

Making Physical Therapy Fun for Children

For children, physical therapy may be indicated as a result of congenital impairments, acute trauma, or chronic conditions. It could ultimately, permanently enhance a child’s current and future functional capacity. A fun, friendly approach to physical therapy will optimize therapeutic goals and outcomes. Some important strategies to follow include:

I. The Setting

Whether treatment takes place at an office facility or at home, it is important to create a welcoming, mind nurturing environment.

Think bright: colors, shapes, and textures tend to relax children, engaging their senses to reduce anxiety.

II. Rapport

Your attitude: kids respond positively to smiley, friendly faces. Build rapport by communicating at eye level, using simple, kid-friendly words. Relating to scenarios that children are familiar with eases tension that they may have towards speaking with a stranger. For example, use Popeye as a descriptor with a child that adores the cartoon character.

Debunk exercise myths: Showing optimism towards exercise can encourage a child, and reduce hesitance.

III. Treatments

Think outside the box: traditional techniques may not be suitable for children. It is important to formulate new methods of achieving therapeutic goals.

Engage their minds: It is quite easy to lose a child’s attention especially in cases where a child may present with attention deficits or behavioral patterns. Prepare to modify therapeutic activities and plan of care frequently to accommodate each child’s needs.

Simple, inexpensive tools and suggestions for therapeutic treatment

Tools	Therapeutic exercise/activity	Therapeutic benefits
Balls	Kicking, throwing, reaching, grasping.	Isometrics, endurance, mobility, flexibility, active assistive.
Jump rope	Pulling, reaching, reciprocal gait training, jumping, balancing.	Balance and proprioception, strengthening, gait.
Bubble set	Coordination activities.	Neuro rehab, cerebellar re-ed
Water balloon	Lifting, carrying, throwing, rolling; substitute for traditional dumbbells.	Strengthening, and conditioning, resistance.
Yo-yo & Slinky	Wrist, finger, forearm activities.	Flexibility, mobility, strengthening.
Paddle Ball	Upper extremity exercise.	Mobility, co-ordination, endurance.
Hula Hoop	Upper and Lower extremity exercises.	Cardio-vascular, endurance, range of motion and flexibility, neuro-rehab.

IV. Maximize Outcomes

Never forget to teach: children have an amazing memory, with a high retention rate. Educate them on the rationale, and benefits of treatments received. Also educate on methods of independently managing or preventing symptoms even after therapy.

Treatment does not end with the therapist: turn their hobbies into home exercise program when appropriate. Friends, guardians, and other members of the community can also be involved in the learning process to maximize therapeutic outcomes.