

To grow up healthy, children need to sit less and play more

Language English



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Children under five should spend less time sitting watching screens, or restrained in prams and seats, get better quality sleep and have more time for active play if they are to grow up healthy, according to new guidelines issued by the World Health Organization (WHO).

“Achieving health for all means doing what is best for health right from the beginning of people’s lives,” says **WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus**.

The new guidelines on physical activity, sedentary behaviour and sleep for children under 5 years of age were developed by a WHO panel of experts. They assessed **the effects on young children of inadequate sleep, and time spent sitting watching screens or restrained in chairs and prams**. They also reviewed evidence around the benefits of increased activity levels.

“Improving physical activity, reducing sedentary time and ensuring quality sleep in young children will improve their physical, mental health and wellbeing, and help prevent childhood obesity and associated diseases later in life,” says **Dr Fiona Bull**, programme manager for surveillance and population-based prevention of noncommunicable diseases, at WHO.

Failure to meet current physical activity recommendations is responsible for more than 5 million deaths globally each year across all age groups. Currently, over 23% of adults and 80% of adolescents are not sufficiently physically active. If healthy physical activity, sedentary behaviour and sleep habits are established early in life, this helps **shape habits through childhood, adolescence and into adulthood**.

“What we really need to do is bring back play for children,” says **Dr Juana Willumsen**, WHO focal point for

childhood obesity and physical activity. “This is about making the shift from sedentary time to playtime, while protecting sleep. “

The pattern of overall 24-hour activity is key: replacing prolonged restrained or sedentary screen time with more active play, while making sure young children get enough good-quality sleep. Quality sedentary time spent in interactive non-screen-based activities with a caregiver, such as reading, storytelling, singing and puzzles, is very important for child development.

The important interactions between physical activity, sedentary behaviour and adequate sleep time, and their impact on physical and mental health and wellbeing, were recognized by the [Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity](#) [1], which called for clear guidance on physical activity, sedentary behaviour and sleep in young children.

Applying the recommendations in these guidelines during the first five years of life will contribute to children’s motor and cognitive development and lifelong health.

[See recommendations at a glance here](#) [2]

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