



Voices of Child Health in Chicago REPORT

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REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

Only one in three young children engaged in physical activity most days of the week.

Both younger children and elementary-aged children were getting significantly less exercise than recommended.

Parents considered their children to be generally active, indicating that parents may not be aware that their children are not getting enough physical activity.

Chicago Children Are Not Getting Enough Physical Activity

Spending time outside and exercising may be top of mind for many Chicago families trying to soak up the last few weeks of summer sunshine and warm weather. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) emphasizes a variety of benefits to exercising and active play, as regular physical activity can help children and adolescents improve cardiorespiratory fitness, build strong bones and muscles, control weight, reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression and reduce the risk of developing health conditions.¹ When children are inactive, it can increase the risk of becoming overweight or obese.¹ Physical inactivity is also the fourth major cause of mortality in the world, further highlighting the importance of helping to teach children healthy physical habits from a young age.²

For this month's *Voices of Child Health in Chicago Report*, we asked 687 parents of children between 1 and 7 years old about their children's physical activity and exercise. To do this, we used PROMIS[®] survey measures developed as part of the [Environmental influences on Child Health Outcomes \(ECHO\) Program](#).³ The ECHO Program aims to understand how early life biological, chemical, behavioral and societal factors affect five primary childhood outcomes including obesity (the other four are neurodevelopment, asthma, well-being and pre/peri/post-natal).

How much exercise should children get?

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends different amounts of physical activity or exercise for different age groups.⁴ Infants need at least 30 minutes of "tummy time" and other interactive play, spread throughout each day. For toddlers and preschoolers (ages 3–5), the AAP suggests they have three or more hours of active play (e.g., playing at the park, playing catch) throughout the day, or about 15 minutes for every hour they are awake. For elementary-age children, the AAP recommends 60 or more minutes of physical activity most days of the week (i.e., four or more days a week). For children who resist being physically active, the AAP recommends giving choices and encouraging new activities.

How physically active are Chicago children?

We asked parents to think about a typical week for their child and report on their physical activity.

YOUNG CHILDREN

For younger children (1 to 5 years old), only about one in three engaged in enough physical activity to meet AAP recommendations: 12% engaged in vigorous physical activity for at least 30 minutes six to seven days per week and another 21% on four to five days per week (Figure 1). The majority of children had physically active days below the recommendations: 35% engaged in physical activity two to three days per week, 14% on one day per week and

Figure 1. Proportion of children ages 1–5 who engaged in physical activity by the number of days

	6–7 days	4–5 days	2–3 days	1 day	0 days
30+ minutes physical activity	12%	21%	35%	14%	19%
Played so hard they felt tired	9%	17%	40%	17%	18%

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19% on no days. Additionally, it is important to note that the AAP recommendation for toddlers and preschoolers is for three hours of active play per day. Similarly, the World Health Organization recommends three hours of active play per day for this age group, of which 60 minutes is moderate or vigorous physical activity.⁵

When asked how many days per week their child exercised or played so hard that they felt tired, only about a third of children played so hard that they felt tired on at least four to five days of the week (Figure 1).

Despite the low rates of physical activity among young children, when parents rated how physically active their child was on a usual day, 28% of parents said, “very much” and 43% of parents said, “quite a bit.” This suggests that parents may not be aware that their children are not getting the recommended amount of physical activity.

ELEMENTARY-AGED CHILDREN

For children between 6 and 7 years old, 43% were physically active at least four days per week (17% engaged in 10+ minutes of physical activity six to seven days per week and 26% on four to five days per week) (Figure 2). Again, it is important to note that the AAP recommendation is for at least 60 minutes of physical activity rather than 10 minutes.

Figure 2. Proportion of children ages 6–7 who engaged in physical activity by the number of days



Only 3% of 6- to 7-year-old children exercised or played so hard that their body got tired on six to seven days per week, and one quarter of children exercised until their body got tired on one or no days of the week (Figure 2).

For both younger children and elementary-aged children, our findings suggest that children are getting significantly less exercise than recommended. In our research, it is important to note that we only assessed children 7 years old and younger, and in the future we hope to explore the same topic for older children and adolescents. The AAP reports that only about 25% of children nationally get the recommended amount of exercise.⁴

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HELPFUL TIPS FOR PARENTS

There are many benefits to physical activity and active play. Active play includes things like hopscotch, jumping rope or a game of tag — all things that can help keep kids healthy and fit.⁶ The AAP reports the advantages as better sleep, improved mood, increased focus, healthy muscles and bones, fundamental strength and coordination development, relaxation and resilience and building social skills.

The AAP’s [Physical Activity Checker Stopwatch](#) is a resource parents can use to aid children in meeting the recommendations for physical activity.⁶ It provides a way to calculate timing of physical activity for different activities and for multiple family members. Parents can help by incorporating physical activity in their child’s routine by going on family walks or participating in family outdoor activities such as games or sports. Every bit of movement counts and contributes toward positive change for a child.

HOW THE SURVEY WAS CONDUCTED

This report is based on data from the Voices of Child Health in Chicago Parent Panel Survey. The survey is administered to a sample of Chicago parents by Lurie Children’s and NORC at the University of Chicago via internet and telephone. The survey is administered to parents three times each year. The data in this report was collected from October through November 2021. The overall sample consisted of 1,142 Chicago parents, step-parents or guardians who had at least one child under 18 years of age in the household (referred to as “parents” in this report). Parents were from all 77 community areas in Chicago. The survey completion rate was 25.4% and the cumulative survey response rate was 1.8%. For this report, we focused on a subset of parents of children between 1 and 7 years old who answered questions about their child’s physical activity. All analyses were conducted with statistical weighting so that the results are representative of the parent population in the City of Chicago during the time period of data collection. For more information about the VOCHIC Parent Panel Survey, visit luriechildrens.org/ParentPanel and our page on Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/cjz82/>.

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