



Creating an Effective Senior Center Fitness Program: A Guidebook

NYC
Department for
the Aging

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Preface

The New York City Department for the Aging (DFTA) is very pleased to offer this guidebook for “Creating an Effective Senior Center Fitness Program.”

This guidebook is intended for all directors and staff of senior centers in DFTA’s community-partner network who are dedicated to creating and providing an overall, comprehensive senior center fitness program for their center members and guests.

The content of this guidebook were developed by Paul Weiss of Asphalt Green and Helen Kwah of DFTA’s Center for Organization Development and Strategic Initiatives. The design and layout of the guidebook were done by Helen Kwah.

Particular thanks are due to Harriet Stollman, Director of DFTA’s Health Promotion Unit, for her suggestions on how to improve earlier drafts of the guidebook; to Amy Lee and Susan Perlstein of DFTA’s Center for Organization Development and Strategic Initiatives for their feedback and editing; and to Robert Stephens, Director of DFTA’s Center for Organization Development and Strategic Initiatives, for his vision and direction.

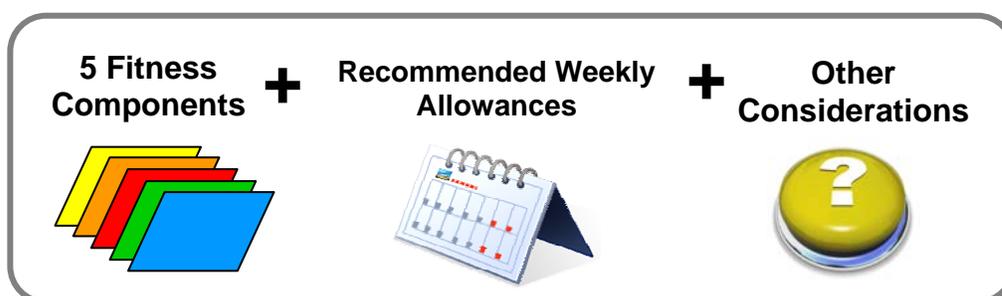


How to Use This Guidebook

To use this guidebook, follow the content in the order it is presented. There are 2 main sections to this guidebook, including a section on what you need “to Know” and a section on what you need “to Do.”

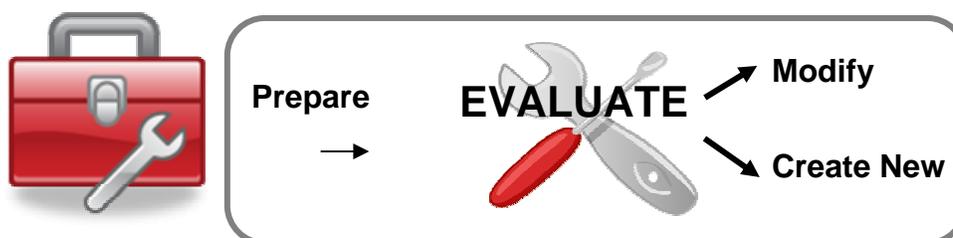
First, what do you need to know?

- 1) Read through “The 5 Components of Senior Fitness” (pg. 2).
- 2) Then “Recommended Weekly Allowances” (pg. 5).
- 3) Then “Other Considerations” (pg. 6).



Next, what do you need to do?

- 1) Read “How to Identify Fitness Components in Classes” (pg. 9).
- 2) Look at the “Sample List” (pg. 10) of typical exercise classes and see what fitness components have been identified for senior center classes.
- 3) Use the EVALUATION TOOL: “Program Evaluation Worksheet” (pg.11) to evaluate your current senior fitness classes.
- 4) To modify existing classes, see “Tips for Modifying Classes” (pg. 13).
- 5) To create new classes to fill a gap, see “Tips for Creating New Classes” (pg. 14).



Section 1

What to Know...

Section 1

What to Know:



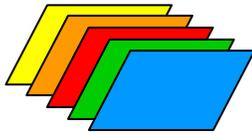
OVERVIEW

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of your current senior center fitness program, it will be helpful to build your knowledge about what makes a senior fitness program effective.

This first section on “What to Know” explains what the 5 core components of an effective senior fitness program are, the “recommended weekly allowances” (RWA’s) for how often a senior should engage in each fitness component, and other considerations to be aware of in putting together your fitness program.

What You Need to Know:

5 Fitness Components +



Recommended Weekly Allowances +



Other Considerations



Section 1A

The 5 Components of Senior Fitness

The first thing you need to know is that an effective overall senior center fitness program will include these 5 fitness components:

- | | | | |
|----------|-------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| 1 | Aerobic Fitness | 4 | Balance |
| 2 | Muscular Fitness | 5 | Relaxation |
| 3 | Flexibility | | |

Please note that many exercise classes can provide multiple components at the same time. For example, nearly every dance-based class will offer “aerobic fitness” and “balance,” and most yoga classes will offer “muscular fitness,” “flexibility,” “balance,” and “relaxation.”

For clarity, we will learn about each fitness component in this section, one at a time.

Component **1**: Aerobic Fitness

Aerobic fitness is a primary component of all exercise programs. Aerobic exercise is defined as any brisk physical activity that requires the heart and lungs to work harder to meet the body's increased oxygen demand.



The fitness of the cardiovascular system (heart, blood vessels) declines with age. However, scientists now agree that a significant cause for these declines may be related to decreased physical activity.

Benefits: Because aerobic exercise stimulates the cardiovascular system, its benefits include strengthening the heart, improving the circulation of oxygen through the blood, building lung capacity, and helping individuals to maintain healthy weight and blood pressure.

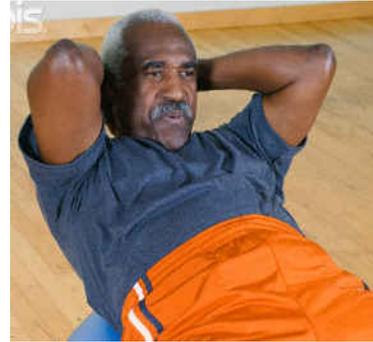
Exercise examples: Good examples of aerobic exercises for seniors include light jogging, brisk walking, aerobics classes, dance classes, and any physical activity or game (for example, table tennis) that keeps the heart rate elevated for at least 10 minutes.



Component **2**: Muscular Fitness

Muscular fitness involves both muscular strength and endurance.

- ▶ **Muscular strength** can be developed through engaging in movements that put weight or resistance on the muscles and skeleton.
- ▶ **Muscular endurance** involves the ability of particular muscles to sustain activity, and can be effectively developed through aerobic exercises that actively engage various muscle groups.



"Use it or lose it" definitely applies to muscular fitness, and by increasing physical activity, an older adult's muscular strength and endurance can be improved.

Benefits: Exercises for muscular fitness stimulate the growth of bone and muscle, and helps to increase one's resting metabolism. As a result, activities of daily living, such as housework, lifting groceries, etc. are facilitated. A strong musculoskeletal system also offers better protection against injuries by improving muscle balance and flexibility.

Examples: Good examples of exercises for seniors include lifting weights, working with stretch-bands (pictured below), calisthenics (such as sit-ups), and yoga classes.



Component **3**: Flexibility

Flexibility is an important and often neglected component of physical fitness. It can be defined as the ability to move muscles or joints through a full and normal range of motion.



Stretching exercises are the best way to increase or maintain the range of motion around the joints. A good stretching program will involve all the major muscle groups, including the muscles of the arms, back, hips, thighs (fronts and backs), and calves. Stretches should be held for approximately 10 to 20 seconds to be effective. Current research indicates that the best time to stretch muscles is after a workout, when you no longer need to produce large forces within the joints, or after a 5-10 minute warm up.

Benefits: Good flexibility will help alleviate stiffness, prevent injuries, improve balance and coordination, and make it easier to engage in all activities of daily living. Practicing flexibility through a good stretching program will also help relieve stress.

Examples: Stretching is a part of many typical activities held at a senior center, such as dance, tai chi, or yoga classes. Stretching can also be done as part of a muscular and aerobic fitness exercise program.



Component 4 : Balance

Balance, or stability, is an important component of fitness and everyday movement. The ability to balance, or remain upright, is very important in all of the routine tasks of daily life. A person's stability or ability to balance can change with age, injury, and illness. In fact, stability problems are a major cause for falls in older adults.

Balance is best developed together with the components of muscular fitness and flexibility because these components can "complement" each other. The body's "core muscles" in the abdomen, lower back and pelvis work together to support the spine, so building up core muscle strength



results in greater balance and stability. Developing flexibility also helps to support balance.

Benefit: Balance exercises have been shown to help prevent falls and broken bones in older adults. Practicing balance exercises three days per week has been shown to produce significant results.



Examples: To strengthen the "core muscles," older adults can do any number of traditional calisthenic exercises such as sit-ups, and they can do core exercises with fitness balls (see picture, left). Other good exercises to strengthen the core and practice balance include tai chi, dance, and yoga classes.

Component **5**: Relaxation

Relaxation is not often considered to be an integral fitness component. But just as a warm-up period is important before starting a workout, a gradual cooling-down, relaxation phase is equally important to allow the body to return to its resting state. If either the warming-up or cooling-down process is ignored, the body and the muscles can suffer a lot of damage both in the short and long run.



Benefits: Relaxation exercises help to bring the heart rate back to its resting state and the body to clear itself of toxins and waste products. Another benefit is increased flexibility and movement around the joints. Relaxation can also contribute significantly to alleviating symptoms of stress.

Examples: Incorporating relaxation into a fitness program can take on various forms depending on the class. Some exercise classes such as yoga, tai chi and pilates can be a form of relaxation and exercise. Some stretching exercises combined with post-workout breathing exercises can provide significant relaxation benefit.



Section 1B

Recommended Weekly Allowances

A comprehensive Senior Center Fitness program should provide a “**recommended weekly allowance**” or “**RWA**” of each fitness component three (3) times per week; however, the relaxation component can be offered every day.

Fitness Component and RWA Schedule for Senior Centers

Component	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Notes
Aerobic Fitness	√		√		√	3x: Preferably spread out across the week.
Muscular Fitness	√		√		√	3x: Preferably spread out across the week.
Flexibility	√		√		√	3x per week, best combined with muscular fitness.
Stability	√		√		√	Can be more than 3x, and combined with aerobic and muscular fitness sessions.
Relaxation	√	√	√	√	√	Make time for relaxation during every program.

As noted in the “Overview of the 5 Core Fitness Components,” many individual exercise classes or programs may address multiple fitness components.

In fact, two fitness programs available through DFTA’s Health Promotion Unit, “STAY WELL: Fitness for Seniors Program,” and “Big Apple Strollers Walking Clubs,” can be offered together to satisfy 100% of the 5 components and RWA’s for senior fitness.

However, one of the main challenges of an effective fitness program is to keep participants coming back, and evidence shows that a varied mix of exercise programs is more likely to retain participants in the long term.

Section 1C	Other Considerations for Enhancing Your Program
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The basis for your senior fitness program is providing classes that meet the RWA's for all 5 fitness components. However, in order for your senior fitness program to be effective for as many older adults as possible, there are physical health challenges related to age or disability that should also be considered.

In conducting an evaluation of your current fitness program, you should observe your current classes and make note of whatever needs or challenges are not being met. In the last part of the next section, Section 2B “**Tips for Modifying or Adding Classes,**” you will find some tips for modifying classes or creating new classes to meet some of these challenges. For now, keep the following considerations in mind during your evaluation of your current senior center fitness program.

Physical Health Challenges

Lack of Conditioning: Many older adults may come to exercise after many years of inactivity. Their cardiovascular and muscular conditioning will be weak along with poor flexibility and stability. When evaluating your current fitness program offerings, observe whether modifications are made in the class to simplify movements and reduce intensity for older adults who come to exercise in poor physical condition.

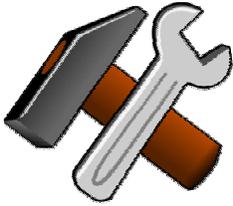
Physical Limitations: Some older adults may have physical limitations due to diseases such as arthritis, diabetes, or another health condition. Again, during the process of evaluating your senior center's exercise program, consider whether the needs of these older adults are being met through the existing classes.

Section 2

What to Do...

Section 2

What to Do:



OVERVIEW

Now that you have an understanding of the core fitness components and other considerations for an effective senior fitness program, the next step is to start evaluating the fitness classes you are currently offering at your senior center.

In this section, we will walk you through the steps of identifying the fitness components in your current class offerings, and then conducting a more thorough evaluation of all the classes using the “Class Evaluation Worksheet” as your tool.

Once you have evaluated your current class offerings and overall effectiveness of the program you are offering, you can decide to modify existing classes or create some new classes to make your overall fitness program more effective. Good luck!



Section 2A

Preparation:

Identifying Fitness Components in Classes

Each exercise class that you offer may address several fitness components. Although in general, an “aerobics” class will have an aerobics fitness component, the full range of components that a class can include depends on how the class is being taught.

Here is a sample list of classes that you may find in a senior center and the fitness components that are probably included.

Class	Aerobic	Strength	Flexibility	Balance	Relaxation
Ballroom Dance	X			X	
Chi Gung/ Tai chi		X	X	X	X
Country Line Dancing	X			X	
Latin Dance	X			X	
Low Impact Aerobics*	X	X		X	X
Meditation					X
Salsa Dance	X	X	X	X	
Silver Sneakers	X	X	X	X	
Stability Ball Exercise		X		X	
Stay Well Program	X	X	X	X	X
Step Aerobics	X	X	X	X	
Strengthen and Stretch		X	X		
Walking Club	X	X		X	
Chair Yoga		X	X	X	X

***Note** how the Low Impact Aerobics class is listed with a relaxation component. In this particular case, the Low Impact Aerobics class has a stretching and relaxation cool-down time at the end of the session.

Section 2A

Evaluation Tool:

Fitness Program Evaluation Worksheet

Now you want to evaluate the effectiveness of your senior fitness program. Use the following worksheets to conduct the evaluation.

View the sample evaluation worksheet that follows. It is completed with 4 exercise class entries. The steps to take are:

1. Enter each exercise class you offer, with the days and times that it is offered*.
 2. Next check off the fitness components that the class addresses.
 3. Then check off the next two columns about whether older adults who are frail or who have disabilities can participate in the class.
 4. **OBSERVATIONS:** If you are not sure about which fitness components are addressed by a particular class or whether it is appropriate for those with frailties or disabilities, you will need to take the time to observe the class or speak with the instructor.
 5. **More OBSERVATIONS:** In general, it is a good idea to observe any or all of the exercise classes. There is a note box at the bottom right of the worksheet page to record observations about classes that need follow up. For example:
 - ▶ Whether any needs are not being addressed
 - ▶ Whether the intensity and duration of the class seems appropriate
 - ▶ If the location and space for the class is appropriate
 - ▶ If there is a gap in your program offerings, and if you need to add a class
 6. **Make a Note to Modify:** In the last column of the worksheet, indicate if a modification to an existing class is needed.
 7. **Final Records:** Date your initial evaluation and note whether you need to follow up with modifications (or create a new class). Then, when follow up is complete, date and sign the evaluation worksheet for your records.
- *Entry TIP:** Enter the exercise classes that occur at the same time and days together. As the example on the sample worksheet shows, when two or more classes that cover the same fitness components occur at the same time and day, you can only include the count for one class towards the RWA's.

SAMPLE Evaluation Worksheet: Senior Fitness Classes

Senior Center: Sample Senior Center

Class Title	Days & Times of the Week					RWA Count*					Can FRAIL Participate?	Can Seniors with Disabilities Participate?	Class Needs Modifying? How?
	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Aerobic	Muscular	Flexibility	Balance	Relaxation			
Line Dance		10:30 am			10:30 am	2X	2X		2X				
Chair Yoga	12:30 pm		12:30 pm		12:30 pm		3X	3X	3X	3X	X	X	
Walking Club	12:30 pm		12:30 pm		12:30 pm	3X	3X	3X	3X		Limited		Yes. Modify for Frail participants?
Cardio Aerobics	1:00 pm	1:00 pm				2X	2X		2X				
TOTALS						7X	7X	3X	7X	3X	1X	1X	

Note: Since these 2 classes are offered at the same time, an older adult has to choose between the classes. Therefore the overlapping fitness components they offer cannot be counted twice towards the RWA total.

Date of Initial Evaluation March 31, 2009

Need to Modify Any Classes? Yes No

Evaluation Completion Date _____

Completed by _____

*RWA Count: Recommended weekly allowances are approximately 3x per week for each fitness component.

Observations About Classes That Need Modifying:

- Walking club has a few frail participants. Talk to instructor about having 2 sections- 1 for more frail participants only?

Evaluation Worksheet: Senior Fitness Program Effectiveness

Senior Center: _____

Class Title	Days & Times of the Week					RWA Count*					Can FRAIL Participate?	Can Seniors with Disabilities Participate?	Class Needs Modifying? How?
						Aerobic	Muscular	Flexibility	Balance	Relaxation			
	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.								
TOTALS													

Date of Initial Evaluation _____

Need to Modify Any Classes? Yes No

Evaluation Completion Date _____

Completed by _____

Observations About Classes That Need Modifying:

*RWA Count: Recommended weekly allowances are approximately 3x per week for each fitness component.

Section 2B

Final Steps for Enhancing the Effectiveness of Your Senior Center Fitness Program

Tips for Modifying or Adding Classes

Your final goal is to enhance your center's current senior fitness program to make it as **effective** and **inclusive** as possible for your senior center members.

Therefore, in the process of conducting an evaluation of your current senior fitness program, you may decide to modify an existing exercise class or add a new class to fill in a gap in your program. Here are some needs that may not be addressed enough by your existing fitness program and suggested ways to modify classes or add a new one to fill in the gap.

Lack of Muscular Conditioning:

The biggest obstacle to fitness improvements for seniors, physically, is the loss of muscular strength and endurance due to inactivity. When an older adult returns to exercise after a long period of inactivity, s/he may struggle with the duration and intensity of the exercise class, as well as bring a fear of falling or getting injured.

- ▶ **Tip:** The older adult who has lost muscular conditioning should start with exercises to build muscular strength. If your center does not offer it, then create (if possible) a seated strength-training class. A seated class is a less fatiguing way to allow a senior to develop strength with little fear of falling or losing balance. Once the senior has built up some muscular strength and endurance, s/he can move to standing positions, more complex movements, and a more varied mix of activities.
- ▶ **Tip:** If your center cannot create a seated strength-training class, one suggestion for modifying an existing muscular fitness class is to allow some participants to perform modified movements in a seated position during the class.

Frailties and Physical Disabilities:

It should be noted that all classes can contain a mix of participants including the more robust, as well as those with frailties and mobility-related physical disabilities (e.g., participants with arthritis and/or who use wheelchairs or walkers). There are many ways to modify a class to make the exercise accessible to these varied participants.

- ▶ **Tip:** Work with an experienced instructor. He or she should know how to structure the class so that every movement has two or more levels of intensity and complexity— through seated or simpler variations of the movement, or through modifying the strain of the movement through shorter durations and fewer repetitions.
- ▶ **Tip:** Keep participants with differing needs (such as those who are less experienced, frail, or have physical disabilities) in the front of the class where the instructor can more easily monitor and provide support.