

Early Childhood

A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

Edited by **Tina Bruce**

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Second Edition



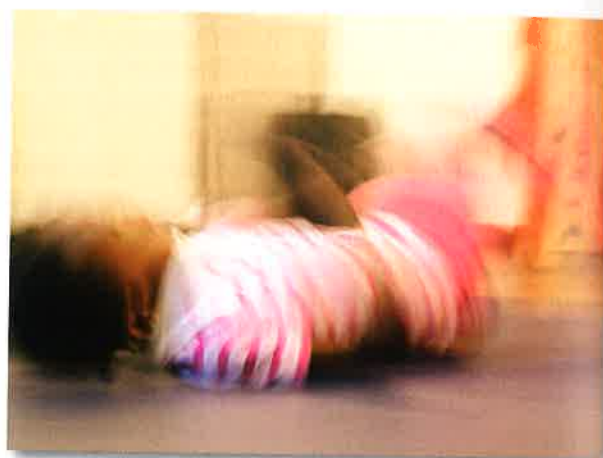
CHAPTER

16

Physical Development

Penny Greenland

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Aims

To develop understanding of:

- ☐ and practice in relation to key aspects of physical development
- ☐ how to help children to engage with and develop movement patterns deemed to be significant in prompting physical development which also promotes later learning
- ☐ how to encourage children to make their own risk assessments, thus keeping them and others safe.

Sukjinder is lying upside-down under a table at the side of the room with his feet pushing upwards on the underside. Chelsea is lying tummy down over a big bolster cushion, singing to herself, and gently pushing with her toes so that she rocks slowly to and fro. Ben and Royston are locked in a vice-like grip in the centre of the room, pulling and tugging at each other as they roll around the floor, grinning madly and grunting as they go. Chenai is being led solemnly round the room on a 'lead', crawling dog-like between the other children, woofing and growling by turn as they pass. And Bobby is turning slow circles in the corner, arms held wide, head tilted this way then that, before he comes to rest with his head wedged against the wall.

Children's fine and gross motor development, their awareness of their body, and their pleasure and confidence in being a physical creature is underpinned by the whole-hearted, full-bodied movement play that most freely indulge in amid everything else they do. Within this spontaneous flow of movement are some quite specific movement activities that prompt the brain and the nervous system to develop in ways that will lay foundations for future learning, health and well-being. Fortunately, babies and young children – given good health and the right opportunities – are biologically driven to seek out, and create, the experiences they need (see also Chapters 8 and 9). They have an inbuilt capacity to devise just the right game for their particular stage of development, and an endless capacity to invent new ways of addressing the key issues: where do I begin and end, where this body part is in relation to that, how much force is too much force, how do I fit into the space around, what does it feel like to be a body? Unfortunately, many aspects of contemporary culture get in the way of this most basic learning, but in the Physical Development area of the curriculum we have the opportunity to make sure that children do have the opportunities they need.

Piaget recognised that a child's ability to understand the world around, to communicate with others, and to establish a strong sense of self is grounded in the early sensory and motor experiences available to them. Sensory motor learning is the ability to take in, sort out, process and make use of information from the world around us. Information is gathered from the senses – taste (gustatory sense), smell (olfactory sense), sound (auditory sense), sight (visual sense) and touch (tactile sense). But there are also two other senses intimately connected to movement that we tend to take for granted and often ignore, but which are key to young children's development. These are the sense of the position of our body parts in relation to one another (proprioceptive sense) and the sense of movement and relationship to the ground (vestibular sense). These provide key reference points for our sense of self, and our relationship to the external environment.

With poor foundations for proprioception a child might find it hard to co-ordinate their movements. They might feel ill at ease in their 'skin' or be compelled to wriggle, fidget and be constantly on the move to get a better feel of themselves. The vestibular sense is unique in that it has no sensation of its own, but provides us with the capacity to function within the force of gravity, to know which way is up, (even when we tilt our head), and provides the central reference point for all spatial awareness. An under-developed vestibular sense might result in poor balance, fear and dislike of movement, a drive to spin excessively, or an uncomfortable relationship to the external environment. Since the vestibular system is connected to our emotional development, under-development might also compromise emotional stability.

It is active involvement and exploration through movement play that enables a child to become a more mature, efficient organiser of sensory information – providing the foundations for all future learning. During the early years, therefore, movement is food for the developing system and the opportunities we provide comprise the diet. For healthy eating, ‘five fruit and veg’ per day are recommended. For a healthy movement diet these are recommended:

- Floor play: on backs and on tummies, young children need to spend time in contact with the floor exploring their moving, sensing bodies.
- Belly crawling: the first self-determined travelling movement that supports a strong sense of the centre of the body whilst in motion.
- Crawling: the activity through which children first combine balance and travelling.
- Push, pull, stretch, hang and slide: through which children prompt enhanced feedback of their felt, or proprioceptive, sense and build the felt sense of self.
- Spinning, tipping, tilting, falling: through which children build their vestibular sense, their upright balance, their sense of space and their primary external relationship – with the ground beneath their feet (Greenland, 2005: 32).

The first three activities also specifically support the development of postural alignment and full articulation of the joints as they take the body from the curled up ‘C’ shape of the baby in the womb, to the ‘S’ shape of spine in upright posture.

The key role for practitioners is to create a learning environment in which children can take the lead in finding activities and games that precisely fulfil their sensory needs, both indoors and outdoors. This means thinking about how a setting supports movement within every activity, looking at the spaces and resources provided, and the balance between adult-led and child-led opportunities on offer.

Parklands Children’s Centre in Leeds changed the way they laid out ‘table top activities’.

We have removed tables in the nursery environment. We had quite a few in the paint area, in the creative area, in the mark-making area, in the tactile area, but all those resources are now on the floor ... so the children are getting down on the floor and having tummy time while they get on with other things ... We feel that the resources work better on the floor. It has been a really positive thing to do. (Greenland, 2005: 159)

Goosehill Nursery, Morpeth, have set up a Movement Corner where children can choose to move when and how they want. This lets them know that their spontaneous movement play – the way they are in their body – is valued alongside all the other kinds of activity provided and ensures that children can respond to their own particular sensory drives. The staff find that the Movement Corner supports learning across the whole curriculum, not just Physical Development.

Yesterday I had time in the movement corner and I had a checklist and I was just ticking off the things the children were doing which related to the Foundation Stage for their records. It links into so many aspects of development. (Greenland, 2005: 149)

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Sure Start Elland have changed the way they support movement, aiming to provide spaces and resources that stimulate appropriate activities, rather than organising adult-led groups.

We have been observing much more what the children are doing and letting them lead the activities rather than saying, ‘Come on, let’s do this now.’ One day we just taped a big piece of bubble wrap down and the children were beside themselves, they thought it was wonderful. They rolled and they jumped and put their hands on it and wiggled about ... It gave them permission to move and they were off ... (Greenland, 2005: 125)

Sukjinder, Ben, Royston and the other children mentioned at the start of this chapter attend a nursery in Peterborough where the practitioners have ensured that children can move freely indoors as well as out. Several times a week they have a movement afternoon and one room is available, as part of the continuous provision throughout the nursery, just for spontaneous movement play. Children move freely between leaping, bounding, crawling and rolling in here, and the activities in other rooms. Surprisingly perhaps, children find it very easy to change from, high-spirited rough and tumble one minute, to quiet, contemplative sand play the next.

In any setting, children’s natural drive to spin and tip, push and pull, can override their sense of caution. Being on hand to keep them safe is an important adult role, therefore, as is supporting their developing ability to assess risk, and act appropriately. Even very young children can do this.

Children are doing their own risk assessment, keeping themselves safe and keeping others around them safe. To witness that in children under three years old is terrific (Parklands CC). (Greenland, 2005: 169)

When it comes to Physical Development children are the experts. If adults ensure that the opportunities they provide play to this very considerable strength, activities that support physical development will not only build strong, flexible and happy bodies, but also play a central role in building foundations for all other future learning as well.

EXERCISE 16.1

Observation

Set out to notice ways that adults unwittingly shut down children’s natural drive to engage in spontaneous movement play. Discuss your findings with the team and think about ways you could value this aspect of children’s learning even more.

Observe a child over a week and work out what you think their current sensory energy drives are. How can you support them to follow these drives? What activities or resources would help them?