

The Influence of Play on a Child's Health and Fitness

A GameTime sponsored research study conducted by Dr. Lou Bowers, Professor Emeritus University of South Florida

Background

Children seem to be in an era of decreasing fitness. Today's kids are at a greater risk for diabetes, stress, obesity and other health risks. Children today spend at least 17 hours per week watching TV, playing video games and other sedentary activities, and in order to maximize play opportunities, we need to offer equipment that will draw and hold their attention.

Objective

This study focused on a child's playground component choices, and caloric expenditure on these components. Our independent researchers used a recording instrument to measure calories burned, which showed students falling into the minimum benefit zone of the Surgeon General's physical activity target. In order to advance to the standard to reduce health risk, the students surveyed would need to burn 85 additional calories per day. During his study of children engaged in free play, Dr. Bowers discovered that the children who participated burned half of the Surgeon General's recommended caloric expenditure, in 30 minutes of play on a GameTime play structure. Researchers were able to discover which equipment held the children's attention constantly through the 20-week study period, and which burned a relative amount of calories. During the study conducted, children between the ages of 4 and 8 were fitted with an apparatus to measure the amount of calories expended while playing on the GameTime PowerScape unit. Data was collected on several days, throughout the study period. Each day, the children were allowed 30 minutes of free play on the structure with no adult influence, with the exception of instances involving safety.

Findings

The study showed the remarkable influence that free play can have on the health and physical activity of children. The children surveyed burned an average of half the additional daily caloric burn recommended by the Surgeon General, and the caloric burn average also increased over the second phase of the 20-week study. The children consistently chose GameTime's exclusive BigFoot slide as the most popular activity. Other popular GameTime exclusives on the playground were the Wild Goose Trapeze Ladder, Chunky Arch Climber and Peek-a-Boo Tube Slide.

Recommendations

Since children will play voluntarily, it stands to reason that play structures are a valid component in the health of today's youth. Free play, unlike organized activities, give children the health benefits needed with little to no prompting to encourage the activity. Furthermore, it is an activity that children of all ages, sizes and abilities can benefit from equally, with no team pressures, physical preferences or singling out, as is sometimes the case with other activities. However, it is important to note that a child will not play on a play structure that does not hold his/her interest. On the GameTime equipment used in the study, the children kept the same level of interest throughout the 20-week period of the study. This study gave us valuable product development data to ensure that we can offer equipment that kids will want to return to again and again.

