



Dear Teachers and Recreation Leaders:

As you know, parental support and involvement play a crucial role in children's education. In the case of physical fitness, children are much more likely to get fit and stay fit if parents promote physical activity, and engage in it themselves.

Please photocopy the following pages and send them home to parents so they can understand and support your efforts—and more importantly, understand and support their children. Parents can also download their own copies by searching for the Play On! program at [www.aapar.org](http://www.aapar.org) and [www.PlayCore.com](http://www.PlayCore.com).

(The Play On! program is copyrighted, and users may not copy or distribute any other pages. However, we do encourage you to copy and distribute this section for parents. Thanks!)

# Play On! A Resource for Active Families

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## Dear Parents and Guardians.

Your child is participating in a new program called *Play On! Playground Learning Activities for Youth Fitness*.

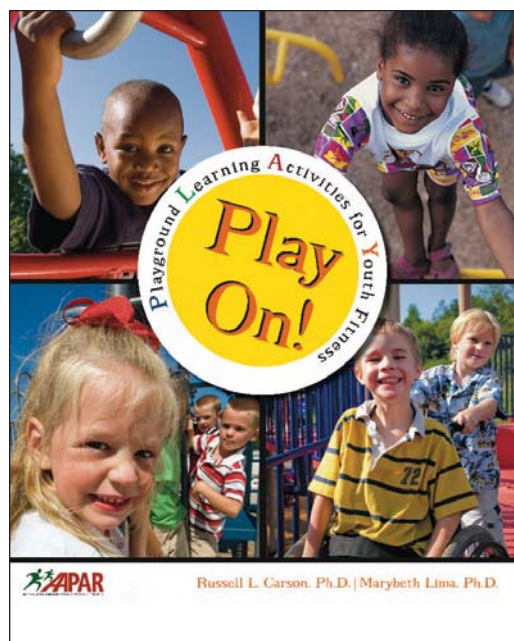
We want to share our enthusiasm about this program and offer suggestions for activities that your family can do together to promote fitness for everyone.

Have you seen the disheartening trends associated with childhood obesity? According to the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

- Roughly 19 percent of children ages six to 11 are overweight, a percentage that has more than doubled since 1980 (when it was seven percent).
- Overweight children are more likely to become overweight or obese adults.
- Overweight adults are more prone to chronic health risks including heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and some forms of cancer.
- Approximately 300,000 premature deaths per year are associated with overweight and obesity, making extra weight the second most common cause of preventable death (tobacco is the first).
- Estimated annual obesity-related health care costs are in excess of \$100 billion.

One major cause of the obesity epidemic is the physical inactivity of children today. In 2005, only 36 percent of students nationwide met the recommendation set forth by the CDC of 60 minutes or more of physical activity on most days of the week. This percentage steadily declines throughout the adolescent years, and almost 10 percent of youngsters are not physically active at all on a regular basis.

Moreover, the average American child spends about five and a half hours each day engaged in sedentary media use (watching television or movies, playing video games, and surfing the web). Clearly, it is more important now than ever for children to engage in physical activity.



Fortunately, when structured properly, physical activity can be fun!

## Benefits of Physical Activity

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As you may know, regular physical activity has numerous benefits. Regular moderate-to-vigorous exercise:

- Reduces the risk for cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and colon cancer
- Helps prevent obesity and premature death
- Develops healthy bones, lean muscles, and non-arthritic joints
- Lowers blood pressure and cholesterol
- Improves cognitive performance
- Increases self-esteem, and
- Reduces feelings of anxiety and depression

That is why physical activity experts recommend that young people (ages 5-19) engage in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity for at least 60 minutes—and up to several hours—on most (preferably all) days of the week.

Developing healthy habits early in life is essential to lifelong wellness. With this in mind, we have developed a program to help your child get excited about physical activity. With your support, this program could help curb the current childhood obesity epidemic by fostering lifetime fitness in children. In particular, it could help your child to establish patterns and interests that will lay the foundation for a lifetime of fitness and wellness.

## Introducing *Play On!*

The new and exciting program that has become an integral part of your child's education is called *Play On!* The program uses playgrounds to boost learning, physical activity, and fun. Through carefully crafted "Playground Learning Activities for Youth Fitness," children find themselves moving, learning, problem-solving, freely expressing themselves, exploring their physical capabilities, developing fundamental motor skills, experiencing diverse elements of play, collaborating with one another, and, best of all, loving every minute of it. That is the most important aspect of this program: *Play On!* allows children to achieve physical fitness in a fun context that they enjoy!

*Play On!* turns playgrounds into so much more than an "energy release" for children. Besides enhancing youngsters' physical fitness (cardiovascular fitness, muscular strength and endurance, flexibility, etc.), *Play On!* facilitates the development of their personal (creativity, goal setting, self-confidence) and social (camaraderie, communication, leadership) skills. *Play On!* builds active, healthy bodies—a pressing need among children today.

*Play On!* was created by a team of physical activity experts who work with and understand children. The team represented elementary physical education teachers and adapted "teachers of the year" from demographically diverse school settings, experienced university teacher educators of physical education, leaders in the field of motivation, and elementary-age children themselves. A thorough process of testing and re-testing certified that the activities reflect the following:

1. The developmental needs of four groups: Kindergarten and first grade, second and third grade, fourth and fifth grade, and activities for all grades;
2. The six fundamental elements of play: climbing, swinging, sliding, spinning, balancing, and brachiating (overhead climbing);
3. Safety considerations;
4. Adaptations to accommodate a range of skill and fitness levels;
5. Current thinking and practices regarding physical fitness and children; and
6. National physical education standards.

As a result, *Play On!* offers a comprehensive list of developmentally appropriate, diverse, safe, inclusive, and attractive playground activities for youth fitness.

## Playing with Your Child

Playtime is not just for children. All age groups can benefit from the physical fitness, social contact, critical thinking, and creative expression opportunities playgrounds offer. Playgrounds are places where children, parents, and family members of all abilities can come together to engage in fun, interactive activities.

When you take your children to the park or to the backyard, do you just watch? If so, try participating.

Playing with your child is a perfect way to show your support for lifetime physical activity, as opposed to sedentary leisure pursuits. Play allows you to connect with your child and be part of their life in a meaningful way. These quality experiences establish fitness habits that will be passed along from generation to generation. We want today's children to teach tomorrow's children the value of active play on playgrounds, thereby reversing current childhood obesity trends – and that can start with you.

There are many ways to play with your child, all of which can enhance their enjoyment, your relationship with them—and even your own physical fitness.

## Here are the three primary types of play. All contribute to the life and development of children:

**Free play** is play that is dictated and controlled by children without adult input or guidance. Free play is beneficial to children because it allows them to experience the world in which they become the authorities, because they are deciding what to do. During free play, children can work independently or together to learn, problem-solve, share, negotiate, and lead. Tag, neighborhood races, and spontaneous games that children play on a playground without prompting from adults are examples of free play.

**Imaginative play** is a type of free play that involves children using their minds creatively; in other words, it is play that involves elements of pretend or make-believe. This type of play is important because it enables children to develop their imagination and creativity, and to

discover and explore their interests. A child playing with an imaginary friend is one example of imaginative play. On playgrounds, children may play house or school, or pretend to be an astronaut, monster, or famous person.

**Structured play** is play that occurs under the facilitation of an adult, usually to meet a specific objective (such as physical fitness) that is not necessarily chosen by the children. Structured play is important to enable children to develop physically, emotionally, and cognitively. Kickball, four square, and hopscotch are examples of structured play because they are games with multiple rules that are usually administered and monitored by an adult, at least during the initial teaching process.

*Play On!* incorporates all three kinds of play. Each activity provides structured play, but many activities encourage children to use their imagination and to engage in free play as they build and expand on activities to “make them their own.” In the activity “Follow the Zookeeper,” kids are asked to make their favorite animal sound when sliding down a slide. In “Cling to Your Color,” children are asked to touch only one color of playground equipment at a time — but what they do on that equipment is entirely up to them.

All three kinds of play are valuable, and we encourage you to use them on any outdoor play spaces or playgrounds available to your child. A recent report by the American Association of Pediatrics states that play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength; play is important to brain development. Additionally, the report says that a combination of child-driven and adult-driven play is important, and that parent-child play time is crucial.

### **Suggestions for Playing Together as a Family**

There are a variety of ways that families can be physically active together. The next time you take your child to a nearby schoolyard, park, or your backyard, find a way to participate with them in play. Children need play that is fun, physically challenging, and socially and mentally engaging each and every day. Families that play together stay together! Below are some helpful suggestions.

- Ask your child: “Who did you play with today? What did you do? Was it fun? What did you like about it?”

- Allow your child to show you the *Play On!* activities or other playground activities they are performing at school or camp. Express genuine interest in what they are doing and achieving.
- Establish a set time for “free play” at home. Follow their lead, enter into their world, and allow this time to be totally directed by your child. If you get bored or distracted, stay with it. This is time for the children to be in charge, and for you to learn what is interesting and important to them.
- Develop imaginative play activities or games that can be performed as a family. Act out musicals, perform skits, create a community circus, offer magic shows—whatever engages your child’s imagination and sense of fun. The more physical these activities are, the better. A sea lion in a play about the ocean, for instance, should not just “bark,” but should also “swim” across the stage or through the audience.
- When your child tells you about a physical activity that was challenging or difficult (a disappointing Little League game, for instance), turn it into a teachable moment by asking how the experience can help the child learn something about persistence, compassion, teamwork, or other life lessons.
- Set a family goal to visit all the playgrounds in your local community.
- Encourage your child to explore and perform physical challenges. Be prepared to provide an easier modification if a child cannot successfully perform the activity, and a more challenging modification when they can. If an activity appears to be unsafe, stop it and redirect their attention to a safer activity.
- Be a role model! Engage in your own playful physical activities around your children. Children are likely to develop habits similar to their parents’ or guardians’.
- If you are not able to actively engage with your child on a playground, watch him or her carefully! Scan the playground visually and position yourself in close proximity to your child.
- Keep records of your family’s physical activity. Make it fun with charts, stars, and other rewards.

- Keep lists of your most popular activities and community playgrounds.
- Set goals for family physical activity. For instance, participate in five physical activity outings per month (bowling, swimming, hiking, biking, jogging, mini golfing, geocaching, etc.)
- Create backyard treasure hunts that incorporate physical activity.
- Designate one evening a week as “playground night.”
- Offer some sort of active game at every family reunion or gathering.
- Have a picnic in the park (or schoolyard) during the weekend. Come up with a play activity as you enjoy a healthy meal, then go play!
- Expand your family’s capabilities and ambitions each year by learning a new form of physical activity such as cross-country skiing or rollerblading.
- Make it a family project to write letters to local authorities to develop or improve community spaces that promote physical activity (sidewalks, playgrounds, trails, parks, etc.).

### Six Core Play Elements

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Playgrounds contribute to overall child development and physical fitness while improving six essential elements of physical activity. *Play On!* offers 100 activities that emphasize these six play elements.

On the following pages are the key elements, with some general suggestions for playing with your child.



# Brachiating (Overhead Climbing) Benefits

Improves upper-body muscular strength and endurance.

Promotes hand-eye coordination, kinesthetic awareness, and rhythmic body movement.



**Brachiating Suggestion:**  
Traverse across "monkey bars" following your child.

# Climbing Benefits



Enhances spatial awareness and arm and leg coordination.



Advances the development of body management skills on stable and unstable apparatuses.



Fosters whole-body muscular strength, endurance and flexibility.

**Climbing Suggestion:** With your child, ascend and descend as many climbing structures as possible.



# Swinging Benefits

Integrates a smooth and synchronized movement pattern.

Emphasizes the importance of timely energy transfer during movement.

Promotes aerobic fitness, muscular force, and whole-body awareness.

**Swinging Suggestion:**  
Get on a swing and synchronize your swinging motion with your child's.





# Sliding Benefits

Enhances core stability,  
dynamic balance, and leg and  
hip flexibility.



Provides a body and  
spatial awareness  
movement experience.

Personal enjoyment!

**Sliding Suggestion:** Devise and perform a tag game with  
your child that incorporates sliding.

# Spinning Benefits

Develops kinesthetic awareness and postural control.

Improves comprehension of speed, force, and directional qualities of movement.



**Spinning Suggestion:**  
With your child, spin clockwise and counterclockwise on every playground platform.



# Balancing Benefits

Increases understanding of efficient body positioning and control when stationary or moving.



Promotes muscular strength and endurance throughout the entire body.



Introduces mechanical principles such as center of gravity, equilibrium, base of support, and counterbalances that are essential in most sport skills, especially gymnastics activities.



**Balancing Suggestion:** With your child, generate as many different matching balance poses as possible.



# Combined Play Benefits



Increases muscular strength and endurance, flexibility, balance, cardiovascular fitness, social skills, and much more!

**Combined play suggestion:** With your child, design and execute an obstacle course that integrates each play element.

Your child might be able to teach you the *Play On!* activities learned at school or camp, or the two of you might make up your own. Cue them by asking, “What sliding games have you learned so far?” or “Show me a way you can spin or balance on the playground.”

Another option is to take a free-play approach. Allow children to create their own activities that your family can do together. Ask, “What can be learned or discovered here?” or “What challenges or games can occur between us?” Talk about the benefits, what you liked best, and how you might do it differently next time.

The key is to engage in activities that capitalize on your and your child’s collective creativity, imagination, and natural desires, while promoting and modeling fitness.

### **Safety!**

Playgrounds are fun, but can also pose risks. According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), approximately 200,000 children visit the emergency room each year due to injuries on playgrounds.

This information can be alarming. We share it so that you will be aware of the potential risks on playgrounds and so that your children will play in the safest possible environment. According to the National Playground Safety Institute, 84% of all playground accidents could be avoided through two activities: (a) adult supervision of play and (b) proper maintenance of playgrounds.

To minimize playground injuries, establish or review safety rules. Before a trip to the playground, ask youngsters what they think the rules should be. This can empower young people to decide for themselves how to behave, which increases the likelihood that they will abide by “their own” rules.

## **A QUICK CHECKLIST FOR PARENTS**

### **KEEP YOUR CHILDREN S.A.F.E.**

Place this list in a prominent area of your home for quick reference. Then, before your children head out the door for the playground, check that:

#### ***Supervision is present, but strings and ropes aren’t.***

Adult presence is needed to watch for potential hazards, observe, intercede and facilitate play when necessary. Strings on clothing or ropes used for play can cause accidental strangulation if caught on equipment.

#### ***All children play on age-appropriate equipment.***

Preschoolers, ages 2 - 5, and children ages 5 - 12, are developmentally different and need different equipment located in separate areas to keep the playground safe and fun for all.

#### ***Falls to surface are cushioned.***

Nearly 70 percent of all playground injuries are related to falls to the surface. Acceptable surfaces include hardwood fiber/mulch, pea gravel, sand and synthetic materials such as poured-in-place, rubber mats or tiles. Playground surfaces should not be concrete, asphalt, grass, blacktop, packed dirt or rocks.

#### ***Equipment is safe.***

Check to make sure the equipment is anchored safely in the ground, all equipment pieces are in good working order, S-hooks are entirely closed, bolts are not protruding, there are no exposed footings, etc.

For a scorecard to see if your playground makes the grade, see [www.playgroundsafety.org](http://www.playgroundsafety.org).

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## Safety Guidelines for Backyard Play Sets | A Play Set Safety Checklist

All children deserve a safe place to play. According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), there were nearly 47,000 injuries on home playgrounds to children under age 15 in the latest year studied. To create a safer play experience for your child, please follow the guidelines listed below, and inspect any play equipment before your child plays there.

- P** Parents need to supervise children at all times. Stop dangerous behavior before injuries occur.
- L** Lumber sturdiness is a key component of your play set. Four-by-four corner posts offer stability to the play deck by minimizing the side-to-side sway motion that less substantial dimensional lumber may sometimes cause. A-frame legs are equally important as they provide a firm footing for the swing beam.
- A** Age-appropriate accessories should be selected to complement your child(s) age(s). Play set accessories are not one-size-fits-all. Gradually change age-appropriate accessories as your child grows. Kids under age five should not play on anything above five feet high and if the child can't climb up a wall or swing independently, he or she is too small for that particular piece.
- Y** Yard space must be considered when selecting a play set. Backyard play sets should have a cleared area beyond the play set that extends six feet out from all sides and from the end of accessories such as slides. For swings, the rule of thumb is to have additional cleared space that extends at least twice the height of the swing beam.
- S** Soft landings protect children from being injured in a fall. Proper surfacing is an often overlooked safety feature for backyard play sets. Dirt and grass are not adequate. Loose fill materials such as wood mulch, wood chips, sand, or fine gravel are recommended and should extend at least six feet in all directions and under equipment. Adequate depth for fill material varies from 9 to 12 inches depending on the type of material.
- E** Ensure that the play set you select does not contain spaces measuring between 3.5 inches and 9 inches. Such spaces could trap a child.
- T** Teach your children safe play rules.
- LOOK** | Never run in front of or behind someone who is swinging.
- SHARE** | Take turns on the climbers, slides and swing.
- DRY IT** | Don't play on the swing set if it is wet.
- BE NICE** | Don't push, shove or roughhouse.
- S** Separate play zones help to avoid collisions and allow sufficient room for dismounts without hitting another accessory or child.
- A** Anchor ropes and chains (except those used for swings) at both ends so that they cannot be looped back on themselves. This helps to eliminate the risk of strangulation.
- F** Firmly close all "S" hooks. Improper crimping or closing of "S" hooks to swing hangers can cause a swing accessory to detach from above, and can entangle clothing.
- E** Examine your set frequently to ensure proper surfacing and to tighten loose fasteners. Also, look for protruding bolts and excessive wear of chains, ropes, and hardware. Make sure all pieces of the play equipment are in good condition.
- T** Take extra care to make sure equipment has adequate guardrails or enclosures, particularly from elevated platforms, walkways, and ramps that are 30" or higher. Also, remove tripping hazards like tree stumps, roots, toys, rocks, etc., from the play area.
- Y** Youngsters should not play on worn-out and neglected play sets. Take action to remove them immediately.

Some information provided by the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission. Reprinted with permission from Swing-N-Slide and the Home Safety Council.



## To Learn More...

To see sample activities from the *Play On!* program or download copies of *Play On! A Resource for Active Families*, go to [www.PlayCore.com](http://www.PlayCore.com).

To learn more about playground safety, consult the National Program for Playground Safety (NPPS, at <http://www.playgroundsafety.org/>). The NPPS web site allows you to e-mail playground safety questions, and a safety expert will answer you personally.

## Comments or questions? Contact us:

AAPAR (Publisher of *Play On!*): [www.aapar.org](http://www.aapar.org)  
[AAPAR@aabperd.org](mailto:AAPAR@aabperd.org) or 703/476-3430  
PlayCore (sponsor of *Play On!*): [Info@PlayCore.com](mailto:Info@PlayCore.com)  
or 423/265-PLAY

## Have fun and *Play On!*

### Additional resources

- The Partnership for Play Every Day is a national initiative to increase the number and quality of play spaces for children. See [www.playeveryday.org](http://www.playeveryday.org) for details. Be sure to check out the “Building Generational Play” report as well.
- [www.bestfamilyadvice.com](http://www.bestfamilyadvice.com)
- [www.familyfun.com](http://www.familyfun.com)
- [www.familytlc.net](http://www.familytlc.net)
- [www.familyeducation.com](http://www.familyeducation.com)
- [www.funattic.com](http://www.funattic.com)
- [www.familywithpurpose.com](http://www.familywithpurpose.com)
- [www.gameskidsplay.net](http://www.gameskidsplay.net)
- [www.aap.org/parents.html](http://www.aap.org/parents.html)
- 99 Tips for Family Fitness Fun at Shape Up America!: [www.shapeup.org/publications/99.tips.for.family.fitness.fun/](http://www.shapeup.org/publications/99.tips.for.family.fitness.fun/)

## Related Books

- Harrison, A. (2002). *36 games kids love to play*. Turners Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children.
- Hurn, R. (2006). *Active playtimes: Playground activities for fit, healthy and happy kids*. London: A & C Black Publishers.
- Kettmann, S. (2005). *The 2,000 best games and activities*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks.
- Steffens, C. & Gorin, S. (2007). *Learning to play, playing to learn: Curriculum and activities for classroom and playground management* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Wellhousen, K. (2002). *Outdoor play every day: Innovative play concepts for early childhood*. Albany, NY: Delmar-Thomas Learning.

