

Moving forward



Mary Mountstephen explains why nursery schools need to be providing more opportunities for exploration and physical activity to improve learning, language and behaviour among pre-schoolers

Children love to move. Wriggling and squirming, they learn to control their bodies and to reach out and explore their environment. Their movement is a joy to them, but can be exhausting and frustrating for parents and carers who crave some peace and quiet in the presence of children who are still and at rest. However, as many experts point out, movement, free play and exploration are the keys to healthy physical development and also provide the fundamental basis for sound all-round development.

Jasmine Pasch refers to the 'powerful ways' in which body movement impacts on the development of the brain and nervous system and the longer term impact this has on creating firm foundations for learning, health and well-being.

Children need daily varied activity to create developmentally sound:

- vestibular system
- proprioceptive system
- tactile system

Through swinging, spinning, rolling climbing and jumping, these systems learn to work together

efficiently and they prepare the child for academic learning and social competence.

The vestibular system

This system in the body is responsible for maintaining balance, posture, and the body's orientation in space. It also regulates locomotion and other movements and keeps objects in visual focus as the body moves.

A well-balanced vestibular system gives us good balance and the ability to stand still, which is not as easy as it may seem. To stand still requires the body systems to co-operate together in a mature fashion, which can only be achieved through enriching physical activities.

The proprioceptive system

The ability to sense and process information about the position and

location and orientation and movement of the body and its parts.

Children need a wide diet of activities to develop a confident awareness of where their body is in space and the ability to move with increasing efficiency and ease, even when surrounded by others.

The tactile system

This refers to the ability to process information effectively about touch and sensations through the entire surface of the body.

A well-developed tactile system allows the child to relate to others and to concentrate in class. Many children are now being wrongly labelled as disruptive and having behaviour problems, when in fact, their sensory systems are either over-active or underactive. This leads them, for example, to be wrigglers and runabouts or toddlers who hate the feel of labels in their clothes.



Implications for Early Years settings

Much of a child's play involves movement of some kind. During infancy, before the ability to represent the world symbolically has developed, physical, or sensorimotor play predominates and it is the child's way of discovering their world.

Creative movement helps each child express ideas, feelings and to develop their tactile and emotional senses. It can be used to improve self-confidence and communicating with others. In one piece of research, children who were encouraged to improvise as much as possible in a movement programme showed significant improvement in social skills and a significant decrease in problem behaviour, compared to those children who had not had the same experience.

The reasons for this are unclear, however it does seem that movement allows children to explore new ways to communicate, and this is important in the light of recent evidence that an increasing number of young children are struggling with their speech, language and communication skills.

Through movement, children can discover alternative ways to express themselves as they learn to listen to



their bodies. Movement is, after all, their first language and one, which sometimes these days are limited by the containment of babies in buggies and other forms of transport, which limit their natural movement. Children learn to move and they move to learn and if opportunities to do this are limited, then the child's whole vocabulary begins from an impoverished basis.

Practical strategies

Practitioners need to observe children's movement: How can this be built into the busy day meaningfully?

Create safe opportunities to climb, roll and, link movement to the singing

of rhymes and clapping games.

Offer toys that encourage toddlers to use their muscles. Provide building toys, riding toys, balls and beanbags, and climbers.

Provide plenty of time for active free play. Experts say toddlers need more than 60 minutes of unstructured physical play in a safe place every day.

Morning, afternoon, and evening, let them set their own pace.

They can walk, run, roll, climb, slide, pull, push, throw, and jump until they're tired.

Lead them in creative movement. They can practice their skills and learn new ways to move.

Make an obstacle course. Indoors or out, toddlers can take turns going over, under, around, and through furniture, boxes, and climbing equipment.

Move to music. Bounce, sway, clap, march, dance, or play rhythm instruments.

Exercise together. Make it a part of your routine. Do stretches before lunch.

Set a good example. Let toddlers see you walk, run, bike, build, and dance, climb, or play ball. ■

Physical activity guidelines for under-fives in the US

| | Guideline 1 | Guideline 2 | Guideline 3 |
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| National Association for Sport and Physical Education (2002). Active Start. A Statement of Physical Activity Guidelines for Children Birth to Five Years. Reston, VA:NASPE. | | | |
| Infants (Birth to 12 months) | Should interact with parents and or caregivers in daily physical activities, which involve exploration of their environment. | Should be places in safe settings that facilitate physical activity and do not restrict movement for prolonged periods of time. | Physical activity should promote the development of movement skills. |
| Toddlers (12 to 36 months) | Should accumulate at least 30 minutes daily of structured physical activity. | Should engage in at least 60 minutes and up to several hours of daily, unstructured physical activity and should not be sedentary for more than 60 minutes at a time except when sleeping. | Should develop movement skills that are building blocks for more complex movement tasks. |
| Pre-schoolers (3 to 5 years) | Should accumulate at least 60 minutes daily of structured physical activity. | | Should develop competence in movement skills that are building blocks for more complex movement tasks. |

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