

# Body building

Freedom of movement is essential for children's developing minds and emotions as well as their bodies, say *Anne O'Connor* and *Anna Daly*

PHOTOGRAPHS AT HAPPY NURSERY DAYS BY JACKY CHAPMAN

In her book *The Well Balanced Child*, Sally Goddard Blythe comments on the changes in society that have led to physical exercise becoming a 'task' rather than an everyday experience.

She reminds us, however, that 'physical experience is the very expression of life. Just as the brain controls the body, the body has much to teach the brain'.

It is through movement that we first express our experience of the world, even before birth. A baby in the womb is already using their repeated acrobatic movements to strengthen the pathways linking the brain to the body and forming the millions of connections needed to build the nervous system. Movement is integral to life and a child's movement experience is likely to play a big part in shaping their physical development, personality, feelings and achievements.

Unlike most other land-based mammals, our motor skills at birth are at a relatively early stage of development. Many animals are able to stand shortly after birth and are moving around confidently within hours. And yet a human baby instinctively knows that movement is linked to their survival. Ever wondered why we rock babies to sleep? Or why a crying baby will be soothed to sleep when picked up and instantly alert and distressed again the minute it is put down?

One theory for this relates to the fact that humans were originally nomadic, constantly on the move, travelling from place to place. Being carried meant you weren't being left behind! Linked to this is the fact that a baby on the ground cannot move

away from predators, so would cry to ensure that it was picked up. Movement reassured the baby that it was held and safe, while being still alerted the baby to its lack of safety.

## PROPRIOCEPTIVE LEARNING

The early years of life are all about gaining control of our bodies – getting to know how they work, and where they begin and end. This is called 'proprioceptive learning' or knowledge of the inner self. It is something we probably don't think too much about once we've learned it, but is vital if we are to function independently. We also learn how our bodies connect with the world around us and in particular, the role that gravity plays. Ray Barsch talks about the child being a 'terranaut' – like an astronaut, but on land, learning to control their body on the gravity-based environment that is 'terra firma', the earth.

Because a baby has not yet acquired all the motor skills it needs for body control, a series of reflexes exist to support the developing child and help the body to learn specific functions. The more a young child moves, the better they are able to control their movement. Sally Goddard Blythe describes how 'in this way, movement helps to map the brain, and the reflexes provide a child with his earliest vocabulary of movement.'

## REFLEXES

We need to understand the role of reflexes, because they can be used as signposts for physical development. Their importance lies not just in the



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stage at which they develop, but also in the stage at which they become integrated or inhibited – that is, when they are no longer needed on a regular basis. More importantly, the work of the Institute of Neuro-Physiological Psychology (INPP) suggests that the difficulties that some children experience in later life may be directly linked to the continued existence of these reflexes.

For example, the Spinal Galant Reflex exists in the womb to help with the birth process and exists until around nine months of age. Touching the skin on either side of the lower spine causes the hip to flex on one side and the other side to arch in the opposite direction. It helps make the hips flexible as the baby negotiates

its way through the birth canal, then should become gradually inhibited over the first nine months of age.

This happens because other, more complex reflexes and movement control develop when babies have lots of opportunity to lie on their backs and freely kick their legs. But if this reflex remains active for a prolonged period, it can cause hypersensitivity in the lower back. Even the slightest touch can activate it, and it can make it hard for a child to sit still. It may be present in a child who is constantly in trouble for fidgeting or being always on the move.

The work of organisations such as the INPP, Jabadao and the Developmental Physical Education Group (University of Edinburgh) remind us

that we have an important part to play in ensuring that children's physical development isn't just left to chance. Understanding the significant stages of physical development equips us to be able to provide the kinds of stimulation, games and activities that promote healthy development.

Some of this can be done in specific movement sessions; some of it can be encouraged in the way that the environment and continuous provision is organised for true 'free-flow play'; but a lot can also be done spontaneously through interactions with key carers. We need to remember that children move through the physical development stages differently, regardless of age, and that knowing the children really well and involving their parents

## TOUCH

If proprioception is important for telling us what is happening from within our bodies, touch is vital for telling us what is happening outside. Sadly, changes in childrearing practices in the western world have reduced the opportunities for natural and instinctive physical closeness in the early years of a child.

Bottle feeding, travelling around in car seats, sleeping in cots, and so on, have all become the norm, and when added to heightened concerns about physical and sexual abuse, these have dramatically reduced

the amount of time that children spend in direct physical contact with others.

We now know that physical and sensory deprivation have important implications for the holistic development of a child, because it affects the development of the brain as well as their emotional well-being.

Every child should have opportunities for spontaneous, affectionate physical contact every day. Additional experiences, such as massage, can help counteract the effects of our increasing contact-less culture.

in our assessments is the best way to foster good movement development.

## THINKING ABOUT RISK

To encourage children's physical problem-solving:

- Move an object that a child wants slightly nearer to encourage 'will into action', rather than simply handing it to them
- Encourage and observe, while close at hand, as a child negotiates a new physical position, rather than moving the child's arms, legs, and whole body to a place you think they are aiming for
- When you see a child wriggling to rearrange themselves, roll over or reach something, and they are not in danger or distress, observe for a minute or two longer to allow them the chance to figure it out for themselves. This is when a lot of kinesthetic processing is going on, and a degree of frustration can often lead to important new discoveries
- The floor is a great place to encourage children to explore new moves safely, because they can't fall off! It's also a good place for a nervous adult to give themselves permission to step back and allow children to do things for themselves, so we need to make sure that our environments have lots of indoor and outdoor floor space where children ►

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**The floor is a great place for a child to do full-body exploration**

can experiment with full-body exploration

- Assess the opportunities that your outdoor space provides for calculated risk-taking, using the natural environment as well as manufactured equipment
- Assess the range of surfaces in your setting. Does your indoor and outdoor space include a variety of different surfaces? Do 'safety surfaces' really make children safer? How do children learn to

negotiate and manage the different surfaces in the real world if they don't experience them?

### THINKING ABOUT TOUCH

Reflect on your attitude and use of touch by asking yourself:

- How do you use touch as well as voice to greet and welcome a child?
- Can you use physical contact to assess a child's level of involvement or readiness for an activity? In playful rough and tumble, horsey



### REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

- Jabadao, [www.jabadao.org/dmp\\_theory.html](http://www.jabadao.org/dmp_theory.html)
- Institute of Neuro-Physiological Psychology, [www.INPP.org.uk](http://www.INPP.org.uk)
- 'Move on' by Mike Jess and Jan McIntyre of the University of Edinburgh (*Nursery World*, 29 January 2009)
- 'Promoting physical activity for children and young people' at [www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk)
- Sally Goddard Blythe, *The Well-Balanced Child: Movement and early learning* (Hawthorn Press)
- Jonathan Doherty and Richard Bailey, *Supporting Physical Development and Physical Education in the Early Years* (Open University Press)
- Ray Barsch, cited in *The Well-Balanced Child*, p175 (from 'Achieving perceptual-motor efficiency – a space-orientated approach to learning', 1968)

rides or swinging in your arms, can you sense through a child's body tension how ready they are for the experience? Are they resisting a lot, remaining tense and 'risk averse'? Are they resisting at first, then readjusting to relax and enjoy the experience? Are they demonstrating they want more physical contact play by initiating vigorous moves?

- Have you tried responding to a fidgeting or restless child with appropriate touch or extension of your own body? For some children, just the sense of being in close physical contact can soothe and help regulate them through a stressful experience or the challenging task of being still.
- Have you looked for opportunities for affectionate touch throughout the day? There should be plenty in personal care routines for younger children, but an older child who is touch-averse may respond well to having their soapy hands massaged at hand-wash time, or being wrapped in a fleecy blanket. ■

**Future articles in this series will look at the importance of floor play, crawling and locomotion, balance and vestibular development for children from birth to five. The next article will be published on 16 April**

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## RISK

Professor Mike Kelly, public health director of the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), says, 'It's important that we let children play and don't let society's aversion to risk stop young people from being physically active' ('Give parents exercise advice', *Nursery World*, 5 February 2009).

By trying to keep children very safe, we can sometimes

prevent them from developing their own risk assessors. Our society seems to expect children to take responsibility for their actions, and yet constantly legislates against them being able to physically explore situations or learn for themselves through experience, risk and physical negotiation.

Children need to learn how to keep themselves safe and to understand and manage their

own strength and flexibility. Our job should not be about removing all risk (even if we could), because that would be more harmful in the long run. Our responsibility is to know our children well enough so that we can support their physical learning – and their risk-taking – in developmentally appropriate ways.

We need to know when we can stand back a bit and let children solve problems with

their bodies rather than just giving them the answer, just as we would if they were tackling a tricky maths problem or exploring a spelling. When we lift them off a piece of equipment, for example, or reach for something for them, this can short-cut the process of finding the physical answer themselves and, therefore, limit their ability to physically problem solve and take calculated risks.