

# Supporting children's development

## Gross motor skills

*In this article on supporting children's development, Sonja Tansey discusses children's gross motor skills and how active experiences can be promoted in child care settings.*

Children's bodies develop rapidly in the early and middle childhood years and during this period their gross motor skills begin to emerge and develop. Children's natural enjoyment of active play and their desire to interact with others and the environment create great opportunities for child care professionals to support children's gross motor development. Providing a combination of free play and planned gross motor experiences will support children to develop physically strong and healthy bodies. Services can use both indoor and outdoor spaces to promote children's gross motor development and child care professionals can consider creative ways to use indoor areas during wet weather or extreme temperatures.

### Positive experiences support children's gross motor development

When children have positive early experiences with physical activity they are more likely to enjoy being active later in life and this will contribute to their long term physical, social and psychological health. Children benefit from having a wide choice of gross motor experiences that are non-competitive and focussed on having fun. Providing a range of choices for gross motor play also caters to children's individual interests, skills and abilities.



### This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles:	2.2 and 3.5
OSHCQA Principles:	5.1 and 5.2
QIAS Principles:	4.1 and 4.6

Children in child care services view adults as role models, so it is important that child care professionals demonstrate a positive attitude toward physical activity. By showing enjoyment in physical activity and getting involved in movement activities, games, dance and sport with children, child care professionals can help to motivate children to participate in, and have fun with, gross motor experiences. Child care professionals who are active in their lives outside the service may also be able to bring their physical activity interests such as dance, yoga, soccer or martial arts to the service for children to enjoy.

### Which gross motor skills do children need to develop?

Gross motor skills that children should be supported to develop include those that involve movement of the arms, legs, hands, feet, head, neck and torso. The skills children need for optimum gross motor development include rolling, reaching, sitting, crawling, walking, climbing, balancing, running, jumping, catching, throwing and striking. These fundamental gross motor skills will assist children's lifelong ability to participate in physical activity including sport and other recreational pursuits.

### How do challenge and risk encourage children's development?

Children enjoy and are motivated by play experiences that are fun and allow them to succeed. However, they also enjoy opportunities to take some risks and physical challenges and this helps them to extend and refine their gross motor skills.

Child care professionals have a responsibility to provide safe, well supervised gross motor experiences, but these can be made attractive,

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## The characteristics of typical gross motor development

Every child develops at his or her own pace and may reach milestones at different stages of their development. However, there are general characteristics that are typical of gross motor abilities at certain developmental stages:

- Babies are developing head and neck control, reaching, grasping, rolling, pulling themselves around, crawling and beginning to pull themselves up on people and furniture.
- Toddlers enjoy short bursts of high energy and are developing more controlled movements such as walking steadily, jumping, running, bending, stretching, twisting, climbing stairs and throwing and catching large, light objects such as soft balls, cushions and beanbags.
- Preschool age children are further developing physical skills such as running, jumping, climbing, balancing, hopping and skipping and have more coordinated arm, leg, head and torso movements.
- School age children have mastery over many gross motor skills but are still developing strength, fitness, coordination, concentration, body control and reflex responses.

exciting and challenging for children. Providing children with opportunities to explore and experiment with activities that encourage them to climb, swing, balance, run and jump can motivate children to participate and to take some risks.

## Cultural sensitivities

It is important for child care professionals to be aware of any cultural factors that may influence children's gross motor development. In some cultures, for example, gender expectations can affect how active children are allowed to be. Certain cultural practices discourage girls from being physically active and music, singing and dancing may be prohibited. Child care professionals can develop an understanding of the cultural considerations that influence individual children's gross motor development by speaking respectfully and sensitively with families about what activities are acceptable.

## Supportive environments for gross motor development

Outdoor play environments are ideal for encouraging children to be active and for promoting gross motor development. Simply being outside can sometimes be enough to encourage children's gross motor play. Outdoor environments that promote gross motor development require simple elements such as adequate open space for running, safe and carefully positioned equipment (fixed and/or moveable) and simple props such as balls, bats, buckets and spades. Remember that sun safety measures such as shaded areas over fixed equipment, avoiding the sun at times of the day when UV levels are at their peak and using hats and sunscreen when children play outside are important considerations.

If outdoor space is limited or there are adverse weather conditions such as extreme temperatures or wet weather, indoor and sheltered areas can be used for children's gross motor play. Some gross motor equipment such as soft fall mats and smaller climbing equipment can be set up indoors or under shelter. When setting up equipment indoors or in smaller, sheltered spaces, it is important that child care professionals make sure that it is placed away from walls and hard objects. The use of simple, interesting props such as balls, bean bags, scarves, blankets and ropes can also be useful for indoor gross motor play. Dancing, movement experiences and active games such as musical statues, scavenger hunts and follow-the-leader can also expand children's indoor gross motor experiences.

## Practical gross motor experiences

Babies and young children generally enjoy being active in periodic bursts, lasting a few seconds to several minutes. As children get older they become more interested in longer periods of active play and can benefit from participating in organised games and sports.

Child care professionals should support children's gross motor skills through a balance of planned and spontaneous experiences that are based on children's individual interests and abilities. Dance and movement experiences are also valuable for babies' gross motor development, though they will need adult support to participate in these.

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Babies need lots of time with consistent carers who encourage eye contact and physical movements. They also need close physical contact to bond with carers and for assisted physical movements, as well as space to move. Provide cosy corners with rugs and cushions, soft furnishings, interesting objects, soft mats and child sized furniture, as well as some safe, open space for rolling, crawling and climbing. Tummy play can help to develop head and neck movements and games such as peek-a-boo encourage head and body movements.

Toddlers enjoy repetitive, predictable games, throwing and catching large, soft objects such as balls and bean bags, and spaces for running,

climbing, jumping and balancing. Introduce play objects of interest such as large boxes and rugs and equipment for digging, sifting and pouring.

Preschool age children can benefit from obstacle courses, climbing equipment, tricycles, balls, bats, hoops, ropes, equipment for balancing and open space for running. Provide interesting props such as skittles, balloons, kites, parachutes and bubble blowing tools. Preschoolers also enjoy active group games such as 'Duck Duck Goose' and 'Simon Says'.

School age children often show an interest in organised sports such as soccer, netball, basketball, football, dance, ballet, tennis and swimming. Running games such as tag and 'What's the time Mr Wolf?' can also encourage school age children's gross motor play. Provide props such as a badminton set, frisbees and short and long ropes for individual and group skipping games.

## Conclusion

By creating many engaging opportunities for children to play actively, child care professionals perform an important role in supporting children's gross motor development and in improving their short and long term physical health outcomes ■

## References and further reading

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