Young Kids Are More Active When Parents Participate

By ACSH Staff — April 8, 2016

In the continuing effort to curb childhood obesity, researchers are continuing to focus on ways to keep kids active and encourage healthy behaviors. And according to a recent article published in the Journal of Pediatrics [2], researchers believe that parents of young children can be a big part of the solution.

Researchers assessed 20 parent-child dyads in a gymnasium setting with equipment that included jump ropes, soccer balls and hurdles, and used in three circumstances:

1. Children and parents were instructed to play together
2. Children were instructed to play while parents sat close by and watched
3. Children were instructed to play while parents were absent from the room

The children were aged between 3 and 6 years. The cohort was split evenly between boys and girls while the parents were mostly women in their early 30s. Only three out of the 20 adults in the study were fathers.

The children wore activity-monitoring devices during each of the scenarios and researchers recorded with a stopwatch how much time each child spent being physically active.

Results showed that physical activity levels increased by over 60 percent when parents and children played together. Children’s activity levels were also markedly greater when parents sat close by and watched, as compared to when they were absent from the room.

Children spent the least amount of time — under 4 minutes — being sedentary, or inactive, when parents participated in the 30-minute play session. However, when parents were nowhere to be found, children spent more than half of the 30-minute period engaged in little to no activity.

Another study published in the International Journal Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity [3] showed similar findings. Children's physical activity, as measured by pedometer step counts, were positively associated with parents' activity, further indicating that "children's physical activity is
related to that of their parents in distinct and quantifiable ways."

But one important question still remains: How best to involve parents in physical activity interventions for young children?

According to a systematic review published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* [4], the jury is still out. It states that "there is little evidence for effectiveness of family involvement methods in programs for promoting physical activity in children, because of the heterogeneity of study design, study quality, and outcome measures used."

More research is needed in this area to determine the optimal ways in which parents might better influence their children to be active. Regardless, these findings suggest that parents can act to encourage their children's physical activity, which is a big first step.