

## RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

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### Physical Activity in Head Start Classrooms: How Teachers' Attitudes and Training Contribute to Program Usage

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This research to practice article summarizes the findings of a study that examined the frequency of Head Start teachers' implementation of the physical activity components of *I am Moving, I am Learning* (IM/IL). Lead teachers in a large city in the United States completed questionnaires to self-report frequency of program implementation, their general attitudes toward physical activity promotion, and their specific attitudes about implementing IM/IL. Teachers reported using movement vocabulary most frequently, followed by facilitating unstructured activities. Implementing structured activities was less frequent. Almost all teachers reported positive attitudes about promotion of physical activity in general and the IM/IL program specifically. Three variables were associated with teachers' program usage: (1) prior teacher training; (2) teachers' perceptions about program usability; and (3) teachers' prior experience leading physical activity. Many Head Start teachers described IM/IL as a feasible and acceptable physical activity promotion program. Understanding ways to promote more frequent implementation of structured active play is important.

*Keywords:* Head Start, preschool, physical activity, active play

Early childhood education programs and staff are key to the promotion of physical activity for young children. Preschool teachers are often responsible for leading physical activities in their classrooms, yet research has not sufficiently explored how teachers' attitudes relate to their preparedness and willingness to implement this type of instruction. Many Head Start programs utilize *I am Moving, I am Learning* (IM/IL), a nationally disseminated program focused on promoting healthy eating and physical activity among young children. IM/IL's physical activity goals are to increase the quantity of time children spend in moderate to vigorous physical activity during their daily routine to meet national guidelines for physical activity and to improve the

quality of structured movement experiences facilitated by teachers and adults (Finkelstein et al., 2007; Fox, Hallgren, Boller, & Turner, A, 2010). Despite widespread dissemination, there is limited information on how teachers use IM/IL and the impact that IM/IL has on children's physical activity (Fox et al., 2010). IM/IL was developed as a flexible program that would fit seamlessly into Head Start programming with each site having autonomy over implementation (Fox et al., 2010). Given this flexibility in program usage, it is important to understand how often teachers implement the program's varied activities and the extent to which teacher characteristics, such as enthusiasm, self-efficacy, preparedness, and perceptions about the program itself contribute to program implementation. The goal of this study was to understand the frequency of IM/IL implementation, teachers' general attitudes about physical activity programming, their specific beliefs about IM/IL, and how those attitudes and beliefs were related to teachers' implementation of IM/IL.

## PROJECT BACKGROUND

The authors of this study had an 8-year partnership with an agency providing Head Start programming in a large city in the United States as part of a city-wide early childhood obesity prevention initiative. Promotion of children's physical activity levels at home, school, and in the community was one focus of the partnership. IM/IL was used across the city as the primary physical activity promotion program in Head Start. The idea for this study was generated by observations of variable levels of interest in physical activity promotion among teachers.

## METHODS

Researchers developed a teacher questionnaire that measured teachers' demographic information, their IM/IL implementation, their attitudes toward promoting physical activity in preschool in general, and their attitudes toward implementing IM/IL specifically. The questionnaire was reviewed by Head Start staff and piloted with two teachers. A total of 120 lead teachers from 22 Head Start programs in the city completed the surveys during staff meetings.

## SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Teachers were mostly female (96.7%); they had an average of 13 years of experience working with preschool-age children and 9 years as a Head Start teacher. The majority of teachers reported having prior experience leading physical activities with their students (81.5%), and had prior training on IM/IL (79.3%).

The most frequently used IM/IL component was vocabulary, with teachers reporting incorporating movement vocabulary into classroom activities nearly four to five days a week on average. The second most frequent component was implementing unstructured activities, which teachers reported doing, on average, two to three times per week. In contrast, teachers reported implementing structured activities, using the *Choosy* CD, and using equipment and props were reported less often, approximately once a week.

Almost uniformly, teachers' reported strong positive attitudes about the importance and benefits of promoting physical activity with their students in general. Teachers reported positive attitudes regarding their perceptions of IM/IL as well. Teachers believed that IM/IL was an acceptable intervention, that it was compatible with their school environment, and that they understood how to implement it. Their ratings were slightly lower, but still positive, with regard to the feasibility of implementation. Teachers did not believe they needed help from other staff to implement IM/IL.

Three factors in this study predicted teachers' use of IM/IL in their classrooms. Specifically, teachers who attended an IM/IL training endorsed using IM/IL more frequently. Second, higher usability ratings were linked to more frequent IM/IL usage. Finally, teachers' prior experience leading physical activities was linked to more frequent IM/IL usage. The most important factor that predicted IM/IL usage in this study was prior IM/IL training.

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study provide preliminary data on the frequency with which Head Start teachers in a large city in the United States utilized IM/IL to promote physical activity. Overall, reported estimates for leading structured activities were less frequent than estimates for leading unstructured activities. One factor contributing to these results may be that leading unstructured activities (e.g., free play outside on the playground) require less teacher knowledge, planning, and effort than structured activities.

Another goal of this study was to explore preschool teachers' attitudes toward physical activity programming. Results revealed almost universally positive attitudes toward promoting physical activity in the classroom and perceptions about the benefits associated with physical activity. This finding departed from previous qualitative studies where themes emerged regarding some teachers reporting physical activity programming not aligning with their role (Cashmore & Jones, 2008; Derscheid et al., 2010; O'Connor & Temple, 2005). Teachers also reported positive perceptions regarding the usability of IM/IL, suggesting high intervention acceptability, good program understanding, perceptions that the program was feasible to implement and that it fit with their Head Start context. Prior IM/IL training, teachers' perceptions of program usability, and their prior experience leading physical activities were associated with higher levels of IM/IL usage. The strongest predictor of IM/IL usage was previous participation in IM/IL training.

IM/IL is designed for Head Start programs, and it allows for flexibility and autonomy over implementation. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to promote higher levels of children's physical activity in child care:

- (1) It is important to do more to help preschool teachers promote structured active play. This includes a better understanding of reasons why teachers may prefer to facilitate unstructured active play rather than leading structured active play, determining barriers specific to leading structured play, and addressing these barriers with the goal of having both structured and unstructured active play made available to children every day.
- (2) Previous IM/IL training was the most important predictor of IM/IL usage in this study. Given teacher turnover, it is important to think about ways to provide recurring trainings so that all teachers receive training as part of onboarding. Additionally, it is important to

provide ongoing training opportunities to teachers, assistant teachers, and onsite supervisors so staff can expand their knowledge, skills, and confidence in leading structured play and facilitating unstructured play with their students, and to promote norms in programs regarding the importance of both structured and unstructured play every day for young children.

- (3) This study revealed that previous experience leading physical activities contributed to how frequently teachers used IM/IL in the classroom. In addition to providing teachers with ongoing training opportunities related to active play, developing a mentorship program for new teachers or teachers with limited experience promoting physical activity may be helpful to teachers with less experience. Teachers could be paired with more experienced teachers to provide opportunities for modeling, to address challenges, and to find new activities that promote active play in child care.

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