

Busy Bodies:

How the Development of Physical Skills Supports Learning

Young children are on the move—from day one! And it's a good thing, because movement is not just important for helping children grow physically strong. It is also a key factor in their overall healthy development. Through movement, children develop thinking and communication skills as they use their growing physical skills to communicate and solve problems. So keep on moving!

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- **Provide lots of tummy time.** This position helps babies develop core, neck, shoulder, and arm strength, which supports their developing muscle and motor development and helps them get ready to crawl. Lie down face-to-face with your baby and play “peek-a-boo.” Or lie next to your baby and place a mirror or open book in front of you so you can talk and play together. Place a favorite toy just out of reach to encourage your 5–7 month old to wiggle toward it. As your baby gets more comfortable on her stomach, she'll begin to enjoy playing with toys from this position.
- **Do finger-plays.** Add gestures to the songs and rhymes you share with your baby and toddler. Songs like “The Itsy Bitsy Spider” and “Wheels on the Bus” can help develop the use of fingers and hands (fine motor skills.) These skills will help your little one learn to use crayons, pick up small objects, and—later—learn to write, button a shirt, and tie a shoe.
- **Dance!** Put on different types of music and move to the beat with your baby in your arms. Change your actions to match the mood and beat of the music. Many babies like going from being on the floor to way up high. They also like to sway, roll, bounce, clap, stretch, waltz, glide, or turn! Encourage your toddler to use his body to move freely to any type of music, and notice what kinds of tunes he prefers.
- **Provide “just right” challenges.** Choose challenges that help your baby or toddler take the next step in her physical development. Provide foods she can learn to pick up on her own with some practice. Put interesting, safe objects just out of reach so she is motivated to use her body to get what she wants. Encourage your toddler to climb a short ladder, standing behind her to help her feel safe to take the next step. These experiences build young children's confidence in their ability to use their bodies to master a new skill.
- **Head to the playground.** The playground provides a rich learning opportunity for children. In the sandbox, offer your child different size pails and shovels to help him practice using his fingers and hands. Crawling through tunnels will teach him about in and out. He'll learn about up and down on the slide. Play with balls of all sizes. Figure out together which ones are best to kick, throw, play catch with, and roll on.
- **Create an obstacle course.** Create a course that encourages your toddler to use a variety of skills. Set up boxes for her to crawl through, pillows to climb on, and blocks to run around. Stay close by—or even try the obstacle course along with your toddler. Doing the course over and over again helps your child learn to plan her actions to reach a goal.
- **Act It Out.** Act out stories and concepts using movement and dance. Pretend to be a leaf falling from a tree, a fish swimming in a pond, or a flower growing up from the ground. Pretend to march in a parade or fly like a fairy or super hero. Or tell your child a story and let him act out the different parts—for example, pretending to climb the beanstalk like Jack.

continued on next page ►

Busy Bodies: How the Development of Physical Skills Supports Learning (continued)

- **Stack and build.** Help your child (12–36 months old) develop finger and hand skills by nesting and stacking blocks and cups. Offer plastic cups to nest inside one another, cardboard boxes to stack, foam or wooden blocks to build with, or chunky interlocking blocks to link. This type of construction play helps children build physical skills and important thinking skills as well.
- **Be creative.** Use crayons, markers, stamper pads, paintbrushes, and finger paints as a creative way to help your child express himself and build finger and hand strength. Even as early as 9 months, babies can explore child-safe finger paints or roll toy cars through paint and onto paper that has been taped to their high-chair tray.