

Raising Future Well-Adjusted Adults

How a Three-Dimensional Approach to Learning Fosters Healthy, Smart, Socially-Adept Children

Summary: New research supports a revolutionary and refreshing model of healthy child development: one that grows out of physical movement. What were once thought of only as fitness skills can now directly support and translate into classroom and work skills. Although schools are now cutting back on physical education, parents can turn to extracurricular programs like The Little Gym, which uses physical activity as a conduit for *Three-Dimensional Learning*.

Who doesn't want to give their children the best start in life? That extra edge that will help them become well-rounded, well-adjusted adults?

Happily for parents and children, new research suggests that creative physical activity may be the key to fostering confident, successful kids. For example, a 2007 report by the American Academy of Pediatrics noted the importance of play in promoting healthy child development¹.

Capitalizing on this model and on its own deep experience with child development, The Little Gym has developed a whole child approach that uses physical activity as a conduit for *Three-Dimensional Learning*. This paper explores how the latest research findings support each dimension of the holistic child development model, including:

- **GET MOVING!** Physical activities that develop athletic skills and launch a lifetime of healthy habits.
- **BRAIN BOOST!** Exercises that stretch the mind and develop a love of learning.
- **CITIZEN KID!** Activities that teach life skills and translate to a well rounded, well adjusted super kid.

How the Get Moving! Dimension Launches a Lifetime of Healthy Habits

It comes as no surprise that active children are more likely to become active adults. A series of studies from multiple countries

makes it increasingly clear that children spend far too much time sitting than is good for them. And now this inactivity is happening earlier than ever, as evidenced by a recent study following children from ages seven to nine. By that time, it's often too late: inactivity habits are already forming².

Getting your children involved in regular physical activity by the early elementary grades may alter this trend for the better. Young children who acquire "fundamental movement skills" such as running and hopping, catching and throwing, and balancing and twisting are more likely to get and stay physically active. Reviews of research have also linked these skills to improved cardio-respiratory fitness and lower risk of obesity.³

Success in physical activities and games can also boost a child's confidence.⁴ Research shows that children make judgments about their motor skill abilities at an early age, which may affect their willingness to take on new physical challenges as they get older.⁵

Harnessing the *Brain Boost!* Dimension to Develop a Love of Learning

Did you know that physical activity also boosts children's mental functioning? Young children's brains undergo tremendous growth and change, which we can see

reflected in a child's improved processing speed, working memory, self-control and strategic decision-making ability.⁶ To foster this intellectual growth, you can encourage your child to participate in structured and repetitive physical activities.

All of the physical development programs at The Little Gym incorporate "experiential learning" activities that expand the mind, as well as stimulate the body. These active games feature unpredictable elements and solvable problems to nurture "executive function" skills, which help children make plans and strategies to pursue their goals. What's more, researchers believe that physical games that require sustained focus and standing still at times can help with attention problems like attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).⁷

In addition to physical activity, music can also have profound effects on children's brain development. Child-centric music, like the original songs central to all programs at The Little Gym, has benefits that reach beyond having fun. In a recent study of five-year olds, singing or listening to familiar, age-appropriate music enhanced creativity and drawing proficiency.⁸ Research increasingly suggests a link between musical appreciation skills and the skills essential for reading and speaking.⁹ And, we know that music can help teach children rhythm and mathematical skills like counting.

Fostering Life Skills Through the *Citizen Kid!* Dimension

Music also plays a key role in promoting social skills. A study of four-year olds found that singing, dancing or drumming together made children more likely to help each other afterwards, and to spontaneously cooperate to solve a problem.¹⁰

Cooperation is just one of a battery of teachable friendship skills that reflect healthy social and emotional development in a child. The relevant skills vary by age, but include playing fairly, listening,

demonstrating empathy and resolving conflicts peacefully. Friendship is not only rewarding in itself, but research shows that having even one friend during grade school can protect against problems in later life.¹¹

Along with promoting cooperation and friendship, programs like The Little Gym offer opportunities for children to develop leadership skills. Research suggests that early participation in structured group activities that allow children to cultivate skills such as initiative, teamwork, and emotional regulation, can help children more effectively take on leadership roles in childhood and later life¹². Groundbreaking studies conducted by Columbia University have tracked the leadership success of children who developed the ability to take turns and wait for a reward. These children grew into adolescents who were better able to handle frustration and stress, pay attention and make plans, and generally perform better in both school and social situations.¹³

Fusing the Dimensions Into a Whole Child Approach

Parents looking to give their child a boost in comprehensive development must evaluate their child's extracurricular activities to ensure that they don't merely stress one dimension of learning. Instead, parents should seek out programs like those offered at The Little Gym, which embrace a whole child approach, where physical activity is interwoven with activities that stretch the mind and encourage life skills.

Research compiled and reviewed by Dr. Cheryl K. Olson, a public health researcher and former Harvard Medical School faculty member who specializes in child development and health behaviors.

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- ⁷ Mikami, A.Y. (2010). The importance of friendship for youth with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 13:181-198.
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- ¹¹ Mikami, A.Y. (2010). The importance of friendship for youth with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 13:181-198.
- ¹² Murphy, S.E., & Johnson, S.K. (2011). The benefits of a long-lens approach to leader development: Understanding the seeds of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 22:459-470.
- ¹³ Mischel, W., Shoda, Y., & Peake, P.K. (1988). The nature of adolescent competencies predicted by preschool delay of gratification. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54:687-696.