for the early years. Available to download at: [www.health.gov.au](http://www.health.gov.au) (search 'Get up and Grow').

### **Active Start, ages 0-6 (Canadian Sport for Life)**

Offers a number of downloadable factsheets for parents and an online DVD on the importance of physical activity in the first six years of life and lots of activity ideas relevant to the different stages of a baby and young child's development. [www.canadiansportforlife.ca](http://www.canadiansportforlife.ca) (search Active Start)

### **Artie's Olympics (British Heart Foundation)**

An activity-based fundraising scheme for young children, aimed at nurseries and other groups working with the 3-8 year old age group. It encourages children to get active through a number of games and activities. Groups get to keep 20% of funds raised. Visit [www.bhf.org.uk/schools](http://www.bhf.org.uk/schools)

### **Start to Play (Youth Sport Trust)**

Aimed at those engaging with children between 0 and 5 years old, Start to Play provides a number of resources to encourage play and physical activity opportunities for young children, their parents, guardians and carers. Available to order at: [www.ystdirect.org.uk](http://www.ystdirect.org.uk) Training is also available, although not compulsory, call: 01509 226600. Visit [www.youthsporttrust.org](http://www.youthsporttrust.org)