

■ GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE ■

FITNESS AND WELL-BEING

GETTING PHYSICAL AS PART OF ONLINE EDUCATION

Parents can make sure their children get enough exercise outside class with virtual play dates, make-believe games and even helping our with household chores, writes **Ben Young**



Teachers at Fairchild Kindergarten have found ways to bring creative physical play to Zoom.
Photo: Handout

Pandemic-era regulations and online learning have been extremely challenging for kindergarten pupils, teachers and parents. This is because physical activity and play are difficult for teachers to set up remotely, and Covid-19 restrictions make it harder for parents to arrange things like outdoor play dates.

Fortunately, several of Hong Kong's top early childhood education experts have been working tirelessly to ensure pupils stay physically active and continue their learning unabated during this challenging period.

"Our kindergarten teachers are inspirational," says Geoff Lacey, principal of Hong Kong International School (HKIS) Lower Primary.

"They continue to make learning fun online and ensure that pupils are actively involved in their learning. Moving to online, one could easily make lessons passive, more of a give and get. However, our teachers encourage collaboration online by class shares and breakout sessions where children have the opportunity to reflect and articulate their thoughts and ideas."

Lessons at HKIS often include activities like Lego building and watercolour painting, which keep pupils moving while also tapping into their imagination and creativity, while segments of other lessons are dedicated

to physical education. In addition to regularly scheduled PE activities, HKIS has daily "move and groove" sessions in which different teachers will dance, play, do yoga and move about with pupils in ways that will challenge their strength, flexibility and aerobic capacity.

Lacey says that parents should play an integral role in helping their children stay focused during Zoom classes and ensuring that the children are getting enough exercise outside class.

"Parents should be engaging pupils in physical activity throughout the day whenever possible," he explains. "When accessible, going out for walks is ideal for children to get some fresh air. At home, children and parents can set up mini obstacle courses for the whole family to get involved with. Also, it is important that when not online for classes, pupils are not on screens during breaks."

Parent-teacher communication is more important than ever, and HKIS staff have been organising coffee meetings to help parents understand what online learning looks like and how they might be able to support their child at home.

"We try to provide them with a variety of resources to help support pupils' social and emotional needs as we

find pupils have more challenges with emotional regulation when engaged in home learning," Lacey says.

Staff and parents ought to work closely in organising physical play during lessons which, according to HKIS Lower Primary Kindergarten teacher Priyanka D'Costa, plays an "even more critical role in online learning" as it fulfils an important socialisation role. If a child does not have frequent play dates, it becomes more important for him/her to get used to socialising with friends during online play.

"Play looks different online and can look different from day to day," D'Costa explains. "In my class, sometimes play includes scavenger hunt games like 'look for a shoe that is not yours' to share a laugh or teach maths concepts like 'find something short or long.' Sometimes when we have had a busy day, it looks like making dragonflies or octopuses with Blu Tack while talking and sharing random anecdotes or knowledge with each other."

"Through play, pupils strengthen their fine motor muscles, sometimes create letters and numbers, or just get creative and talk."

Physical play is also an important point of emphasis at English Schools Foundation (ESF) Tung Chung

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International Kindergarten, according to principal Allison Banbury.

"Play is central to learning; it ensures that children develop skills and knowledge through active participation," she says. "Play provides children with the time and space to explore the concepts, theories and ideas that are of interest to them. Physical play can arise spontaneously or be planned. It can be initiated by adults or children. It can involve whole body movement – such as dancing, jumping or doing yoga, hand-eye coordination, or foot-eye coordination."

According to Banbury, it is extremely important that children remain physically active as this "not only affects their health and well-being but also affects their cognitive growth". Similar to HKIS' "move and groove" session, ESF schools recently introduced "squiggle and wiggle" sessions in which teachers engage children physically as they develop reading and writing skills.

She says that physical education and play can be accommodated for during lockdowns, it just requires some additional preparation.

"Physical play needs a clear space, so ensure that toys are packed away, and depending on the type of physical play, you may have to move furniture or ensure that furniture that is around the play space is safe with no sharp corners or hard edges onto which children could fall," Banbury explains. "Clear boundaries must be set, like what the child is wearing, can the children jump and dance on the furniture or only on the floor, and what toys will they be using?"

She also emphasises the important role parents must play in this relatively new form of early childhood education, citing "connection" as the key for parents in ensuring that preschool-aged children continue to learn.

"The close connection between parent and child ensures that parents understand their children's feelings,



Even with classrooms unavailable, HKIS hosts regular "move and groove" sessions employing dance, play, yoga and more. Photo: Handout



Make a meal, set the table, eat and clean up together – these increase motor skills, language development, problem solving, critical thinking, not to mention increasing family interaction while supporting children's self-care skills.



Experts recommend two hours of physical activity daily. Photo: Shutterstock

needs and wants at this time and can provide for them. Good health and well-being are central to learning," Banbury says. "Establishing a close connection with the school, through supporting their children's active engagement in the online and offline learning offered by their children's kindergartens, will ensure that a child's cognitive learning progresses.

"A kindergarten's curriculum should continue to offer a rich variety of engagements in response to children's interests and next steps in learning, even during periods of in-school class suspension."

Last but not least, Banbury stressed the importance of parents ensuring their children stay connected with other children.

"Whether it be through school-initiated Zoom sessions or through virtual or, when possible, face-to-face play dates, this will allow children to continue developing key social, linguistic and communication skills which are essential for happy and healthy relationships, which parents recognise as an important part of their children's learning at kindergarten," she says.

Many parents have to spend more time at home with their child because of school closures and work-from-home provisions. But many experts claim that those who view this as an opportunity instead of a purely negative circumstance will be doing what's best for themselves and their children, as there are many fun and creative ways to bond and exercise with kids that may never have occurred during normal conditions.

"Parents can definitely exercise with their children more – stretching together, yoga poses, dancing and jumping to music, obstacle courses at home, these will all help to get everyone moving together," says Betty Yau, principal at Fairchild Kindergarten. "Even mixing something in a bowl, or ripping up paper, or scribbling on a piece of paper will get those arm muscles moving."

Yau is another big advocate of creative physical play, both for Fairchild Zoom classes and during free time.

"It can be as simple as going for a walk with your child and playing 'I spy', or setting up role-playing games at home," she says. "For example, you can save your egg cartons, ice cream containers, bottles and fruit boxes, and use these to set up a mini supermarket at home. Parents and children can pretend to come into the shop, choose what they are buying, and pack their shopping, all while

negotiating, problem solving, and moving around the house."

Yau noted that including children in what are normally considered tedious chores is a "tremendous opportunity" both to increase quality time, and help kids develop good habits. Such activities can be considered exercise for kindergarten children, as they are still in early developmental stages.

"Use this time to involve children in day-to-day activities at home such as folding the laundry, this supports their hand-eye coordination and helps tackle a chore," she says. "Make a meal, set the table, eat and clean up together – these increase motor skills, language development, problem solving, critical thinking, not to mention increasing family interaction while supporting children's self-care skills."

Finally, Odette Umali, founder at parenting consulting company Gordon Parenting, who has done extensive research on the topic of physical play, says its importance cannot be understated.

"Physical activity from an early age should be encouraged as it enhances the development of a child's motor skills, bones and muscles, prevents obesity, and improves cognitive and social skills," Umali says. "Exercise also improves children's focus and energy levels."

She says that research has found that children need a minimum of 60 minutes of structured physical activity a day and an additional 60 minutes of unstructured physical activity.

"Fortunately, there are still a lot of activities that kids can do outdoors like playing in parks, going to the beach and hiking," Umali says. "Indoor activity can be a challenge but there are great resources and guides that are available on the web. Some notable ones we found include dance videos on YouTube, exercise-based video games like *Just Dance*, balloon volleyball, mini trampolining, jumping rope and hula hoop."

Umali echoes Yau's sentiment that allowing children to participate in chores is a great way to kill two birds with one stone. "Children prefer the real and real things to things on screen," Umali says. "If you are sweeping up around the house, hand your kids a broom or vacuum and they will be happy to participate. If you are preparing food in the kitchen, let them be part of the process by washing vegetables or mixing baking ingredients."