Physical Activity in the Early Years

An investigation into the knowledge of AIT third year Childcare Management students

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Childcare Management to Athlone Institute of Technology
Declaration of Ownership

I declare that this project is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Childcare Management in Athlone Institute of Technology. It is entirely the work of the author and has not been submitted to any other University, Institute or college, or for any other academic award in this Institute. I further declare that, where reference is not given in the text, that it is entirely my own work.

Signed: ___________________   Date: __________________

Michelle Loonam     April 16th 2013
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Abstract

This research explores Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) Childcare Management students’ awareness of the role of the childcare practitioner in promoting physical activity in the early years’ settings and examines their knowledge of physical activity for preschool children. A quantitative method was used to collect data. The results demonstrate a lack of knowledge of physical activity for preschool children amongst the childcare students. These results are perturbing for future practice indicating that the childcare practitioner may be unable to ensure adequate physical activity levels for preschool children.
Chapter One:

*Introduction*
Chapter 1: Introduction

The aim of this research project is to investigate Athlone Institute of Technology 3rd year Childcare Management students’ knowledge of physical activity for preschool children. The main objectives are to examine Childcare Management students’ understanding of physical activity requirements for preschool children and to explore Childcare Management students’ awareness of the role of practitioners in early years’ settings in promoting physical activity for preschool children.

Chapter two reviews relevant literature from 2002-2013 and a justification for this research is provided. In chapter three the research methodology is discussed, detailing that a questionnaire was used as the data gathering instrument. The results are detailed in section four in narrative and graphical form. The results are discussed in section five, with reference to the literature in chapter two. Finally, the research project is concluded and recommendations for practice and future research are made.
Chapter 2

*Literature review*
Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction
This chapter reviews current literature on physical activity (PA) in the early years’ sector and the role early years’ providers play in promoting PA for preschool children.

It will provide a definition of PA, exploring how PA habits have changed over time, the importance of PA to the preschool child, and guidelines for PA in the early years. It will also examine the influence early years’ settings, specifically; the practitioners, the environment, policies, and curriculum, have on PA for a preschool child. The review will close with an exposition of the need for this research.

For the purposes of this review, a preschool child is defined as any child under 6 years of age, who is not attending primary school or equivalent (Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006).

2.1.2. Definition
“Physical activity is bodily movement produced by the skeletal muscles that expends energy beyond resting levels.” (Ward, Saunders & Pate 2007, p4)

2.2 History: The Move to Sedentary Lifestyles
It is widely recognised that previous generations were much more active than today and studies have found that many adults and children are not meeting their daily requirements for physical activity (Lavin, Matcalfe, & Higgins 2011; Clerkin, Walsh, & Nic Gabhainn, 2002). A study by Clerkin et al., (2002) which surveyed 8,424 Irish children about their exercise habits, found the percentage of children who report exercising four or more times a week decreased from 53.5% in 1998 to 47% in 2002. This decrease coincides with a significant increase in childhood obesity in the last number of years (Lavin et al., 2011; Murrin 2013).

As obesity levels increase so do its associated comorbidities, including; cardiovascular diseases, Type 2 diabetes, and psychological problems (Murrin 2013; Brown, Pfeiffer, McIver, Dowda, Addy & Pate, 2009a). However, it is widely accepted that regular PA and a healthy balanced diet, can help combat obesity while also contributing other health benefits (WHO, 2012).

2.3 Benefits of Physical Activity
The official website for promoting PA in Ireland ‘Get Ireland Active’ (2013) highlights the benefits of physical activity to both adults and children, to include, inter alia; having a stronger heart, lungs and bones, preventing chronic disease, reducing weight, and reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression. Countries worldwide have begun to promote PA, particularly for young children, as early intervention is recognised as being important in developing future habits (WHO, 2010).
Strong, Malina, Blimkie, Daniels, Dishman, Gutin, Hergenroeder, Must, Nixon, Pivarnik, Rowland, Trost, & Trudeau (2005) states that it is important to begin with the preschool child when promoting PA, in the hope that it will lay the foundations for future healthy lifestyles. A study by Temple and O’Connor (2003) exploring childcare practitioners’ feelings towards PA for preschool children found that they had limited knowledge about the importance of PA to a preschool child’s development, but did recognise its importance for developing future patterns.

2.4 Guidelines for the Early Years

It is recommended, both nationally and internationally, that children (aged 2-8) undertake sixty minutes of PA daily (Get Ireland Active, 2013; Janssen & LeBlanc, 2010; WHO, 2012). Get Ireland Active (2013) recommends this activity should include moderate to vigorous physical activity. PA for children of moderate intensity includes: roller-blading, dancing, bicycle riding, and brisk walking. PA of vigorous intensity for children includes: Active games such as tag and skipping, running, and sports such as Gaelic football and swimming (Get Active Ireland, 2013).

2.5 Influence of the Early Years’ Setting

It is acknowledged that early years’ settings are important contexts for promoting PA among preschool aged children, considering the length of time a child spends in such settings and the influence these settings can have on a child’s life (Edwards & Tsouros 2006). While Siolta (The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, 2006) Principles and Standards advocate a pedagogical approach that incorporates ‘the inseparable nature of care and education’ (2006, p.9), evidence suggests that children are not as active as they should be during their time in preschools (Pate, McIver, Dowda, Brown & Addy., 2008).

Cross-culturally, Pate et al., (2008) in their observational study of 493 children in US preschools, found that children were sedentary 80% of the time observed and only engaged in moderate to vigorous PA 3% of the time. These statistics, as suggested by Pate and colleagues (2011), emphasise the importance of early years’ services in promoting PA for preschool children.

2.5.1 Early Years’ Practitioners

Many researchers have highlighted the need for early years’ practitioners to be trained on physical education for the early years (Kelly, 2013; Early Childhood Ireland, 2013; Brown et al., 2009a).

Brown, Smith Googe, McIver, Rathel (2009b) directly observed 476 US children in their preschool settings with an aim to determine social and environmental events and contextual conditions associated with PA. They found the preschool child’s moderate to vigorous PA increased when there was adult involvement and encouragement of PA sessions (Brown et
al., 2009b). The study concluded that there is a need for early childhood educators to become better informed about their role in promoting PA in the early years and more involved in preschool children’s general physical well-being (Brown et al., 2009b). McWilliams, Ball, Benjamin, Hales, Vaughn, & Ward (2009) agree, stating that, in addition to staff training it is important to provide PA training to parents. This idea is supported by Síolta (2006), which highlights the importance of information sharing from practitioner to parent, and providing opportunities for parents to be involved in activities within the setting.

2.5.2 The Environment

Research supports the idea that a quality preschool environment is linked to a child’s PA (Timmons, Naylor & Pfeiffer, 2007). McWilliam et al., (2009) agree, stating quality indoor and outdoor environments afford children greater amounts of PA and a stimulating learning environment. Similarly, Ouvry (2003, cited in Síolta Research Digests (2007)) identifies the following five reasons why children should have access to outdoor play: movement, potential health benefits, risky play, improved behaviour and sensory benefits.

However, Duffy (2007, p217) argues “we find ourselves in a position where outdoor play has become devalued and under threat from societal and attitudinal changes. Narrow one-dimensional views that box learning environments into indoor classrooms, fail to recognise the potential and necessity of holistic outdoor learning environments for young children.”

Brown et al., (2009b) agree, asserting that providers need to make sufficient use of both indoor and outdoor space, as well as ensuring the availability of appropriate materials in order to maximise PA.

2.5.3 Physical Activity Policy

Síolta Research Digests (2007) highlight the importance of writing “clearly communicated policies and procedures” and state that this “...is what provides a setting with an effective point from which to organise and manage resources and, thereby, guide and determine practice.” Brown and colleagues (2009b) agree, affirming that there is a need for childhood practitioners to develop and implement policies and practices on all areas of a child’s development, including motor development and PA.

Furthermore, Brown (2006, cited in Brown et al., 2009b p.143 ) asserted, “If we truly believe in working with the ‘whole child,’ then we ought to be proactive about how we implement preschool policies and practices related to childrens’ physical activity, particularly higher rates of moderate to vigorous physical activity and lower rates of sedentary behaviour.”
2.5.4 The Early Years’ Curriculum
Aistear (2009, p22) the Irish Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, explicitly states the early years’ practitioner should include “physical activities in the daily routine to help build children’s fitness,” as part of developing their overall physical wellbeing. In addition, Siolta (2006) encourages practitioners to consider PA as part of the settings curriculum on a daily basis.

Brown et al., (2009b) agree, stating that practitioners need to integrate health related activities, such as PA, throughout the preschool day. However, both studies by Brown and colleagues (2009 a & b), have shown how early years’ educators can sometimes assign less importance to PA than other areas of a preschool child’s development, such as school readiness skills.

2.6 Conclusion
It is clear that PA habits have changed significantly in recent years. Promotion of PA, especially in the early years, in order to prevent the development of obesity and associated conditions is now more important than ever. The early years’ setting has been shown to play a central role in promoting PA at a young age, which leads to the development of healthy life-long PA habits. It is clear that well communicated guidelines for PA for preschool children are warranted in early years’ settings. Evidence supports the contribution of early years’ practitioners, the preschool environment, its policies and curriculum in the promotion of PA in the early years’ setting.

To the best of the author’s knowledge, there has been no research into childcare students’ knowledge of PA for preschool children and their awareness of the role of the early years’ setting in promoting PA. There is, therefore, a great need for research to be conducted in this area in order to address the significant hiatus that currently exists in the literature. It is vital that childcare students, our potential future childcare practitioners, are knowledgeable and aware of the important role they play in the promotion of PA among preschool children.
Chapter 3

Methodology
Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction
This chapter outlines the method considered most appropriate for gathering data required to satisfy the objectives. It describes procedures used to gather data, as well as considering the participants, ethical issues, and the proposed method of data analysis.

3.2 Research Method
The main methodological approaches can be split into two categories; quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative methodology aims to measure, quantify, or find the extent of a phenomenon, using a structured approach where all aspects of the research are decided before data collection (Mukherji & Albon 2010). In contrast, Mukherji & Albon (2010) state that qualitative methodology is concerned with describing experiences, emphasising meaning and exploring the nature of an issue, using an unstructured approach where aspects of the research may change in response to events as they occur.

The aim of this research is to investigate AIT third year Childcare Management students’ knowledge of PA for preschool children. This research will adopt a quantitative method as this will allow the researcher to identify the extent of this knowledge, enabling this information to potentially be generalised (Mukherji & Albon 2010).

The design of the questionnaire was aligned to the objectives of the study. Questions 1-5 gather general information on the participants, which is necessary to analyse the information correctly. Questions 6-11 attempt to satisfy objective one while questions 12-17 attempt to fulfil objective two. Both open and closed questions were used to gather rich data (Mukherji & Albon 2010).

3.3 Participants
A total of twenty third year BA Childcare Management students from AIT participated in this study. This group was chosen as they are assumed to have more knowledge of the early years’ sector and more experience of practice placement than first-or second-year childcare students, therefore were considered most appropriate to satisfy the aforementioned aims and objectives.

3.4 Process and Procedure
A pilot study was conducted to identify potential problems associated with the questionnaire. This involved administering the questionnaire to 5 fourth year Childcare Management students in order to address clarity of questions and usefulness of potential data as well as to ensure bias was limited as much as possible. Results of this pilot study (not presented here) indicated that no changes were necessary.
Therefore, arrangements were made to administer the final draft of the questionnaire to the twenty third year Childcare Management students during their class time, with prior permission sought from their lecturer. The questionnaires were distributed by the author and collected immediately upon completion.

3.5 Ethical Considerations
The participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity both in the cover letter (appendix 1) and verbally by the author before the questionnaires were distributed. Written, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any point in the future and that the data would be destroyed on final completion of the research project.

3.6 Data Analysis
The responses were analysed statistically and results are illustrated using graphs generated by Microsoft Excel. Use of graphical illustrations was limited to results containing numerous variables, which required further explanation visually in order to enhance understanding.
Chapter 4

Results
Chapter 4 Results

4.1 Introduction
This chapter presents an analysis of the results. The results are presented in graphical and narrative form and in line with the main objectives of the study.

4.2 Results

4.2.1 Background Information
All respondents were female. The most prevalent age group was 21-24 years (75%), followed by 17-20 years (20%) and 25-30 years (5%).

Question 3: Weekly Physical Activity Habits
As can be seen in Figure 1, 80% of respondents undertook PA at least once per week, with the remaining 20% stating they never undertake PA. 55% of participants undertook PA 2-3 times a week, 15% once a week, while the remaining 10% were spread equally between 4-5 times and 5 times or more per week.

Figure 1: Personal Weekly Physical Activity Habits

![Physical Activity Habits](chart.png)
**Question 4: The Influence of Personal Physical Activity Habits on Children**

This question sought to investigate whether participants’ own PA habits influenced the PA habits of children. 55% of respondents answered yes, while 45% answered no. Of those that answered yes, they stated that if a person is regularly active themselves they are more likely to encourage children to be physically active and emphasised the influence of practitioners modelling PA. Of those that answered no, they state, despite not exercising themselves, they nonetheless see its importance for children and would encourage them to be active.

**Question 5: Physical Activity Training**

95% of respondents have not received any form of PA training for early years’ children. Only one respondent received training in the form of The Búntas Programme.

**4.2.2 Objective 1: To examine Childcare Management students’ understanding of physical activity requirements for preschool children.**

**Question 6: Necessity of Physical Activity Training**

Figure 2 illustrates the vast majority of respondents (90%) answered that it was very necessary/or necessary for early years’ practitioners to receive some form of PA training for preschool children. 10% felt it was unnecessary/or very unnecessary.

**Figure 2: The Necessity of Physical Activity Training for Practitioners**
**Question 7: Importance of Physical Activity**

All respondents affirmed the importance of PA for preschool children.

**Question 8: Benefits of Physical Activity to Preschool Children**

This question was an open question to ascertain students’ knowledge of the benefits of PA to preschool children. All answers stated were grouped into the benefits listed in figure 3 below. 40% answered that PA prevents obesity and increases the child’s fitness levels. 35% stated that PA benefits a child’s ‘general health’ and 25% mentioned it ensures positive lifelong habits. Respondents also included heart health and positive overall development with 10% and 15% respectively mentioning these as benefits. One person (5%) stated a benefit of PA to be the increase in vitamin D levels, while 15% of respondents answered “I don’t know.”

**Figure 3: The Benefits of Physical Activity to Young Children**

![Benefits of Physical Activity](chart.png)
**Question 9: Recommended Daily Physical Activity Requirement**

Figure 4 below illustrates participants’ responses. Only 20% chose the correct answer, (60 minutes). Thirty percent were unaware of the recommended requirement and half of all respondents (50%) chose incorrectly, with the majority choosing 30 minutes.

**Figure 4: Knowledge of Preschool Children's Daily Physical Activity Requirements**

![Chart showing daily physical activity requirement](chart.png)

**Question 10: Recommended Intensity of Physical Activity**

The majority of respondents (65%) answered either incorrectly (25% said low intensity) or did not know (40%). Only 35% answered correctly, choosing moderate to vigorous intensity.

**Question 11: Knowledge of Moderate Physical Activity Levels**

Figure 5 below indicates respondents’ knowledge of what constitutes moderate intensity PA for preschool children. Participants could select a number of responses. The majority of respondents chose low intensity activities as moderate intensity, for example, 80% and 75%
of responses indicated playground activities and hopscotch respectively as being moderate intensity, while 45% and 35% indicated dance and running being of moderate intensity.

Figure 5 illustrates the activities which were incorrect (low intensity activities; highlighted red) were selected most commonly by respondents to be moderate intensity physical activities.

**Figure 5: Knowledge of Moderate Physical Activity Levels**

![Figure 5: Knowledge of Moderate Physical Activity Levels](image)

### 4.2.3 Objective 2: To explore Childcare Management students’ awareness of the role of practitioners in early years’ settings in promoting physical activity for preschool children

**Question 12: Responsibility for Physical Activity Promotion**

The results show 100% of respondents believed the early years’ practitioner held the most responsibility for PA promotion, while 80% suggested the child’s parent(s) had responsibility. Respondents believed that the government held the least responsibility for PA promotion for preschool children with just over half (55%) agreeing.
Question 13: Importance of Physical Activity Promotion in the Preschool Setting

Figure 6 below shows how 100% of respondents believed playing outdoors was important/very important for PA promotion. All respondents highlighted that introducing physical activity into the curriculum would be an important/very important promotional measure.

85% were in agreement that introducing a physical activity policy was important/very important to promote PA. 20% disagreed, considering such a policy to be unimportant to promote PA. 20% deem an adult’s involvement in PA sessions to be unimportant as a means of promoting PA, while 80% considered this to be important/very important.

Figure 6: Opinions on Physical Activity Promotional Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Not important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Playing outdoors regularly</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introducing physical activity into the curriculum everyday</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduce a Physical Activity Policy</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure adult involvement in physical activity sessions</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 14: Physical Activity Policy

This was an open question to ascertain students’ knowledge of what is detailed in a Physical Activity Policy. All respondents answered ‘I don’t know’.

Question 15: Outdoor play: Experiences from placement

Participants could choose one of the following options: everyday, regardless of the weather, only on days when the weather was good (mild, sunny), once a week, or never.

The information in figure 7 demonstrates that 20% of respondents observed children playing outdoors daily in all weather types. The most common observation (55%) of outdoor play was when the weather was mild. Ten percent of respondents observed outdoor play only once a week, while 15% stated that they never observed children playing outdoors.
Question 16: Practitioners Working with Parents

The results show 100% of respondents indicated benefits of practitioners and parents working in partnership to influence parents’ understanding of the importance of PA for their child’s health. Over a third (35%) further indicated practitioners working with parents promoted the replication of physical activities in the home environment and 15% of respondents stated that it increased parents’ awareness of the importance and benefits of PA. Additionally, 10% of respondents stated this would increase the child’s PA levels. 5% believed that it would build positive partnerships between parents and practitioners, while 30% did not elaborate.

Figure 8: Practitioners Working with Parents
**Question 17: Importance of PA in relation to other developmental areas**

Figure 9 illustrates the majority of respondents considered PA to be as important as/more important than other areas of development. 10% prioritised cognitive and language skills while 15% and 20% respectively indicated academic skills and social/emotional skills to be more important.

**Figure 9: Physical Activity in Relation to Other Developmental Areas**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of development</th>
<th>Not as important</th>
<th>As important</th>
<th>More important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic skills/ School readiness</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive/intellectual skills</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language skills</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/emotional skills</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**4.3 Conclusion**

This chapter presented the results in graphical and narrative form, in line with the objectives of the study. The results under objective one illustrated a clear lack of knowledge of physical activity guidelines for preschool children amongst the students. Despite this, under objective two there was a reasonable understanding of the importance of the early years’ setting in promoting physical activity for preschool children, although there was a poor understanding of specific promotional measures. These results will be discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 5

Discussion
Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction
This chapter discusses the significance of the findings of this research. The findings will be analysed in terms of their relevance to the objectives of the study and related to the research findings of others, as discussed in the literature review.

5.2 General Information
In question 3, 80% of respondents undertook some form of PA weekly. Interestingly, in question 4, 45% of respondents believed their PA habits do not influence the children with whom they work. While we are aware of the importance of adults being positive role models for children (Síolta 2006), it is unclear whether personal habits, such as PA habits, have a direct influence on these children. Further research in this area is recommended.

5.3 Objective 1: To examine Childcare Management students’ understanding of physical activity requirements for preschool children.
Results from question 5 revealed the majority of respondents (95%) received no training in the area of PA for preschool children. This is worrying considering Brown et al., (2009b) emphasised the importance of PA training for childcare practitioners. Nonetheless, in question 6, 90% of respondents felt such training is necessary when working with preschool children. It is reasonable to suggest that better education and training should be provided to childcare students on PA for preschool children, perhaps as a module as part of their early years’ education training.

While 100% of respondents acknowledged the importance of PA to a child’s life (question 7), their knowledge of the actual benefits it brings was somewhat vague. Benefits such as the prevention of obesity, increasing fitness levels, heart health, and positive lifelong habits were mentioned by many respondents in question 8, which concur with the benefits discussed in the literature review (Get Ireland Active, 2013).

However, with 15% answering ‘I don’t know’, vague answers, such as “improves general health,” being mentioned by 35%, and all respondents failing to mention such benefits as the prevention of chronic disease, and the reduction of symptoms of anxiety and depression, it might suggest the students have a limited knowledge of the actual benefits PA provides to young children. These results are similar to the study by Temple & O’Connor (2003) who found that childcare practitioners seemed unaware of certain benefits of PA.

Worryingly, in question 9 only 20% of respondents were aware of the recommended PA requirement for preschool children (60 minutes (Get Ireland Active 2013)), with only 35%
being aware of the recommended intensity level for such PA (moderate to vigorous (Get Ireland Active 2013)) and the majority not knowing the type of activities which constitute moderate-vigorous levels of PA in questions 10 and 11, as mentioned by Get Ireland Active (2013). The childcare students’ lack of knowledge of the guidelines for PA for preschool children further indicates the need for better education in this area.

5.4 Objective 2: To explore Childcare Management students’ awareness of the role of practitioners in early years’ settings in promoting physical activity for preschool children.

Findings from question 12 demonstrate that all respondents consider the childcare practitioner to be responsible for the promotion of PA for preschool children. This is a positive result considering research regards early years’ services to be important contexts for promoting PA among preschool aged children (Brown et al, 2009).

In question 15, 20% of respondents did not observe outdoor play during placement. Nevertheless, all participants acknowledge its importance for promoting PA in a preschool setting in question 13. These results support the research by McWilliams et al., (2009) and Ouvry (2003, see Síolta Research Digests (2007)), which emphasised the value of outdoor play for young children. According to the results of this study, lack of use of outdoor play in Irish preschool settings is significant, which is a worrying result. Further research is warranted into why outdoor spaces/activities are underused in early years’ settings. Moreover, large scale research is warranted to elucidate whether or not Irish early years’ settings are providing children with sufficient outdoor time.

Interestingly, all respondents favoured the introduction of PA into the daily preschool curriculum as a valuable means of promotion. This result is encouraging as both Síolta (2006) and Aistear (2009) and research studies (Brown et al., 2009b) recommend that PA be introduced as part of a settings’ daily curriculum.

Results from question 14 showed that all respondents were unaware of what is detailed in a Physical Activity Policy. This is interesting considering the majority (85%) of respondents in question 13 regarded the introduction of a Physical Activity Policy as important/very important in promoting PA for preschool children. This is significant considering the value placed on a Physical Activity Policy in a preschool setting as identified by Brown et al., (2009b). This once more suggests the need for our future childcare practitioners to be educated on PA for preschool children.

Findings from question 13 also demonstrated that the majority (80%) of respondents believed adult involvement was important/very important in PA sessions. This result is similar to that of Temple and O’Connor (2003), who also found that the majority of practitioners in their study recognised the value of adult involvement to promote PA. Nevertheless, the remaining minority of respondents regarded this measure as unimportant for PA promotion. This is worrying considering Brown and colleagues (2009b) attributed considerable importance to staff involvement in PA sessions, stating that it significantly increased a child’s moderate to
vigorous PA. Brown et al., (2009b) recommend a balance between child-and adult-directed PA sessions. This may imply a need for further education to raise childcare practitioners’ awareness of these promotional opportunities.

In response to question 16, all respondents believed it would be beneficial for the childcare practitioner to work with parents to influence their understanding of the importance of PA in their child’s life. This result is encouraging, as research has highlighted the value of information sharing from practitioner to parent (McWilliams et al., 2009; Síolta 2006).

It is encouraging to note the majority of respondents in question 17 believed PA to be as important as/more important than academic, cognitive, language and social and emotional skills. This conflicts with the results of Brown and colleagues (2009 a & b) who found that educators can sometimes assign less importance to PA than other areas of a preschool child’s development, such as academic skills.

Surprisingly, 20% of respondents considered PA to be more important than the development of a child’s social and emotional skills. This shows a lack of knowledge among participants, as social and emotional skills play a vital role in the child’s overall development (Aistear 2009). Perhaps, a greater focus is needed in education to ensure the practitioner is taking a pedagogical approach to a child’s learning and development, adapting a curriculum which takes a ‘whole child’ perspective, as stated in Síolta (2006).

5.5 Evaluation of Data Collection Method

The questionnaire was a very effective data gathering tool for this research. It allowed for the collection of a wide range of information in the area of PA from specific respondents, which satisfied the objectives of the study. This provided a good indication of the general knowledge of the childcare management students in AIT on PA for preschool children. It seems reasonable to suggest that the results could be generalised to the larger childcare student population. It was a cost-effective and less time consuming method, which was advantageous. Students were more likely to participate when it only took a few minutes to complete.

A limitation of this study is that the researcher was only permitted to survey college students and could not gather information from outside the college. Secondly, only 20 questionnaires were administered, reducing the sample size. Gender bias exists in these data as the entire cohort of participants was female. However, as the majority of childcare students tend to be female, this could be said to represent, to some degree, the larger childcare student population. While the honesty of the respondents cannot be guaranteed, it can be assumed that all replied honestly as they participated willingly and all questionnaires were fully completed. Nevertheless, these limitations did not detract from the quality of the information gathered and overall it was an effective method of data collection.
Chapter 6

Recommendations
Chapter 6: Recommendations

This dissertation has highlighted a need for further research in this area, as well as implications for practice.

Recommendations for practice

There is a considerable need for more training and education for childcare students in the area of physical activity for preschool children. Specifically students should be educated on:

- the benefits of physical activity for the early years
- the guidelines for physical activity for preschool children
- introducing a physical activity policy
- strategies for physical activity promotion
- the importance of taking a pedagogical approach to early years’ education and care, whereby all aspects of children’s education and care are reflected and expressed in the early years’ programmes (Síolta, 2006).

Recommendations for further research

This research has begun to fill a gap that exists in the current literature. However, as with every research project, a need for further research in the area of physical activity for preschool children in Ireland has been identified, considering the lack of knowledge among the AIT Childcare Management students. Considering the entire cohort of respondents was female, additional research into whether a concerted drive to promote PA would encourage male students into the early years’ profession, thus providing not only a gender balance of practitioners but also diversity of approaches to PA and indeed greater focus on PA. Further research examining prospective and current childcare practitioners’ knowledge of physical activity in early years’ settings is necessary. Specifically, research should focus on the provision of sufficient opportunity for outdoor play in Irish preschool settings. The opportunity may be there, but the impetus to use it may not.
Chapter 7

Conclusion
Chapter 7: Conclusion

The aim of this research project was to investigate AIT Childcare Management students’ awareness of the role of practitioners in promoting PA in the early years and as such, begin to address the current gap in the literature in this area. The results demonstrated a significant lack of knowledge on PA for preschool children amongst these childcare students. Of particular significance is the lack of knowledge of the recommended PA guidelines for preschool children. If our future childcare practitioners are unaware of such guidelines, there is a risk that the children in their care will not be meeting their recommended PA levels, which research shows has direct implications for their present and future physical and psychological health.

The lack of awareness about strategies for PA promotion is another significant find from this research. Both national and international research emphasise the importance of the role of childcare practitioners in promoting PA. These findings highlight the substantial need for PA education for childcare students to ensure they are fully equipped to promote PA in the preschool settings in which they may work.
List of References
Reference List


Appendix
Appendix 1: Cover Letter

My name is Michelle Loonam and I am a fourth year student in BA (Hons) in Childcare Management at Athlone Institute of Technology. I am distributing this questionnaire to 20 third year Childcare Management students in the institute for the purposes of the mini project I have to complete as part of my course. The project is a study about Childcare students’ knowledge and awareness of the role of the early year’s setting in promoting physical activity for preschool children.

Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary. You do not have to fill out the questionnaire if you don’t want to. It should only take a few minutes to fill out.

Your responses to the questionnaire will remain anonymous and confidential. You do not have to put your name on the questionnaire and the responses will be used for the purposes of this assignment only. The data collected will be destroyed on final completion of this research project.

If you have any questions just ask me, I will gladly answer them.

If you choose to fill it out, thank you! I really appreciate your help.

Thanks for your time,

Michelle Loonam

I hereby agree to take part in the research conducted by Michelle Loonam on Physical Activity in the Early Years. The research is conducted as part of the degree in Childcare Management in Athlone Institute of Technology.

Signed: __________________________

Print Name: ______________________________
Appendix 2

Questionnaire

Physical Activity in the Early Years

1. Are you male/female?

2. How old are you? Circle one

   17-20 years  21-24 years  25-30 years  30 or more years

3. About how often in a typical week are you physically active for 30 minutes or more at any one time? This can include
   - walking/jogging
   - going to the gym
   - Taking part in sport activities of any kind

Tick one:

Never  Once  2-3 times per week  4-5 times per week  More than 5 times per week

4. Do you consider that your personal physical activity habits influence your approach to physical activity with preschool children?

   Yes  No

Please explain your answer

___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

5. What kind of training on the area of physical activity for children have you received? Tick one.

Physical activity (or similar) module in college

The Búntas Programme training

None

Other, please state
6. To what extent do you consider it necessary that early years’ practitioners receive training/education on physical activity for preschool children? *Tick one of the boxes.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very necessary</th>
<th>Necessary</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Unnecessary</th>
<th>Very unnecessary</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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</table>

7. Indicate, using the scale below, how important you consider physical activity to be for a preschool child’s life. *Circle one.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>Important</td>
<td>I don’t know</td>
<td>Not very important</td>
<td>Not important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. What are the benefits of physical activity to preschool children?

___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

9. What is the recommended daily physical activity requirement for a preschool child? *Tick one.*

15 minutes  | 20 minutes  | 30 minutes  | 45 minutes  | 60 minutes  | I don’t know  |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</table>

10. What intensity do you consider is a preschool child’s daily physical activity requirement recommended to be? *Tick one.*

Low intensity | Moderate to Vigorous intensity | I don’t know |
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</table>

11. Of the following options of low and moderate intensity activities, indicate only those which are moderate intensity.

Swimming | Light walking | Hopscotch |
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<tbody>
<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>
Cycling   [ ]     Sport (e.g. soccer)   [ ]     Running   [ ]
Brisk walking   [ ]     Dance   [ ]     Ride on toys   [ ]
Playground activities (e.g. swing, slide)   [ ]
Games such as tag, skipping (indoor or outdoor)   [ ]

12. In your opinion, who should take responsibility for the role of promoting physical activity in the early years (0-6)? Please tick all that apply.

The government   [ ]
Childcare Practitioner   [ ]
Parent(s)   [ ]
Other   [ ] Please specify________________________________________________________________________________________________

13. Please indicate the extent to which the following measures are very important, important or not important, in promoting physical activity in the early years’ setting. Tick one of the three options under each measure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Not important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Playing outdoors regularly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introducing physical activity into the curriculum</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating and working with parents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduce a Physical Activity Policy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure adult involvement in physical activity sessions</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

14. To your knowledge what is detailed in a Physical Activity Policy of an Early Years’ Setting? ___________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________
15. From your experience on your last practice placement, were children given the opportunity to play outdoors: Please tick one

- Every day, regardless of the weather □
- Only on days when the weather was good (mild, sunny) □
- Once a week □
- Never, in your experience □
- Other □

If other, please specify ________________________________

16. In your opinion, would any benefits be obtained from a childcare practitioner working with parents to influence their understanding of the importance of physical activity for their child’s health? Yes □ No □ Give a reason for your answer. _________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

17. Please indicate whether you consider physical activity to be as important as/not as important as/more important than other areas of development for a preschool child. Tick one under each of the 4 areas of development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of development</th>
<th>Not as important</th>
<th>As important</th>
<th>More important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School readiness/Academic skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cognitive/intellectual skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Language skills</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/emotional skills</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thank you for completing this questionnaire!