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Published: January 04, 2012

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Playgrounds Too Safe to Keep Little Kids Active

A qualitative study of childcare centre providers found that safety concerns, budgetary limitations, and emphasis on early academic readiness led to children in preschool not engaging in enough physical activity.

Physical activity is deemed important for development of gross motor skills and to combat early childhood obesity.

Boring playgrounds may be one reason preschoolers aren't getting enough exercise, researchers found in interviews with childcare providers.

Strict safety rules for equipment and low budgets at childcare centres were largely blamed for playgrounds that don't make kids feel like playing, Kristen Copeland, MD, of Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Centre, and colleagues reported.

"Fixed playground equipment that meets licensing codes is unchallenging and uninteresting to children," they wrote in the February issue of *Paediatrics*.

The other main problem cited was pressure to focus on academic readiness at the expense of physically active play time, Copeland's group noted.

"Societal priorities for young children -- safety and school readiness -- may be hindering children's physical development," they wrote in the paper.

And that's a problem because three-quarters of U.S. kids attend childcare at ages 3 to 5, where studies have shown that nearly all their time is spent sedentary.

"Because children spend long hours in care and many lack a safe place to play near their home, these barriers may limit children's only opportunity to engage in physical activity," Copeland's group explained. "This is particularly concerning because daily physical activity is not only essential for healthy weight maintenance, but also for practicing and learning fundamental gross motor skills."

Paediatricians may be able to help address this problem by emphasizing the learning and physical benefits of active outdoor play, encouraging parents to dress their child for it, and not suggesting that physical activity is inherently dangerous when giving injury prevention advice, the researchers noted.

The investigators conducted nine focus groups with a total of 49 childcare providers taking care of preschool-age children at 34 centres in Cincinnati, which varied from inner-city to suburban locations and included some Head Start and Montessori centres.

These interviewed providers commonly expressed concern that the children they cared for had little chance of outdoor playtime when they went home, particularly those who were picked up late in the day or whose parents worked multiple jobs.

Many didn't have a dedicated room indoors where kids could be active during bad weather.

Another common theme was pressure to prioritize teaching children shapes, colours, and skills that would prepare them for reading over giving them time for outdoor and active play.

That pressure came directly from parents -- both upper- and lower-income families -- as well as from state early-learning standards.

The result was that many providers tried to turn active time into learning time too, "motivated to demonstrate a 'purpose' for gross motor time so that the children would not be seen as just 'running around.'"

Several providers also mentioned pressure from parents to keep their children from getting injured, even being asked to keep a child from participating in any vigorous activity.

State inspections of their playground equipment and increasingly strict licensing codes made the providers feel confident about safety, though perhaps too much so for the children's tastes.

"To keep it challenging, teachers noted that children would start to use equipment in (unsafe) ways for which it was not intended," the researchers wrote.

They quoted one provider who explained that with new equipment fitting the tighter standards, "you see children trying to climb into places they're not supposed to climb in because it's just not challenging. They're walking up the slide much more than they ever did with the other one. You can see they are just trying to find those challenges."

The investigators cautioned about the possibility of selection bias in that providers who chose to participate in the focus groups may have viewed children's physical activity more favourably.

While the results came from a single county in Ohio, the results likely would generalize to other areas, they noted.

The study was funded by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Physician Faculty Scholars Program, and by the Dean's Scholar Program at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine.

Primary source: Pediatrics

Source reference:

Copeland KA, et al "Societal values and policies may curtail preschool children's physical activity in child care centers" Pediatrics 2012; DOI: 10.1542/peds.2011-2102