



Gross Motor Play

When Weather Doesn't Permit Outdoor Play

Gross motor play is essential for children's healthy growth and development. This need is typically met through daily outdoor play, which encourages physical activities such as running, climbing, and jumping—supporting large muscle development and overall physical fitness. Access to fresh air and open space also helps children release energy, leading to improved focus, behavior, and attention when they return indoors. When weather conditions do not permit outdoor play, however, alternative arrangements should be made to ensure children still have opportunities for gross motor play. Providing these experiences consistently supports children's well-being and helps classrooms run more smoothly.



What is Weather Permitting?

Children should be dressed appropriately and participate in outdoor play unless there is active precipitation, a public health advisory requiring indoor activity, or extremely hot or cold temperatures as indicated on the Weather Watch Chart. A wet playground without active precipitation is not a reason to stay inside.



Make every effort to go outside.

Watch the weather forecast and rearrange the scheduled outdoor time. Move outdoor play earlier or later in the day to help accommodate changing temperatures and anticipated precipitation. When precipitation stops, dry the equipment and go outside to play.



Best Practices: Indoor Gross Motor Play

When outdoor play is not possible, provide an open play space indoors using another licensed space, such as an empty classroom, a lunchroom or gym that is not being used, or a covered porch. Set up the space with gross motor equipment that can be safely used indoors and designate clear play areas for specific types of play, such as running, ball activities, and ride-on toys.



Gross Motor Activities

While vigorous music and movement activities and exercising can provide opportunities for gross motor skill use, these are often hard to sustain long enough to reap the same benefits as gross motor free play. When used, combining activities with gross motor free play is encouraged so children can receive the same amount of gross motor play indoors as they would outdoors.



Positive Behavior Outcomes

Engaging in gross motor play helps children release excess energy, remain more attentive during classroom learning, and reduce rough play that can lead to injuries. These positive outcomes contribute to a calmer, more focused classroom environment.



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Best practice ideas for easy-to-set-up indoor gross motor activities and equipment by age group are listed below. Select only equipment that can be used safely within the available indoor space and is appropriate for the intended age group. Provide resilient surfacing for any climbing equipment or slides over 18 inches in height. Equipment should be placed in open areas with ample clear space on all sides to allow for safe use and to help prevent injuries from falls or contact with other children playing nearby. This list is not exhaustive, but it offers simple ideas to help you get started setting up a fun and practical indoor gross motor play space.



Infants, Up to 12 months

- Balls of various sizes and textures
- Tummy time mirror mats
- Activity gyms and mats
- Crawling ramps and mats
- Large push/pull toys
- Baby roller toys
- Small slides less than 18" tall
- See-through crawling tunnels
- Push-behind walking toys



Toddlers and Twos, 12 - 35 months

- Balls of various sizes and textures
- Climbing ramps and mats
- Large push/pull vehicles and toys
- See-through crawling tunnels
- Push walking toys: grocery carts, wheelbarrows, doll strollers, musical walkers, etc.
- Pull walking toys: wagons, noisemaker toys, etc.
- Simple ride-on toys without pedals
- Rocking horses
- Ground-level, large stepping pads
- Cozy Coupes
- Large fill and dump buckets
- Activity floor mats
- Seated floor scooter board



Preschool, 3-5 years

- Preschool-sized sports balls: soccer, kickball, football, basketball, etc.
- Climbing ramps
- Hula-hoops
- Balance beams up to 12" high
- Raised stepping pods up to 12" high
- Floor mat games: hopscotch, jumping, etc.
- Bean bag toss games

- Preschool-sized basketball hoops with basketballs
- Portable soccer goals with soccer balls
- Parachute games
- Seated floor scooter boards
- Ride-on toys with pedals
- Dancing and exercise games
- Obstacle courses and mazes
- Physical activity games: Red light-Green light, Simon Says, Twister, Exercise and Movement Dice, etc.



School-Age, 5-12 years

- Sports balls
- Basketball hoops with basketballs
- Portable soccer goals with soccer balls
- Yoga and exercise games
- Dance Off
- Scoters
- Jump ropes
- Hula hoops
- Spike Ball
- Gaga Ball
- Balance boards
- Obstacle courses and relay games
- Physical activity games: hopscotch, Four Corners, Twister, crab soccer, tag, kickball, Sharks and minnows, pool noodle hockey, etc.



Additional Resources

