Fitness and Fun for Three-to-Five Year Olds

by Sue Ellen Miller

As early as 1977, research studies demonstrated that one or two risk factors for coronary heart disease were present in 65 percent of boys and girls aged seven to twelve years.* In more recent studies, three- to five-year-olds were found to be very inactive at home and at school, and one- to two-year-old children having obese parents were less active than children having nonobese parents.†

Although elementary and preschool children have not fully developed, it is known that physiologically their bodies respond to exercise in the same general ways as do the bodies of adults. It is recommended that children and youth obtain twenty to thirty minutes of vigorous daily exercise.

Sue Ellen Miller is Associate Professor in the School of Health and Sport Sciences, Ohio University, Athens, OH.

*See Gilliam, Katch, Thorland and Weltman (1977).
†See Noland, Danner, Dewalt, McFadden and Kotchen (1990); Danner, Noland, McFadden, DeWalt and Kotchen (1991).

Regular exercise habits must begin at a very early age if exercise is expected to be part of an adult’s healthy lifestyle. Because home influences are important, parents should be encouraged to demonstrate their concern that physical fitness is a significant factor in a child’s life (American College of Sports Medicine, 1988). More active children come from families with active parents who are willing to spend time exercising and playing actively with their children (Pete & Ross, 1987). How can parents and early childhood educators play a proactive role in initiating positive exercise and fitness habits in young children? The remainder of this article will address three areas by which this can be accomplished. First, what are the types of exercise that can be shared by parents and their children? Second, what are the suggested methods by which parents of preschoolers can encourage active play in their children? And third, what active play activities can early childhood educators plan and implement for children in their care.

Play Activities for Preschool Teachers: Model and Facilitate

1. Balance activities: Romper-stomper stilts (two large coffee cans
with strings attached; see figure 1; low
to medium-height balance beams;
hopping activities through “puddles”
or landing on lily pads in a pond (cir-
cles cut out of thin rubber mats).

2. Balloon activities: striking bal-
loons in the air with different body
parts; pushing or striking them along
the floor as in hockey, using plastic
hockey sticks, coat hanger/stocking
rackets (see Figure 2), or rolled news-
paper bats.

3. Yarn ball and beanbag activi-
ties: striking along the floor with
sticks or bats; throwing for distance;
throwing at large, “can’t miss” targets.

4. Rolling and tumbling: log
rolling (elaborated body shape with
arms overhead, legs straight, and feet
pointed; egg rolling; (curl up in a ball,
wrap arms around bent knees, and roll
sideways and anyway you can); for-
ward and backward roll (always re-
member to tuck chin to chest and use
hands to push the body over); children
can also roll and unroll each other in a
blanket, log-roll fashion.

5. Bouncing and catching: using
large balls, proceed from one bounce
and catch to several bounce-and-catch