



## ***Butterfly Radio: Part 5***

*Imagination and play: How movement helps sustain a healthy body and a healthy mind*

### **TERRY**

This is Terry from Detroit. You've talked a lot about nutrition, eating, snacks, but what about physical activity? How does that fall into the healthy habits discussion?

### **SYLVIA**

Okay! This is an important topic, because just like with food habits, physical activity habits learned early in life can follow someone all the way to adulthood, and those habits are so important for maintaining health.



We need to start by *not* thinking of physical activity as a *separate* activity from the rest of a child's day. In other words, you shouldn't say, "Okay! It's physical activity time. Let's run around." ***The whole day should be organized in a way that respects children's natural inclination to constantly move and that encourages movement when kids are playing, when they are going from activity to activity, when they're outside, or when you lead them in a game or dance.*** Young children want to move and explore through experience, and your job is to let them do it and encourage them to



do it! In fact, it's sedentary activities that should feel to children like an exception to the routine.

TERRY

But what about reading books, drawing and painting, meal times, nap times? Aren't those sedentary activities? Kids need and enjoy them too!

SYLVIA

Without a doubt! Those activities are important and kids love them. Any good caregiver or teacher reads to children, provides them naptime, encourages them to paint and draw, works with them on a computer or tablet.

But Terry, in many programs across the country, young children spend **WAY** too much time in sedentary activities, like circle time. Some teachers think that circle time is the way to get the kids ready for kindergarten or socialized to school, to teach them to listen and follow directions. But remember that children can also learn these things when they're moving and through their own experiences of life, so let's be mindful of the amount of time we require young children to sit when they want and need to be moving!

I know some programs that have young children sit in circle time for **over an hour a** day. What's up with that? Do you think three and four year olds want to sit on their behinds for that long following adult directions?

TERRY

I think sometimes it might be that the teachers just don't want to move so much. Honestly, I don't love exercise. And anyways, I feel that working with children is so intense *all* the time. I'm alert and present with them for up to eight hours, five days a week. Then I go home and have still a lot of things to do. Sometimes my energy runs out, and I just need the children to sit and draw for a while so that I get a few minutes of rest.

SYLVIA

Part of the challenge I think are simply the *terms* “exercise and physical activity.” We immediately think of the gym or jogging--and that might turn us off to the idea of embracing movement in more simple ways, like taking the stairs or avoiding the drive-through. And for children, all we’re really talking about is play! Play as exercise, exercise as play.

***When young children play they often meet all of their physical activity needs.*** Just think about them on the playground, or in the sandbox, or setting up the house, or creating a city out of blocks. The possibilities for physical activity are endless with play!



***This means that one of our main responsibilities as caregivers is creating an environment that encourages active play.***

Now, how do we do that? Well, it starts with a classroom that is arranged so that children can move around easily and can experience different kinds of movement. Preschoolers love using tables and chairs to build caves and tunnels, and cardboard boxes can be particularly exciting for them. You know all this. Just give young children some tools and watch them go to work. The more the classroom environment encourages movement and play, the better.

Of course, this same concept goes for outside play spaces, where you can arrange things so that children can pedal, dig, climb, jump off, jump on, slide down, etc. Take into account different cultural traditions that families might value - like soccer and jumping rope! Natural materials such as logs, stones, boulders are excellent, when available. If the environment is set up to encourage play, then children will play, and if they play, they’re moving, which, wink wink, is physical activity!

TERRY

Okay, so you're saying play.... and I can get behind that. But what about learning? We can't just let kids play all day long!

SYLVIA



Terry, ***when young children are playing, they are learning!*** Research says that play is bigger than just a healthy habit or preventing type 2 diabetes. Play is huge part of brain development...emotionally, cognitively, socially, and physically. Play is about making sure children are developing in all the right ways. In directed play, children can practice basic concepts, like counting, listening, and responding to instructions. Or in self-directed play, children naturally learn about creativity, problem solving, and decision-making.

Imagine that you were four years old again and remember how much you learned when you explored your surroundings, created new worlds with blocks and other toys, developed relationships with other children, and discovered what your body could and could not do. Providing children with a safe and secure environment to explore their curiosities through play is such a privilege for any caregiver.

TERRY

So you're saying that children's natural need to move is important developmentally?

SYLVIA

Absolutely! And it's also important to recognize that an adult's notion of the amount of movement needed by children often differs from what actually benefits them. Sometimes in various cultural traditions, girls are not encouraged as much as boys to be physically active - which is a great topic for a discussion with parents. Also, typically, adults keep children sitting for

too long, and actively prevent children from moving around, which is what most children want to be doing. Of course, every child is different when it comes to the amount of movement his or her body needs. One child might enjoy sitting for 20 minutes listening to you reading a whole story, while another child might need to get up and move much sooner! You should try allowing for those differences. The little boy that starts moving around while you read is still growing and developing, but simply not according to a plan that you intended for him at that moment! It's not always helpful to force all children to sit still for the duration of your reading.

TERRY

Are you saying that children can just do whatever they want whenever they want ?

SLYVIA.

No, it's much more nuanced than that. Children still need you to structure the day with a balance of different types of activities; but you don't need to rigidly hold on to that structure when an opportunity for movement comes about. And know that: if you set up enough playtime each day, self-directed play, make-believe play, structured play, imaginary play, you name it, it helps children quiet down when it's time to read a story.

TERRY

But then can you give me some guidelines? I mean how much playtime are we then talking about?

SYLVIA

***Preschoolers should have 90 to 120 minutes of vigorous activity a day. Of that, when possible, they really should have a minimum of 60 to 90 minutes of outdoor playtime, and when not outside, there should be continuous opportunities for movement.***



Some reports suggest that in ECE programs across the country today, children spend over 80% of their time in sedentary activities, and that's excluding nap time! Gosh, how boring for them!

Remember, young children aren't like us in how they get their physical activity. An adult might think, okay, I'm going to go play basketball for an hour or go jogging for thirty minutes. Young children get their activity throughout the day in lots of short spurts. They might vigorously run for two minutes and then rest for a bit, and then a few minutes later, they might climb on the jungle gym and jump from climbing structures. However, if you give them ample playtime, most children will meet those 90-120 minutes of recommended vigorous activity a day. ***In other words, you don't need to (and shouldn't) set aside a specific 90 minutes segment for vigorous activity, but just be confident that if you are giving children enough play time and outdoor time (when possible) that they will get lots of physical activity without you having to push them, and they will know that movement is a normal part of any day and any activity.***



One nice thing you can do to make movement even more fun, of course, (and I think most of you do this) is structured physical activity like games or dancing or playing musical instruments and moving with the music. Structured play is a great way to intentionally get children involved in vigorous activity. One of the things I love to do is teach them a dance to a fun song, which most kids just love. There's one kids song I love called *Shake it Like a Duck*. Believe it or not, I was at an early childhood conference, and all these teachers were just having a blast to this song...all of these adults, just shaking it like a duck.

TERRY

You want me to shake it like a duck?

SYLVIA

Shake it like a duck Terry!!! Absolutely!!! As often as you can!!! It's good for you!!

TERRY

Okay.

SYLVIA

Caregivers carry a lot of responsibility, and I love your questions Terry, because they shed a light on what that responsibility actually looks like. Here's what I mean: children have a natural inclination to move, and we as caregivers need to honor that inclination even when it's not *our* preference, so we can cherish and sustain children's love of movement.

Set up the room and structure the day in the best way possible to encourage movement and play and don't shy away from movement yourself. By doing so, we'll be helping build lifelong healthy habits and watching children's imagination and learning in action!

