

## Original Article

### Joy in Motion program

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#### Abstract

Joy in Motion is a nationwide physical activity and well-being program aimed at early childhood education and care (ECEC). The Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Agency for Education are responsible for its strategic management. LIKES Research Centre coordinates the program for Physical Activity and Health. The program was published in 2015 to enable every child to enjoy physical activity and get sufficient exercise every day. The free program offers concrete steps and objectives for creating a physically active learning environment and operating culture. Approximately 2,600 ECEC units, more than half of all ECEC units in Finland, participate in this project. Joy in Motion is one of the national On the Move promotion program for physical activity and physical exercise. These promote a physically active lifestyle for different age groups and demographic groups. The Joy in Motion program is based on the new Act on early childhood education and care (2018), the National core curriculum for early childhood education and care (OPH 2018) and the recommendations for physical activity in early childhood education and care (2016). Therefore, in the program, the primary operating method used in developing a physically active operating culture comprises the integration of the activities into everyday life, broad-ranging development work and doing things together. Each municipality and ECEC unit can develop an active operating culture in its own way. Adults are responsible for supporting children's well-being, health and learning so that every child's right to be physically active and play every day fulfils.

**Keywords:** National program; Early Childhood Education and Care; Implementation; Physical activity recommendations

#### Introduction

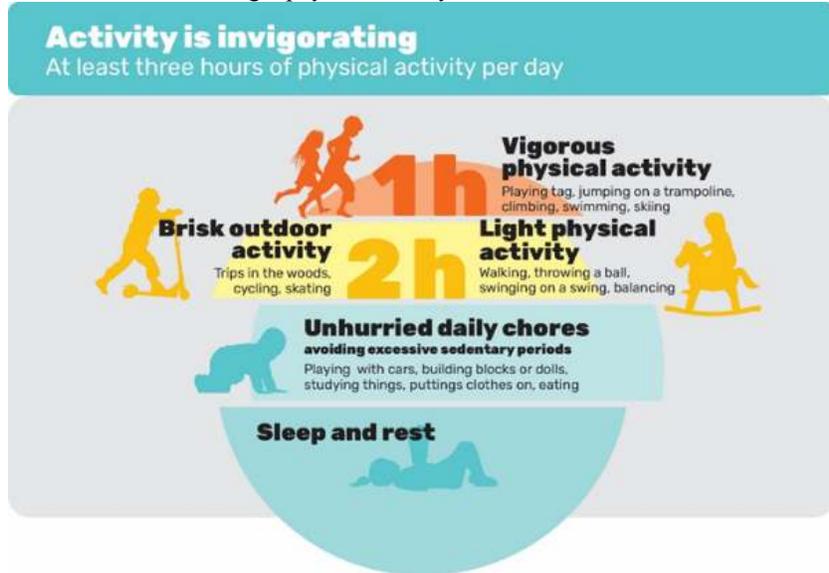
The latest research has shown that young children's physical activity does not reach the recommended level of daily physical activity (WHO 2019). Most children spend a large part of their day in an ECEC centre. Therefore, ECEC centers is a relevant example of context for promoting children's physical activity. Promoting physical activity in early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been challenging because of the multiple factors affecting children's physically active opportunities. For this reason, various aspects increasing the total amount of the daily activity of young children aged 0–6 years have been put together in the Finnish recommendations for physical activity in early childhood (2016). The implementation of the national recommendations has led to creating the national Joy in Motion physical activity and well-being program aimed at ECEC.

Physical activity in ECEC has been highlighted as one of Finland's focus areas on the Move program, which is part of the Government Programs. Finland on the Move program was published in 2015 with the objective to enable every child to enjoy physical activity and get sufficient exercise every day. The free program offers concrete steps and objectives for creating a physically active learning environment and operating culture. Approximately 2,500 ECEC units, more than half of all ECEC units in Finland, participated in this project in November 2020. In the program, the critical operating method used in developing a physically active operating culture comprises the integration of the activities into everyday routines, broad-ranging development work and doing things together. Each municipality and ECEC unit can develop an active operating culture in its own way. Adults are responsible for supporting their children's well-being, health and learning in a way that every child's right to be physically active and play every day is fulfilled. The Joy in Motion self-evaluation survey is a tool that enables the participating ECEC units to plan and evaluate their activities. The self-evaluation survey gives an idea of the existing preconditions for physical activity in ECEC units in the whole country.

#### Recommendations for physical activity: Joy, play and doing together

The Recommendations for physical activity in early childhood are based on the child's rights and the latest research data concerning the kind of physical activity that supports the child's growth, development and well-being. Consequently, according to the recommendations, children under school age should engage in physical activity for at least three hours a day. The recommended activity is diverse and of varying levels of physical strenuousness:

- One hour of brisk physical activity makes the respiratory and circulatory system work harder.
- Two hours of outdoor activities and light physical activity that exercises balance and fine motor skills.



**Figure 1.** The recommended physical activity consists of daily chores of varying intensity levels during the day.

It is natural for children to move and be active and learn things functionally in different environments, in all seasons and sometimes also by testing inspiring equipment. Adults should not, through their own actions, require children to be inactive for long periods but should break such periods down by providing meaningful ways of physical activity, listening to the children, and taking into consideration the child’s wishes strengthens their participation and makes it easier for them to find a meaning for their activities. Children learn by doing. This way, physical activity becomes a natural and integral part of the child’s day. The family has a significant role in enabling a child to adopt a physically active lifestyle. Parents should encourage and inspire the child to be active and spend time outdoors with their example. Most importantly, the whole family should engage in physical activity together; However, it should not be only the family to do this, but all of us should play an essential role in fulfilling the recommendations.

**Joy in Motion programme**



**Figure 2.** Physical activity is a natural part of the child’s day in early childhood education and care.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is to build a foundation for children's way of living that values health and well-being and promotes physical activity together with guardians. In this particular period,

education and care encourage children to be physically active in versatile ways and experience the joy of physical activity. (National core curriculum for early childhood education and care 2018 p. 48)

Those ECEC units that have adopted the Joy in Motion programme look at the child's physical activity and promoting it in new ways and make their operating culture more physically active. One of the required operating methods is to use existing good practices. Several simultaneous measures are implemented to increase activities' effectiveness, and the activities are integrated into the unit's operating culture. An operating culture supporting the physical activity of ECEC units refers to the attitudes, activities and competence of staff, and the conditions, structures, approaches and management of the ECEC unit. The physically active operating culture is developed with the entire personnel and the children.

The development work is systematic and organised, and its results are monitored and evaluated. Integrating the activities into everyday life, broad-ranging development work and doing things together is crucial to developing a physically active operating culture. Management plays an essential role in changing the operating culture. The personnel's competence will manage, and the personnel will engage in developing the activities together.

This free nationwide programme offers concrete steps and objectives for creating a physically active learning environment and operating culture. The development work's progress stands on the unit's situation, and the baby steps ideology. By registering with the programme, the unit will also join the national network, which provides support and inspiration for the unit's development work. Establishing the programme everywhere in Finland requires cooperation with regional and local partners. The Joy in Motion program is made part of the Schools on the Move programme since August 2017, in which its strategic management is under the joint responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Finnish National Agency for Education, and coordinated by LIKES Research Centre for Physical Activity and Health.

Diverse and sufficient daily physical activity and reduced sedentary time have been recorded in the National core curriculum for early childhood education and care, and the recommendations supplement the Core curriculum. ECEC providers must prepare the local curricula for early childhood education based on the National core curriculum for early childhood education and care. The local curricula must consider the natural part played by physical activity in the operating culture and everyday pedagogy of ECEC. The development work in the Joy in Motion programme constitutes three stages, and ECEC units document their development work in the following stages:

In the FAMILIARISE YOURSELF stage, the development work starts by taking a small step. Units encourage to inspire and commit the entire work community to participate in the development work. A Baby steps form is available to support the definition, planning and evaluation of the development steps. In the Familiarize yourself stage, the units also conduct a self-evaluation survey on promoting physical activity in ECEC.

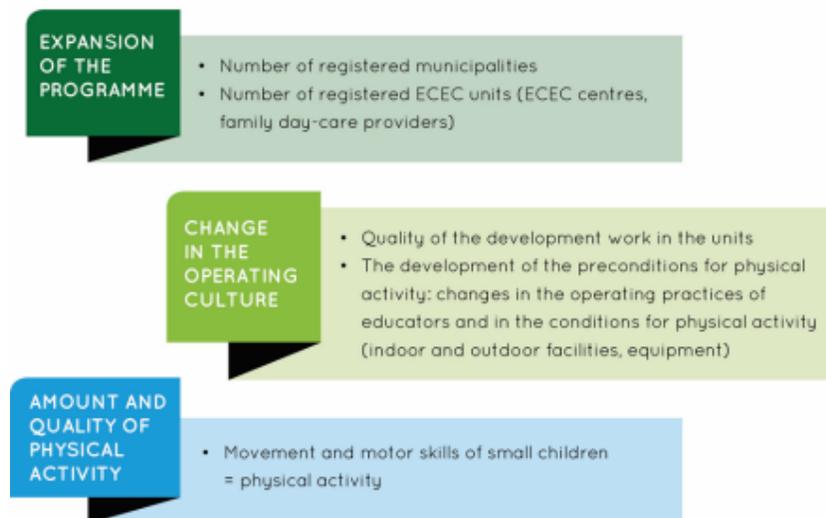
The self-evaluation helps ECEC units choose the areas they need to develop. If the self-evaluation is conducted once a year, the unit's results can be used in its yearly planning and follow the development of its activities. The DEVELOP stage is based on the nine main points of the recommendations for physical activity in early childhood. Based on the self-evaluation and the discussions conducted in the unit, each unit selects its development areas from the nine main points in the recommendations. In addition to the recommendations, separate handbooks are available for ECEC educators, administration and municipal actors to support the development work. The website's Ideas section also offers concrete tips for physical activity in all the development areas. In this stage, units are encouraged to share their ideas and good practices, which can be commented on and improved for the unit's use on the program platform.

The unit reflects on the development work it has conducted in the MAKE VISIBLE stage and how its operating culture has changed. The units report the measures they have taken and the changes that have taken place in their unit on the web platform. Best practices are compiled as support material for other units to use, with the aim to encourage parents and other ECEC units to make their excellent work detectable.

The programme monitors the Joy in Motion programme's current state assessment is a tool developed for ECEC units for the self-evaluation and development of the activities. The current state assessment gives an idea of the preconditions for physical activity. This information helps to structure the programme's progress in line with the objectives. The national and regional results of the current state assessment are view able on a virtual database.

Objectives by 2024:

- National level: To engage all ECEC providers in the programme (%).
- ECEC provider level: To promote the development of an operating culture that has a favourable attitude to physical activity and fosters well-being and learning in all ECEC units.
- Children have the right and need to be physically active every day. The recommended amount of at least three hours of daily physical activity for children consists of physical activity of diverse levels of strenuousness (Joy, play and doing together. Recommendations for physical activity in early childhood. Publications of the Ministry of Education and Culture 2016:21)



**Figure 3.** The Joy in Motion programme impacts can be evaluated at different levels.

### Implementing Joy in Motion programme in Vilske day care-centre

Authors: ECEC teachers Henna Heinonen and Kalervo Valli.

Vilske is a private daycare centre in Turku. It was established in 2015 to respond to the need to change and develop early childhood education and care (ECEC) and create new operating models.

Two entrepreneurs lead Vilske, ECEC teachers Henna Heinonen and Kalervo Valli, who have both had a long career in ECEC and have particular expertise in functional learning, physical activity in ECEC and outdoor activities. Vilske has 130 children aged between 1 and 6 years, in which pre-primary education takes place outdoors in a nature group. The number of employees is 25.

### Conclusion

#### Operating principles

At Vilske, the starting point is the training of our staff. We have an extraordinary way of working, and our staff need to be trained for it. We are developing a new kind of operating culture, and we hope our work will always be incomplete.

Our motto is “A rolling stone gathers no moss”, and the cornerstone of our ideology is an understanding that our operating culture should keep on developing and continue to get better and work better. Our activities respond to today's challenges, and we keep up with the developments, observing the new curriculum for early childhood education and care. Our staff are keen to develop themselves professionally. We offer them training opportunities such as the Lions Quest training and sports playschool instructor training. Both the children and adults grow holistically at Vilske

Planning and implementation always start with observing the children. We observe them comprehensively in all daily activities. The observations are recorded in the child's individual early childhood education plan to guide the pedagogical activities' planning. The team of teachers draws up individual plans. The team regularly meets the pedagogy and the children's knowledge and skills. We also have our own ECEC special needs teacher, whose expertise is available to all children and adults.

All activities at Vilske are supported by experiential and functional learning and experiences built through children's participation. We listen to the children and see them holistically.

Our projects are the product of children's ideas, their world and their interests. The staff know the guiding principles, ensuring that they have a framework and a rhythm and provide a pedagogical view. In our monthly pedagogical meeting, we share the children's ideas, initiate projects and monitor their progress. Play and nature are a mainly essential part of our projects.

This year, the shared theme at Vilske is the sea, and emotional skills give a vital role again.

The Joy in Motion programme has been integrated into our daily work to remind us about physical activity's importance. The children at Vilske participate in the weekly sports playschool, which guarantees that they learn diverse fundamental motor skills. At Vilske, the pre-primary-age children (6-year-olds) and the 5-year-olds learn to swim in the swimming classed organised every autumn. This year, their organisation depends on the currently prevailing emergency conditions.

COVID-19 had considerable impacts on our operation, especially when the pandemic began. In the beginning, parents kept their children at home and worked remotely, which led to a considerable fall in the number of children. However, the situation rapidly levelled out within a few weeks, where a few families could keep their children at home throughout the state of emergency, but the number of children already returned to

near normal in May. Of course, there were also many absences as children could not be brought to day care or pre-primary education if they had even the slightest symptoms.

In line with the national guidelines and restrictions, we moved most of the activities outdoors, which was reasonably easy for us because nature and the outdoors are emphasised in our activities already. A high-quality learning environment can also be created outdoors. As our activities are based on functional and experiential learning, we are not reliant on the classroom/group facilities but can organise high-quality activities anywhere we want to. The children and our staff are well equipped for outdoor activities, and the staff have the skills, knowledge and equipment required to provide holistic teaching regardless of whether it takes place indoors or outdoors.

Now that winter is coming and the weather is getting colder and more unsettled, we will increase our indoor facilities in small groups, but most of our activities will continue outdoors.

Parents actively support this operating model, although they are currently not allowed inside the day care centre at all; in this case, we receive the children outdoors and, at the end of the session, they pick them up outdoors. Most parents have found this a good solution as it makes the morning routines running much quicker.

By working together, we will overcome this challenge too, and good practices are likely to remain in use also in the future when we return to normal or a new normal.

**Reference:**

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Joy in Motion programme document 2019

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