Toddlers and preschoolers spend time in many different spaces-- home, childcare, libraries, parks and recreation centres. These different spaces can play a big role in a child’s physical activity levels. Some environments help kids be more active while others limit or stop kids from being active. We'll tell you some tips and strategies on how your home and community environment can support kids’ movement and physical activity.

**The Built Environment in Your Community**

Our communities are full of features to support physical activity, like pools, playgrounds, walking trails and bike paths. But there can still be barriers for families wanting to use these features. For example, the bike lanes might not be well protected from cars. If your neighbourhood doesn't have safe sidewalks or recreation spaces, contact your city councillor. This type of feedback goes a long way!

Here are some highlights of research about the built environment in communities and children's physical activity:

- Children are more active when they live near public parks and playgrounds and have sidewalks in their neighbourhoods.
- Kids who live closer to school are more likely to use active modes of transportation, like walking or biking. These kids are also more active overall than kids who live further away.
- Neighbourhoods with controlled crossings, such as streetlights and crosswalks, make it easier and safer for kids to use active transportation to travel to and from school.
- Preschool children are more active when they are outdoors than indoors.
Many young children spend time at childcare centres, preschools, and schools. These different environments can impact children’s health and physical activity levels. Last year, we published an issue about Physical Activity in Child Care. We talked about the regulations for Child Care in Ontario and how physical activity should be a daily focus. We’d now like to share how simple modifications to these environments can impact physical activity levels.

A study in South Carolina looked at how the physical environment in preschools affects physical activity levels. They found preschoolers who attend centres with portable playground equipment, larger playgrounds, and less fixed playground equipment take part in more physical activity than preschoolers attending preschools without these features. Adding portable play equipment, like balls and racquets, is an easy way to support physical activity in preschools with limited space.

Another study in London, Ontario aimed to increase preschoolers' physical activity and decrease sedentary time during childcare hours. One component of the study modified the childcare environment by providing novel indoor and outdoor play equipment, like balls, hula hoops, a hop-scotch mat, obstacle course, stepping domes, ribbon wands and hop-along bouncers. Staff put out a few pieces of equipment each day to keep kids interested and engaged in using the different equipment. After 8-weeks of environment changes, staff training, and modified outdoor time, preschoolers engaged in more physical activity and less sedentary time than before the changes.

**Build Physical Activity into your Family Routine**

Families and the home environment play big roles in supporting healthy habits, such as physical activity. Use these tips to provide an environment that supports movement and physical activity:

- Limit or remove screens from indoor play spaces.
- Provide safe, open, indoor spaces so kids have room to move around.
- Build obstacle courses with household items. Try jumping over broomsticks and crawling under tables or through cardboard boxes.
- Provide portable play equipment, such as balls, sidewalk chalk, jump ropes, bubbles, bikes, etc.
- Use active transportation, like walking or biking, in your neighbourhood as much as possible. If using a stroller or wagon, encourage kids to walk part of the way.

Four hundred preschoolers participated in our Health Outcomes and Physical activity in Preschoolers (HOPP) Study. Of the parents surveyed, over 85% agreed or strongly agreed that they had parks or recreation areas, and safe play facilities in close proximity to their homes. Local parks and recreation areas are great affordable, accessible resources to use for active play!

The Child Health & Exercise Medicine Program at McMaster University is working to advance child health through excellence in research.

To learn about our current studies, visit us online at fhs.mcmaster.ca/chemp

**References**


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