

Child Care plus+

+ Movement Every Day in Every Way

Movement and physical activity are especially important during early childhood when tremendous growth and development of motor skills occurs. Motor development is significant in and of itself, and it is tied to every other aspect of the child's development. For example, motor development is linked to self-help skills such as dressing, the enhancement of self-esteem such as learning to climb the stairs to the slide "all by myself", and literacy such as turning pages of a book and writing letters of the alphabet.

The importance of motor development is easy to see, but there is growing concern that opportunities for movement and large motor development are being limited in many early childhood settings. Most programs offer ample materials and activities to support the development of *small* muscle skills. However, many of these same programs have too many "sit down" activities, suppressing children's natural need to move and inhibiting their disposition to explore, test, and build their *large* muscle skills.

Our nation's growing interest in young children's readiness for kindergarten may be one reason that movement is "disappearing" in many early childhood programs. The readiness crusade has increased the focus on early academics—in many cases taking priority over other areas of child development, including motor development.

The very nature of group care and education can also contribute to limiting children's free movement. In a group setting, schedules and routines become more significant. Unfortunately, schedules and routines often mean "wait" or "sit still" for young children. A child might be energetic and ready to move first thing in the morning—but outdoor play is not scheduled until 10:30. By that time, the child has probably been trying to get her need for movement met—perhaps by running around the table while "flying" an airplane, kicking her heels on the floor at circle time, or jumping repeatedly to reach a painting hung to dry. These spontaneous actions are often called "disruptive" when they

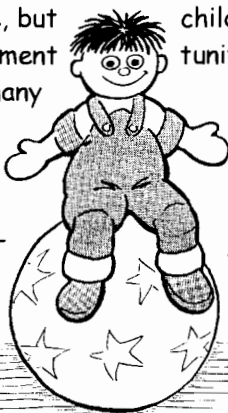
are actually the result of the child's natural need to move. Just as early childhood professionals have learned that leaving infants and toddlers in playpens inhibits movement and exploration, they recognize that preschool children need many daily opportunities for vigorous movement and energetic play both indoors and out. Practitioners must not expect young children to constantly "sit still" and "play quietly".

Creating indoor opportunities for movement is simple. Young children need time, space, activities, and natural opportunities for movement throughout their day. Open-ended activities allow children to engage in movement at their own pace, free from the pressure of group games that can be intimidating to some children.

A balanced program includes guided movement activities in addition to ample opportunities for children to freely move and explore their motor abilities in their own way in a safe environment.

Caregivers / teachers often combine songs and movement activities in their effort to meet children's need for regular movement. While music, dancing, and guided movement activities are important, they do not address children's need for free, unstructured movement.

Appropriate movement activities provide the foundation for motor development and channel children's natural need to move into positive learning activities. Through reflection and planning, you can provide a balanced curriculum that meets the developmental needs of each child. + SHW

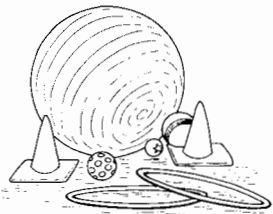


+ In This Issue

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+ IN FOCUS

Have you ever had a child in your program who practiced his/her emerging throwing skills by throwing blocks or other items that were not safe to throw? Whether the child is 18 months or four years old, modifying a motor play area to respond to the child's developmental need to practice this essential and highly prized skill can change the outcome of this behavior from frustration and frequent scolding to learning and growth. The following example illustrates what can happen when a teacher/caregiver individualizes the area this way.



One day Alex threw sand and toys out of the sand table, even after his teacher had him help pick up what he had thrown. Alex's teacher responded to his need by modifying

the movement area to include more throwing opportunities. When Alex wanted to throw, she redirected him to the center which offered various sizes of baskets, balls, a basketball hoop, bean bags, and ping-pong balls. She explained her strategy to his mother and sent home several bean bags. In the teacher's words, this is what happened the day she completed this modification, "I was impressed by how successful it was. Alex threw one toy. I redirected him to the center and said, 'Blocks are for building—please come here to throw balls and bean bags.' It was a wonderful day." +

SLM



+ TRY IT OUT

You can create a simple motor play activity using open space, a large umbrella, strings, and handmade yarn pom-poms. While this idea was sparked by a long period of rainy days, it adds challenge, fun, and color to any motor play area! All you need is:

A) A colorful umbrella with a hooked handle. Check your closet, ask parents, or visit a second-hand thrift store.

B) A loop of string or other hanger attached to a hook or beam in the ceiling. You will want to be able to reach the loop with the umbrella handle so the umbrella can be easily put up and taken down without a ladder. Open the umbrella and hang it above children's reach (or jump) so there is no risk it could be pulled down. Do not hang it so high that children are unable to throw pom-poms into it.

C) Open space free of furniture or other equipment directly below the umbrella.

D) Enough pom-poms so interested children have many tossing opportunities before the umbrella is filled.

The open umbrella invites children to try to fill it with pom-poms. When the pom-poms have all been used, you tip the umbrella to empty it, and the children can toss pom-poms to fill it again and again. As you observe the children at play, you may decide to hang additional umbrellas at differing heights to allow each child in your group both challenge and success. +

SHW



+ CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES

Share your interests and plans for enhancing movement and motor play with families in your program. Many parents also have concerns about the increasing hours children spend in inactive play experiences—both at home and in preschool or child care. Ask parents for ideas about movement activities that are of particular interest to their child. Encourage parents to share their own discoveries of readily available materials that encourage their child's motor play, exploration, and movement.

Parents can also help collect and create materials for your motor play area. Send a letter home asking for donations of specific items to help create a rich motor play area without a big price tag! Donated items might include clean, empty bleach bottles, large and small tin cans with the opening edges smoothed, scarves, a short ladder to place flat on 2 large wooden blocks (6" high) to create a balancing activity, and old roller skates to place under large tin cans to create "scooter boards." Your own childhood memories and creativity can help you expand this list. Parents can help you create simple materials such as yarn pom-poms, a bean bag target made from a piece of plywood with several holes in it (children can help paint or decorate it) or a "floor mat" for rolling and floor play by making an extra durable, well stuffed quilt. +

SHW

+ PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Watching and listening to the young children in your group is the key to meeting children's movement needs. Your ongoing observations will tell you about the kinds of movement activities your children are interested in doing and make you more aware of their movement needs across the day. Once you identify children's interests and abilities, you can begin enhancing indoor movement opportunities by: 1) developing a rich *motor play area*, 2) building movement into *everyday activities and routines*, and 3) capturing *natural teaching moments*.

X Movement in a Motor Play Area

Providing an indoor *motor play area* is recommended practice in the early childhood field. However, it is the area most often left out in curriculum planning and room arrangement. This oversight is most often due to concerns about space, limited materials, and safety as well as the belief that teacher-directed games and songs are sufficient to meet children's indoor movement needs. However, with planning and a little creativity, any program can create an effective motor play area. First, create an area that promotes spontaneous movement initiated and guided by the child. Second, promote a range of active physical play—crawling, balancing, moving, climbing, and playing ball—by rotating the play equipment that is available in the area. Third, just as you do in other areas of the program, encourage appropriate use of materials and engage the group in setting safety guidelines when new equipment is introduced.

Infants/Toddlers: In an infant/toddler program, most of the indoor play environment can be considered a motor play area. For example, open carpeted spaces invite infants to initiate activities such as rolling or crawling whenever they are ready. Play materials—balls, tunnels, a low climbing structure—can also stimulate infant and toddler exploration of movement. Sturdy shelves and low tables allow children to pull themselves up to standing or to walk while holding on. Mirrors in the room enhance their self-awareness and motivate movement.

Preschool: For preschool children, the best motor play area is a designated space in the program that includes a variety of materials and equipment that children can explore freely and at their own pace. Materials such as a balance beam, a floor mat, and a tunnel suggest motor play and allow children to use their entire bodies. You can create an obstacle course by arranging these materials in a variety of ways, along with arrows taped on the floor.

Materials, such as scarves and hula hoops, provided in a spacious area invite movement as well. Encourage throwing by supplying bean bags, pom-poms, and soft balls with a target. Play classical music or reggae (rather than directed movement songs) to encourage children's spontaneity and creative movement as they explore their own physical abilities in this area.

X Movement in Everyday Activities and Routines

Building motor play into *everyday activities and routines* can be accomplished in a number of ways. First, carefully examine your schedule. If you find that children spend a lot of time in passive activities, explore ways to revise your schedule to offer a better balance of active and passive activities. Second, think specifically about your "sit down" activities and the rules you impose during these times. Is it possible to allow a child to stand at the table or lie on the floor while drawing rather than sit still in his chair? These options offer a range of positions, may help meet children's need for movement, and often enhance their attention to the task at hand. Third, plan for movement activities as a regular component of the curriculum. Project topics may bring a focus to movement (building on an emerging interest in "look how fast I can run"). Common early childhood songs (*Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes*) and prerecorded dance and movement activities are also effective ways to embed movement across your day.

X Movement and Natural Teaching Moments

Natural teaching moments can provide rich movement experiences for young children. Responding to children's cues that they are ready for movement individually or as a group is a third strategy for meeting their large motor needs. When children are at free play, you can guide a child who is needing to move to an appropriate activity in the motor play area. During more structured activities such as circle time, improvise and add an unplanned movement activity when the group appears restless. If possible, be flexible within your schedule so the group can transition to outdoor play based on their readiness rather than on the clock. In addition, be creative and build movement into transitions and wait time. Asking "How do you think a snowflake would move to circle time?" or suggesting that the group walk to the snack table "like a duck" helps children channel their energy in acceptable and creative ways. +

SHW

+ QUESTION

QUESTION: *I understand young children need movement, but I just don't have room or the budget to add a motor play area. What can I do?*

ANSWER: Creating a motor play area in your situation requires careful planning and creativity, but it may be simpler than you think. ★ **Think Portable** The area can be created as a moveable center set up during play time and removed when the area is needed for other uses—an entry or group meeting area. Select equipment and materials that can be easily moved in and out of the space. ★ **Identify Materials** Gather equipment that is easily moved, has multiple uses, and can be stored nearby or on a storage shelf. You may already have items you can use. Here are ideas for materials that encourage specific motor activities. Hopping: create a hop scotch with easily removed painters' tape. Stepping up and jumping off: use a one-step stepstool or a shallow crate. Rolling: use large blankets to roll up in and out of or a mat that makes lying down and rolling more appealing. Balancing: use a strip of wide painters' tape on the floor or a board to create a balance beam. Throwing: offer many types of items (soft balls, rolled-up socks, bean bags) and targets (basketball hoop, laundry basket, hole cut in cardboard). Catching: rinse bleach bottles and cut off the bottoms to create scoops for catching bean bags or balls. Crawling: create tunnels with blankets draped over low tables or chairs. Locomotion: use scooter boards and sturdy rope strung through large cans to create stilts. Dancing: provide long scarves and colorful streamers. ★ **Plan and Create** Take inventory of program materials and combine them to create rich play themes. As you develop curriculum, plan 1-2 arrangements for the area during the week. Store items near the area so you can easily engage children in gathering materials, setting up, and putting things away.

★ **Use It!** Make the motor play area available during other play times. Many children will naturally access this area to meet their movement needs, and you can guide children to the area whenever you see indications that more movement is needed. ★ **Keep Observing and Planning** Continue observing children's interests, needs, and their own creative use of materials to get more ideas for expanding the motor play area. Keep a "wish list" of equipment and materials, and invest in durable items that offer open-ended play to enhance the appeal and challenge of the motor play area. + SHW

+ RESOURCE REVIEW

Teachers challenged by active, energetic boys can change the learning environment to address their development, interests, and activity levels. Margaret King and Dan Gartrell, authors of "Building an Encouraging Classroom with Boys in Mind," suggest activities in building and construction, sensory exploration and experimentation, and large motor and whole body experiences, indoors and out, to make programs more developmentally responsive to all children. Found in *Young Children*, July 2003 (NAEYC).

CHILD CARE plus+ is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators.

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