Increasing Movement to Promote Health and Learning in Early Childhood

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Public support is increasing for the investment in pre-kindergarten (pre-K) education for 3- and 4-year-olds. If physical activity is going to be an integral part of pre-K education, changes are needed in the training of early childhood educators and in the physical environments of pre-K programs. When teachers are trained and motivated to move with children throughout the school day and have the spaces to do so, both children and teachers can benefit. Frequent movement is developmentally appropriate for preschool children, promotes health and learning, and can also improve the physical and mental health of teachers.

The main goal of pre-K and other early childhood education programs, such as Head Start, is to prepare children for elementary school. Efforts to increase young children’s physical activity are more likely to be implemented and sustained if they align with that goal. Therefore, movement needs to be promoted on the basis of its benefits for learning, not just for health. Movement can improve academic performance by developing cognitive functions, such as the ability to sustain and shift attention, remember information, and inhibit impulses. Social and emotional learning can also be enhanced when children move together because this develops additional brain functions, such as locating one’s body in relation to others and interpreting and responding to non-verbal cues. When teachers move with children, it may enhance teacher-child relationship quality, which can also support learning. Finally, outdoor activity, which is associated with more energy expenditure than indoor activity, may also increase children’s cognitive stimulation because outdoor environments are more variable and complicated than indoor environments. Interventions have already been developed that emphasize the links between moving and learning by integrating physical activity into the teaching of academic concepts.

Teachers may also be motivated to support children’s physical activity if teachers find that moving with children improves their own physical and mental health. For children to learn well, their teachers must be healthy, and the health of early childhood educators has much room for improvement. The early childhood education program must be viewed as the educators’ worksite, and the same level of support must be given to the teachers’ health and well-being as to the children’s learning. Integrating movement into early learning helps physical activity become part of the culture of learning and health at the school and workplace.

To integrate movement and learning, classroom teachers need training, and preschools require space and equipment that afford safe and enriching movement experiences. All of this requires funding. Funding is most likely to follow from changing policy in two areas: (1) requirements for teacher certification and (2) requirements for

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program certification and quality rating. Degree-conferring programs that credential early childhood educators should require training in several areas: children’s gross motor development, the integration of movement experiences into academic learning, children’s safety during movement, and the development of the teacher’s own movement skills. Technical assistance to existing early childhood educators must address these same topics along with providing guidance about suitable equipment and space for both indoor and outdoor movement experiences. This training may need to come from experts in the physical education of young children. Program certification and quality rating should depend on indoor and outdoor space requirements and the availability of equipment and practices that support physical activity and gross motor development. These costs cannot be shifted onto the teachers, who are already poorly paid, or to the low-income families whose children may benefit most from these changes. As support grows for public pre-K investment, there is an opportunity to position physical activity as part of this investment because movement is necessary for learning and for the health of young children and teachers.

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References