

# Tots in Action **ON** and **BEYOND** the Playground

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**The causes of being overweight are complex and require systematic changes in lifestyle behaviors, including an increase in physical activity.**

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Photos courtesy of the authors except as noted.

**IN THE PAST, BEING OVERWEIGHT WAS CONSIDERED** an individual problem that could be solved through self-discipline. Now it is well known that the causes of being overweight are complex and require systematic changes in lifestyle behaviors, including an increase in physical activity (see [www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=771](http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=771)).

To promote physical activity at an early age, physical educators at the University of North Carolina–Greensboro created Tots in Action in collaboration with pre-K teachers at two local elementary schools. The program has two goals: (1) to increase children's physical activity levels and (2) to help children see physical activity as a natural part of their lives, something they do during outdoor playtime and at other times of the day.

Through Tots in Action, children enhance physical activity rates while working on movement skills and exploring related concepts (like direction, shapes, and levels) determined jointly with classroom teachers. On the playground educators implement a weekly physical activity session with a specific focus (for example, locomotor/traveling, throwing/catching). Each session mimicks the classroom routine of combining large-group and center-based activities. Handouts with lots of great ideas for locomotor and object control activities accompany this article.

## Large-group activities

When teachers conduct outdoor play activities with the class, they can give feedback to all children and establish a common base of learning experiences. Teachers lead children through a sequence of movement activities in which they stay continually active and keep their heart rates elevated. For example, teachers ask questions to help the children use hula hoops in different ways:

Can you jump to the side of your hoop? Can you jump back in? Can you jump in front of your hoop?

Can you march inside your hoop? Can you gallop around it? Can you leap over it?

Can you balance your hoop on your arm far away from your body? Can you move it closer to your body? Can you step through it and balance it on your other arm?

Locomotor activities like this one enhance children's fitness levels.



**The large group setup allows teachers to emphasize the development of skills such as throwing or catching to help all children uncover movement clues.**

The large group setup also allows teachers to emphasize the development of skills such as throwing or catching to help all children uncover movement clues (like pointing toward the target or watching the ball). Children learn and practice skills they will later use indoors in activity centers. These clues help children experience success in the outdoor centers described next. Teachers can also use this time to verbally reinforce important movement concepts, such as *in/out* and *beside/behind/in front of*, that children use in the classroom.

### Center-based activities

After participating in large-group activities, it is important for children to actively explore different activities individually at their own level. To do this, teachers set up outdoor activity centers with a variety of challenges and equipment. For example,

when focusing on throwing and catching, three to four centers are set up where children can practice these skills using a variety of equipment, like yarn balls, scoops, and beanbags. At the activity centers children choose where they want to go, with whom they wish to play, and what they will do (for example, what object to throw, which target to use, how far away from the target to stand). Teachers can also set up centers focused on locomotor skills, such as a mini obstacle course.

One simple way to integrate outdoor play activities with what is happening in the classroom is to have children make their own equipment (for example, paddles for balloon bouncing, ribbon sticks for creative movements) to use for indoor or outdoor physical play. Teachers can also design indoor movement centers like rolling a ball to knock down foam blocks. Likewise, classroom activities can be incorporated into outdoor centers. For example, teachers can reinforce the concept of postal delivery by challenging children to get each toy into the correct box according to its "address" (i.e., color) as quickly as possible.

### Integrating physical activity at home

Family involvement is a necessary part of the Tots in Action program because children tend to be more active when significant adults in their lives are active. One strategy for increasing family involvement is to send home materials and ideas for using them. For example, children can play with homemade ribbon sticks, balloon paddles, and cups (plus balls) with their siblings and parents. Activities such as these reinforce the idea that enjoyable physical activity requires little besides common household items.

Another strategy for family involvement is having school-based family events that include music and movement. During the event, sample movement centers like an obstacle course and throwing at targets are set up so children can show their parents what they do at different centers. Teaching their parents how to participate makes preschoolers feel important and provides ideas for activities to repeat at home.

For more information about Tots in Action, contact Tammy Schilling at [taschill@uncg.edu](mailto:taschill@uncg.edu).

### Conclusion

By showing children the natural connections between all areas of learning and development and the activities they do at school and at home, the Tots in Action team helps young children see themselves as learners *and* movers. This requires mutual cooperation and support among teachers, families, and children. After all, it takes a whole village to raise a *healthy* child.

# Activities to Enhance Locomotor Movement Experiences

## Traveling



### Developmental goals

- Space awareness—safely moving body in self-space and general space
- Locomotor skills—gallop, leap, skip, walk, march, slide
- Directional concepts—*inside/outside, above/below, near/far, on/beside*, and so on
- Community helpers—postal delivery
- Sorting—by color

### Large-group activities

**Stationary Self-Space Activity.** Children stay in their individual spaces. They explore a variety of movement concepts while responding to directions such as:

- Jump *in/out, in front/behind, to the side* of your hoop.
- Walk *around* your hoop.
- Gallop *around* the *inside* of your hoop.
- Jump *into* or *out of* your hoop. (Try different foot patterns, such as jumping from one foot to two feet, two feet to two feet, two feet to one foot.)
- Stand in your hoop and hold it *above* you or up *high*.
- Hold your hoop down *low*.
- Place the hoop on your arm (right/left) as *far away* or as *near* to your body as you can.
- Move your hoop *around* your body with your hands.

**Musical Hoops (hula hoops).** Children move around without touching their friends or the hoops on the floor. When the music stops, they jump into the closest hoop. Have children focus on a different locomotor skill when the music starts again.

**Bubbles (hula hoops).** Children hold hoop at the waist and pretend to be bubbles. Mix up the ways in which the children can travel (walk, hop, jump, skip, gallop, run).

**Car Driving (hula hoops).** Children hold the hula hoop in front of them, like a steering wheel, and pretend they are driving a car. Change directions—have the children back up their cars (by walking backward).

**Mud Puddles (hula hoops, cones).** Scatter the hoops (mud puddles) within an area defined by cones. Children move throughout the space in relation to their friends and the puddles.

**Paper-Plate Dancing (paper plates, recording of “Twistin’ the Night Away,” or other music).** Each child uses two paper plates to do various movements (such as clap plates above head or under leg, march and clap, show muscles with plates, step-together-step and clap). During the chorus of the song, children place the plates on the floor, put their feet on them, and begin twisting. The plates slide easily on linoleum or carpet. After “twisting,” play different beats as the children “skate” on their plates in the play area.

**Ribbon-Stick Movement (ribbon sticks).** Children wave a ribbon stick in different ways to the music. They move the ribbon sticks through the following movements while remaining stationary:

- above
- to the side, in front of, or around the body
- at low, medium, and high levels
- in figure eights, snake, and lasso.

After stationary activities, let the children move in other ways with their ribbon sticks in general space (an open area).





## Center-based activities



**Balancing Act** (*beam, tape, paddles, beanbags*). In an extension of simple locomotor movements, children are challenged to balance on a foam balance beam. (You can use orange strips or a taped line on the floor in place of a beam). If this task is too easy for some children, give them ideas for extra balance challenges, such as walking with a beanbag on the head, backward, or with a ball on a paddle.

**Obstacle Course** (*hula hoops, rubber poly spots, foam hurdles, cones, and so on*). Children help set up a circular obstacle course with a variety of equipment. As children travel the course, reinforce directional concepts such as *over/under, around, in, and on*.

**Hula Hoop Exploration** (*hula hoops, cones*). Use cones to mark off a space where children can explore different movements with the hula hoops (jumping in and out of them or rolling them on the floor, etc.).

**Jump the Creek** (*jump ropes, fish, frogs, rubber ducks, and other water buddies*). Place two long ropes low and parallel to each other, forming a make-believe river or creek. Put the animals in the "water." Children can jump over the ropes so they don't get wet.

**Jolly Jump Up** (*targets on wall, tape/Velcro for targets, or a long handle with a target on it*). Children jump as high as they can to touch a target or to put something on the target with tape or Velcro; for example, children can jump up and place cutouts of apples on to a mural they have drawn of a tree.

**Ribbon-Stick Center** (*homemade ribbon sticks*). Create an area in which children can explore with the ribbon sticks at their own pace, practicing the patterns in the large-group activity or creating their own movements. (For instruction on making ribbon sticks, see arts and crafts integration below.)

## Classroom integration

**Stationary Self-Space Activity.** Repeat activities similar to those in large-group category (above), using smaller spots or squares as the home base.

**Postal Delivery** (*colored boxes, matching colored objects*). Scatter colored objects throughout the classroom and place the colored boxes on the perimeter. Ask children to sort the objects by color and put them in the appropriate boxes according to color. Vary the locomotor skills used.

**Balancing Act.** Set aside one area of the classroom to reinforce balancing skills. This can be as simple as a line on the floor. Children can balance beanbags or other classroom materials on different body parts, while trying to remain standing on the line.

**Arts and Crafts** (*paint stirrers, ribbon, double-sided mounting tape*). Let children create their own ribbon sticks. Provide a plain paint stirrer, two pieces of cut ribbon (2 feet in length) and two pieces of tape for each child. In other projects, children can color fish for Jump the Creek or make targets for Jolly Jump Up (see both activities above).

## Home integration

**Stationary Self-Space Activity.** Ask children to show family members what they know about self-space and directional concepts using a paper plate or linoleum square on the floor.

**Paper Plate Dancing/Skating.** Send home two paper plates for each family member with a note encouraging them to move to a song on the radio. The child can show everyone how to skate around the kitchen floor on the plates.

**Obstacle Course.** Encourage families to make their own obstacle course at home. Remind them to include items to move *over, under, on, in, around,* and so on.



Barbara Bent



Illustrations by Sandi Collins

# Activities to Enhance Children's Object Control Experiences

## Throwing/ Catching, Simple Striking

### Developmental goals

- Directional concepts—for example, *in front of*, *beside*
- Eye-hand coordination—*throwing/catching* and *striking*
- Cognitive concepts—*counting*, *body parts*, *levels*
- Simple household chores—for example, *putting clothes in the washer/dryer*

### Large-group activities



**Balloon Control** (*balloons*). Children practice controlling their balloons in the air in their own space. Appropriate challenges for young children include starting with their favored hand, then trying with their other hand; alternating hands (back-and-forth between hands); striking the balloon with different parts of the body (leg, foot, head, shoulder, elbow, and so on), striking the balloon *in front of* the body, *to the side of* body, and while moving in space. In addition, children can use paddles they made to control the balloon in their own space. If balloons are prohibited or if you are not comfortable using them, try using scarves or small beach balls.

**Partner Balloon Balance** (*balloons*). Children work in pairs sharing one balloon. Appropriate pair challenges include balancing the balloon between partners' hands (switching hands); balancing the balloon between heads, stomachs, and backs. Instead of balloons, try large foam balls or beach balls.

**Partner Balloon Striking** (*balloons*). Partners tap balloon back and forth, trying to keep it off the ground, using different body parts. Instead of balloons, use small beach balls.

**Throw and Catch to Self** (*yarn balls or small beachballs*). Children toss and catch their ball in their own personal space, responding to cues of "Watch the ball" and "Cushion like a pillow." They can toss *in front of* or *to the side of* the body. Move on to tossing and catching the ball in general space. If the children are not ready for throwing and catching, use a bouncy playground ball and have them bounce and catch.



### Center-based activities

**Doing Laundry** (*box, drawing of washer, rolled-up socks, yarn balls, beanbags; or newspaper rolls and a drawing of a house*). The children throw rolled-up socks at a drawing of a washer attached to the wall above a box. They can also use yarn balls and beanbags to throw into the box. The goal is for children to underarm throw the objects into the box from any distance they wish. A variation is to use a drawing of a house and small newspaper rolls for delivery into the box.

**Blow Out the Candles.** (*water bottles with sand or other weight in them and spout lids painted orange and red to simulate flames, box, yarn balls, beanbags*). Use a box or table as the cake and place candles (water bottles) on it. The children select from beanbags, yarn balls, or other objects and throw their object to blow out the candles (knock them over).

**Tennis Ball Cup Catch** (*tennis balls, plastic cups*). The children can practice tossing the tennis ball up and catching it in their cup. Some other options include letting the ball bounce and then catching it, rolling the ball and scooping it up, or rolling the ball back and forth with a partner.

**Hoop Shoot with Throwing** (*hula hoop, basketball rim, paddle, beanbags, yarn balls, rubber animals, and so on*). Hang a hula hoop from a basketball rim. The children can throw different objects through the hoop. Children can also balance an object on a paddle and then throw the object through the hoop.



**Hula Hoop Roll** (*hula hoops*). Children roll hula hoops and then try to throw an object through the hoop as it is moving. They also can simply toss the hoop in their hand by loosening their grip and letting it slide through their hand as they move their arm up and down. A variation is to use large foam donuts for this activity.

**Knock Down** (*items to knock down—foam blocks, colored cardboard bricks, cereal or shoe boxes, empty plastic bottles, plastic cups; items to throw—yarn balls, playground balls, beanbags, rubber animals, and so on*). Children use various objects to build a structure, then knock it down by throwing a ball, beanbag, rubber chicken, or other objects.

**Dribble** (*playground balls*). Children bounce the playground balls and catch them alone or with a partner. They can also sit down with their legs in a straddle position and roll the ball to their friends. Use balls with numbers on them to give children the option of bouncing/rolling the number of times on the ball.

#### Classroom integration

**Balloon Trains** (*balloons*). Children line up to form a train, with a balloon placed in each, stomach to back. The question is, can the train move and stay on the tracks? Instead of balloons, use larger foam balls, any size of beach ball, or hula hoops around the waist with children holding on to their own hoop and the hoop of the person in front of them.

**Striking Balloons with Paddles** (*paddles, balloons*). Children make their own paddle by gluing or taping a paint stirrer to a paper plate. They can design and color their paddle any way they wish. The paddles can be used for tapping a balloon in front and to each side of body, tapping it while moving around in general space, or back and forth with a partner. Instead of balloons, use small beach balls.

**Throwing/Catching with Paddles**. With the classroom-made paddles in hand, the children throw a beanbag up in the air and try to catch it on their paddle in self-space. They can bring the beanbag into the body as they catch ("give" with the beanbag) or work on balancing the beanbag on their paddle. Can they balance and walk? gallop? hop?

**Cup Catch** (*tennis or foam balls, cups*). In this individual activity, each child tries to catch a tennis ball in a plastic cup. A child throws the ball up in the air and catches it, or catches the ball off of a bounce, or rolls and traps the ball with a cup. Children's challenges:

- How many successful catches can you get in a row?
- Can you catch the ball at different levels?
- Can you catch the ball at your side?
- If you flip your cup over, can you balance the tennis ball while you walk across the room?

Teachers can expand this activity to *stacking* and *knocking down*. Children can build a structure of cups and knock it down by bouncing or rolling the tennis ball.

#### Home integration

**Striking with Paddles**. Challenge children and their families to think of creative ways to make paddles with materials they have at home. They can roll up newspaper to make a ball to strike with the paddles.

**Doing Laundry**. Family members invite their children to help with the laundry and have fun and physical activity tossing items one-by-one into the washer (and later, the dryer).

**Pillow Train**. See if family members can make a train by balancing pillows between each other. If this is too easy, can they keep the pillows balanced between them as they walk?

**Cup Catch**. Send home a tennis ball for each family member. Ask the children to demonstrate the different cup-catching activities with plastic cups they have at home. They can use rolling and trapping if they are doing it inside. They could also use a broom to "sweep" the ball into a cup.