

Encouraging Early Sports Skills

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Developing Physical Skills for Sport

As children build on both their gross and fine physical skills through the sporting and sport-linked activities set out in this book they will also be learning the disciplines of co-operation, negotiation, self-control and teamwork. They will be using listening skills and concentration, and will have opportunities to initiate, replicate, lead and follow. They will put sport into various relevant contexts and explore sport in the wider environment. This shows how sport and physical activity can play an important part in a child's all-round development.

Young children need opportunities to develop both their gross motor-skills and their fine motor-skills (manipulation). Development starts as soon as an infant begins to touch and explore their environment e.g. the surface of a brick, a teddy or shaker, the movement of a mobile, balloon or wind chime. They learn about space and orientation as they observe others within their environment, experience what is within and out of their reach, and locate familiar people by sound.

Children need a range of different resources that provide a variety of challenges and experiences, and which interest them and motivate them to explore further. Activities which support the development of fine motor skills include:

- Drawing, writing and general mark-making resources.
- Using computers and keyboards.
- Puzzles, posting and stacking toys and any type of construction material.
- Sewing, threading, weaving.
- Use of malleable materials such as clay, dough, sand and water.
- Handling of balls, beanbags, hoops, quoits, skipping ropes etc.

Large motor development includes both locomotor skills i.e. actions involving moving forward in some way such as hopping, jumping, running, and non-locomotor skills where the action does not involve moving forwards e.g. bending, pushing, pulling. Large motor development is supported through the following opportunities:

- Climbing and balancing, movement sessions, (with or without music.)
- Crawling through tunnels, bouncing on trampettes.
- Cycling and using scooters.
- Learning to walk along a chalk line or narrow beam.
- Stepping from carpet square to carpet square, playing ring games, enjoying action rhymes and active games such as hopscotch.

Movement, dance and gym sessions encourage children to develop the skills they need in order to jump, skip, glide, bounce, leap, roll, spin and run safely within a controlled environment. They also provide opportunities to practice balance skills, sequencing, creative expression and general body control.

Stages of Physical Development

Development takes place in stages, moving from the simple to the more complex. For example, an infant needs to be able to hold up their head with a degree of control before they are able to sit unsupported. They need to be able to sit before they can stand, and to stand before they can walk.

Many of the core skills needed for sport and gymnastic activities develop through three main stages, often referred to as the immature, intermediate and mature stages. For example:

- Toddlers tend to fall into a football when they try to kick it (immature stage), when a little older they kick a ball from a set position (intermediate stage), and eventually they will be able to kick the ball with power, using the natural arm and body swings that provide the momentum needed (mature stage.)
- When trying to catch a ball, a toddler initially averts their face whilst holding their arms out straight and will simply pull the ball to their chest (immature stage), often with little success. When a little older they hold their arms less rigidly and avert their face less, but still have limited success (intermediate stage). Finally they use hand-eye coordination to track the ball as it comes towards them, grasping it with greater levels of success (mature stage).

Crossing the midline

Another significant physical stage children need to reach in order for many sporting and gymnastic skills to be fully developed is that of 'crossing the midline'. This is where a child can reach across their body (in which arms and legs cross from one side of the body to the other) as part of their natural movement and actions. Some children do however continue to find this difficult. Activities to help them develop this important 'skill' include:

- Drawing a large figure of eight on the ground and asking the children to walk continuously around it.
- As a group drawing imaginary (sideways) figure of eights in the air with your finger or arm.
- Asking children to pick up small items positioned to one side of them, using the opposite hand.
- Providing plenty of fine motor skills activities as mentioned before.

Preparation for physical activity

As you plan physical activities it is important to:

- Ensure the personal safety of both children and adults e.g. long hair tied back, jewellery removed, all participants wearing suitable clothing and footwear, with bare feet whenever practical for indoor movement, dance and gymnastic activities.
- Check that all equipment to be used is safely positioned, well maintained, clean, and has been risk assessed.
- Ensure that there is sufficient space for the numbers of participating children to work safely.
- Incorporate time for children to 'warm up' their bodies before the main activity commences and to cool their bodies down again afterwards. This is sometimes referred to as 'warming down'.

Warm-up exercises

Encouraging children to warm up and cool down helps to loosen up children's bodies, enabling them to progress further with physical activities, and can also help prevent the overstretching of muscles and ligaments. Warm up exercises could include:

- Gentle stretching of arms and legs followed by stretching of the whole body.
- Gentle running on the spot, on their toes, on the balls of the feet etc.
- Throwing and catching a ball 'on the spot'.
- Moving slowly around the room in different ways without touching anyone else.
- Balancing briefly on different parts of the body e.g. on one leg, on their back with their legs in the air, on their bottom with legs tucked into their body etc.

Part of a warm-up can also include getting children to reflect on past activities and recalling the skills and disciplines that were needed.

Warm down / Cooling down exercises

Depending on what activity has taken place many of the above suggestions can also help cool the body down again. It can also be good to encourage children to demonstrate a skill, activity or achievement to the rest of the group. This places value on what they have done, helps build self-esteem and, if the physical session has been fast, loud and/or excitable can be particularly useful in preparing children for the next part of the day.

Developing relevant skills

The sports in the previous section include the need for children to develop the following skills and attitudes. Some will apply only to specific sports, but many apply to all sports. They include having:

- The ability to jump
- Good hand-eye coordination
- Good foot-eye coordination
- Good general body coordination
- A lack of fear of being hit by a ball
- Spatial awareness
- Good ball control
- The ability to pass a ball accurately, judging direction and distance
- The ability to catch a ball
- The ability to aim and throw a ball
- The ability to bounce a ball
- Awareness of space, direction and orientation
- The ability to concentrate and follow instructions
- The ability to tackle other players to gain the ball
- Understanding of how to co-operate with other team members
- The ability to balance on different parts of the body
- The ability to move safely at speed
- The ability to jump and land safely
- The ability to move from one position to another safely and with control
- The ability to synchronise actions with another person
- The ability to remain still, and to stop and move as directed
- The ability to keep and respond to a steady pace and rhythm
- The ability to jump both forwards and upwards
- An awareness of how to position the body for certain actions
- Agility
- Strength
- Good general fitness
- Flexibility

Many of these skills can be practiced through the following activities:

Activity 1

Provide beanbags for each child and encourage them to throw them up and catch them again whilst standing still.

Activity 2

Provide one beanbag for every two children and encourage them to work in pairs throwing and catching.

Activity 3

Set hoops out along the floor and provide a large quantity of beanbags. Encourage children to throw the beanbags into a hoop from behind a chalked line. Gradually increase the distance they are needing to throw, or mark out three chalk lines initially and ask the children to decide which line they start from, helping them reflect on whether they need to move closer or try to throw from further away.

Week 4 Creative bodies

Personal, Social and Emotional development

- Collect together a selection of photographs of sports people showing a range of different expressions e.g. delight, despair, anger, confusion, astonishment etc. Ask the children to decide what each person was feeling at the time and what might have happened to cause the expression. If you know the real answer and think the children will understand it then explain it to them. Can they make the same expression? Provide children with mirrors and encourage them to use a variety of expressions, body actions and gestures. Let them pair up with a friend and then observe and copy each other's actions. Which do they consider to be positive expressions and which are negative expressions? Discuss why. (PS2)
- Use pictures of emotions as a basis for discussion of emotion and the expressions that can indicate each emotion. Encourage the children to think how their expressions, gestures and actions can impact on how other people think about them, approach them and react to them, and also how other people's expressions or actions might mean they are in need of friendship and someone to talk to. (PS5)
- Play a game in which you give children clues as to what sport you are playing. Initially describe the various body movements involved, then add in further details such as numbers of players, what equipment they use, what clothes they usually wear etc. How many clues do the group need before they guess? (PS1)

Communication, Language and Literacy

- Read stories such as *Angelina Ballerina* and talk about the actions Angelina and the other mice make as they dance. Ask who has ever been dancing and encourage those children to talk about their dancing classes or experiences. If practical, ask children to demonstrate dancing steps or positions and name them for the others in the class or group. (L3)
- Introduce children to vocabulary linked to creative movement and expression. Include terms such as flow, glide, float, hover, twirl, swoop, posture, pirouette, sequence, active, still. Practice these 'actions' during a movement session. (L5)

Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy

- In groups make a number line of gymnasts by providing materials for the children to draw, cut out and 'dress' people performing. Encourage them to also write the numbers from one to (a maximum of) ten, one number to be placed on the clothes of each performer. If appropriate provide a number line for the children to use as a reminder of how to write each number. Let each group of children sort their gymnasts out into the correct numerical order and display them on a wall. (N1)
- Plan a simple gymnastics routine together using a range of movements and directions. Help the children to remember the sequence of the routine by calling out the direction they should be moving in. Let confident children have a go at taking the place of 'leader' of the routine. (N12)
- Give each child a number to remember, from 1 to 9. Ensure they are familiar with the number you have given them. Play beautiful music and encourage them to dance and move freely in a large circle according to how the music makes them feel. From time to time, gain their attention, for example by clapping your hands, or rattling a tambourine,

and hold up a number. The children who had previously been given that number now dance in the middle of the circle. Repeat the game, ensuring that all numbers have been called out and all children have danced within the centre of the circle. (N3)



Knowledge and Understanding of the World

- Watch a short DVD of a ballet. Encourage the children to use their observations of the DVD in their own dance movements. Use the experience as a discussion point, linking it to the movements also used by both beam and floor gymnasts. (K2)
- Invite as many different dancers to visit your setting as you can, or if this is not possible, gather media footage of different types of dancing. Ideally try to provide demonstrations of ballet dancing, tap dancing, ballroom dancing, disco dancing and break dancing. Help the children to explore the similarities between the dancers, and how the different types of dancers do things differently. E.g. how were they using their bodies differently? Make links to health and fitness and also to balance and coordination. Which type of dancing did the children enjoy watching best? (K3)
- Provide a range of hoops, ribbons and batons for the children to use and let them practice twirling them. These skills are not easy, so encourage the children to ask questions about techniques and why some techniques are successful and others less successful. Try and demonstrate appropriate techniques for them yourself. See activity opposite. (K4)

Physical Development

- Again, using lengths of ribbon to swirl, twirl and generally 'express themselves' with, encourage the children to move creatively around the room without bumping into others. (PD4)
- During a movement session, explain to the children that they are going to be imaginary sportsmen and women. Give them a range of sports which they have to demonstrate e.g. when you say 'cricket' they may become a bowler, or stand-ready with their