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Cover Story: Let's Move Together!

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Moving and Learning Together
by Mary S. Rivkin, Ph.D.

“Reading! Ninety minutes of reading! For kindergarten, yet!” The school’s kindergarten teacher, Ms. Costello, was becoming increasingly annoyed with the intense focus on academics at the expense of other important parts of her program. “These children need exercise, and social skills, and music, and being outdoors...” her voice trailed off as she contemplated getting all the other important things into the day.

That night, thumbing through her resources and searching the Internet, Ms. Costello realized that, for the rest of the year, she would have to be creative about using other parts of her program to meet these goals and expectations. She decided that planned physical activities were going to have a central place in her kindergarten. And with so much to do and so little time, she would use them as a major way of teaching not only important physical skills, but also: cooperative learning, how to connect to the natural world, enjoy music, and of course, develop reading skills.

Ms. Costello was impressed by the message of NAEYC’s *Active for Life*, which emphasized that children need to have planned opportunities to develop physical skills, since development doesn’t just happen during recess—if, in fact, there is a recess. She learned that physical skills can be grouped in three ways: locomotor (running, walking, and skipping), stability (balancing, jumping), and manipulative (throwing, catching, and batting). Children who develop these skills as they grow can become confident, physically active adults, which is something our obesity-plagued society needs to encourage.

Feeling somewhat overwhelmed by the long list of skills she needed to think about and plan for, she took inspiration from early childhood expert Mimi Chenfeld’s observation: “Moving is as natural to learning as breathing is to living. We have to be taught not to move as we grow up in our inhibited, uptight society. Movement is a legitimate way of learning. It is *not* a frill. Movement is the way some people learn best. Children who rarely succeed will find many opportunities for building a healthy self-image and strengthening self-confidence if movement is used in all areas of the curriculum.”

Ms. Costello looked around her room and, understanding that movement is natural and needed, decided she would try to weave it into all aspects of her curriculum.

The Space for Movement

Today's trend toward viewing the classroom as a place for small motor activities and academic learning actually works against good movement education for young children. Large, open spaces are needed for the equipment and activities that promote good skill acquisition. A room with equipment stored for easy access—such as around the perimeter in action centers—is optimal. Children also need an open yard with storage space for equipment. In Ms. Costello's school, she was able to use the end of the hallway for her open space, hanging hooks on the wall for the baskets of balls, jump ropes, hockey sticks, and beanbags. She had a stack of cones and four hula hoops as well. For 30 minutes a day, she and her assistant organized the class in small groups and helped them move through action centers, solving problems such as "How high can you bounce that ball?" or "How can you hit that disc through the cone path?"

While she added motor activities to most of her centers, she also offered structured activities in the classroom. While half the class was in the large open area, she engaged the other half in cooperative physical activities. In the spring, she used a nature theme to unify the activities. Hula hoops on the floor were imaginary ponds through which silly "Frog" and "Toad" hopped backward. On the rug, little snake pairs wiggled, one hanging onto the other's feet, and tried to get out of the nest to find food. In the math center, strips of tape made a V on the floor a river that had to be jumped over while holding hands. Chairs lined up in a row created a tunnel for a nature walk, while a series of linked cardboard boxes were a cave for sleepy bears to emerge from. A wide board going from the floor to a chair was a mountainside to crawl or walk up, with children helping each other hold their balance.

Box: Getting Physical All Around the Classroom

Block Area A set of hollow blocks and accompanying boards will give children appropriately heavy objects to move around to create buildings, roads, horse pens, bridges, and other playable spaces. These materials are enduring, give children hands-on geometry and measuring experiences, as well as emotional satisfaction and opportunity for cooperative play. Set up a balance beam near this area, or encourage children to make walkways with the long boards and 2x6 unit blocks.

Art Area An easel with fresh paint and clean brushes should be a permanent part of the classroom as it allows large arm movements as well as creative expression. Two easels side-by-side encourage conversation and the sharing of art ideas, in addition to sharing observations about what happens when colors mix. Clay and play dough are great materials for pounding and pushing.

Music Area Tapes and CDs of music that foster movement can be provided for children to use individually or in small groups. Rhythm instruments should be available as well. Books of some favorite songs help children make the connection between what they are hearing and the written text, as do song charts posted nearby.

Dramatic Play Area Enormous amounts of physical energy will be expended by rearranging furniture and other props to make new play places in this area. By taking the basic “home” pieces and making stores, businesses, restaurants, doctor’s offices, etc., children learn spatial relations, verbalize and dramatize their experiences, and collaborate in mini-dramas. Children can construct and deconstruct, taking responsibility for the arrangements and experiencing pride in their accomplishments. Teachers can provide extra props as the need arises. Cardboard boxes and lengths of cloth are helpful extras.

Library Area Books about bodies, athletes, and recreational activities such as skiing, skating, and biking contribute to an atmosphere where bodies are valued and taken care of, as do stories about occupations that require physical strength— such as fire-fighting. Books about nutrition and good health will also promote an atmosphere where bodies are taken care of and valued.

Math Area Almost every physical exertion can be measured. For example, how far can you jump? Do you jump with one foot or two? Tape markings on the floor that allow children to measure their efforts. Invite children to measure their physical feats with the materials available in the math area (wooden cubes, rulers, Cuisenaire rods, etc.)

Classroom Chores Physical tasks such as wiping off tables and chalkboards, sweeping up after snack, emptying the trash, putting up chairs, and other housekeeping chores all give children a sense of social accomplishment and pride in their physical prowess. An important part of being “big” is being competent. Children know that they are only at the outset of mastering reading and other academic subjects, but they can take satisfaction in knowing they are fully functioning members of the classroom community. There is emotional power in being responsible—power enough to support them as they work to gain skills in other cognitive areas.

A Musical Addition As part of presenting movement activities, Ms. Costello frequently added background music, knowing that music organizes events for children. Marching and dance music inspired a flow of movement. In addition, she began singing simple songs, often with made-up verses about what was going on in the class. Children joined her, and made up songs too—a strong literacy building activity. The teacher had read that music is the joining of emotion and cognition in the brain, and was happy that her class seemed more “in tune” with her new emphasis on music and motion.

Box: Music and Movement Activities

Music adds a powerful organization to movement, giving it rhythm and color. The easiest thing to do is sing (once you give up worrying how you sound). Beating out a rhythm also unifies a group while allowing for individual expression. Here are some music and movement activities to try in your classroom:

- Sing when you are doing routine tasks. (Remember that making up the words is fine). Children will pick up on the joyful atmosphere you are creating and also begin spontaneous singing as they move around the classroom.

- Use familiar tunes as “frames” for songs describing movements. Many children know the tune to “Row, Row, Row Your Boat”, “Mulberry Bush”, “Frère Jacques”, and “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star”, and can easily sing along with you—especially if you have lots of repetition in the words. Children will often make up verses themselves, spurring on literacy learning.
- Sing songs that have movement in the words already, such as: “Head and Shoulders”, “Knees and Toes”, “If You’re Happy and You Know It”, “I’m a Little Teapot”, “Itsy Bitsy Spider”, “Looby Loo”, “Open, Shut Them”, “Ring Around the Rosy”, “Hokey Pokey”, “Wheels on the Bus”, and “Old McDonald”. Choose songs that everyone can act out all together, rather than have to wait for a turn, as is the case with a song like “London Bridge”.
- Add onto songs to enrich vocabulary and concepts. “Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes” can have numerous substitute body parts, such as *chest* and *stomach*, *hips* and *thighs*. Children enjoy suggesting the substitutes. Build on their knowledge.
- Keep the rhythm instruments near at hand—sticks, drums, tambourines—for children to latch onto when a song is brewing. Model clapping and knee slapping to music—celebrate the beat! Some children may feel shy about singing, but will heartily drum or clap.
- Go beyond the old classics and try the newer classics such as Hap Palmer, Tom Hunter, and Raffi. New songs are being written every day. Ask your colleagues to see what other teachers are using.
- Instrumental music encourages children to make their own interpretive movements. Try “The Nutcracker” by Tchaikovsky. You might suggest that they “move like the wind...gallop like wild ponies...dance like the daffodils (where there are some to refer to of course), to get things started. Provide silk or chiffon scarves for “floaty” music.

Guided Movement Outdoors

The kindergarten teacher tried to take the children outside every day. She often took a prop box outdoors with her, which included:

- Crepe paper streamers or ribbon sticks which inspired children to “run like the wind”
- Handfuls of silky scarves which became leaves or blossoms to fling and wave
- Cones that made “secret paths through the woods” where one child could lead another while describing woodsy events
- A basket of balls of various textures and sizes for throwing and catching
- Chalk for making lines to balance on and jump over

She was amazed by the way the children’s creativity blossomed in the fresh, spring air. “Wild horses” often galloped around the perimeter of the play space. “Tame horses” held jump ropes around their waists and patiently walked while “owners” held the reins. Ms. Costello always appreciated the children’s inventive movements, and tried to reinforce the themes with books whenever possible.

When teachers regard movement as a basic need of children and resolve to work *with* them rather than *against* them by unnecessarily inhibiting movement, it fosters a cooperative atmosphere both in and out of the classroom. Children do not need to feel ashamed of their physicality and restlessness. Being told to stand up and “get your wiggles out” is shaming. Well-known psychologist Stanley Greenspan, a regular contributor to *Early Childhood Today*, has said that for every event for infants and young children, there is a corresponding emotion. Positive emotions are created when children’s desires to be active are respected through appropriate activities.

Chart: Young Children’s Physical Skills

Below is a chart describing physical skills young children may have at different ages and stages. This chart will help you identify appropriate expectations for the physical abilities of the children in your program. Please keep children’s individual learning styles and individual developmental trajectories in mind when following this chart or other similar listings of abilities.

2 to 3 A child may:

- walk up and down stairs; jump off one step
- kick a ball
- stand and walk on tiptoe
- run; dodge

3 to 4 A child may:

- walk backward and forward unselfconsciously; turn and stop well
- jump off low steps or objects, but find it hard to jump *over* objects
- begin to ride trikes and pump on swings
- stand on one foot unsteadily; balance with difficulty on low four-inch wide balance beam while watching their feet
- play actively, but tire suddenly

4 to 5 A child may:

- skip unevenly; run well
- stand on one foot for five seconds or more; master the low balance beam
- alternate feet when walking down stairs; judge well when placing feet on climbing structures
- jump on a small trampoline
- show awareness of things in environment, such as cars on streets, but still need supervision and help protecting self
- have increased endurance in play, but need intakes of water and food

5 to 6 A child may:

- walk backward quickly; skip and run with agility and speed
- incorporate motor skills into games
- walk a two-inch balance beam easily; jump over objects
- hop well; jump down several steps; jump rope

- climb well; coordinate movements for swimming or bike riding
- show uneven perceptual judgment
- have high energy levels in play and rarely show signs of fatigue; find inactivity difficult and seek active games and environments

6+ A child may:

- have increased coordination for catching and throwing
- be able to participate in active games with rules
- sequence motor activities, as with gymnastics or shooting baskets
- have improved reaction time in responding to thrown balls or oncoming vehicles.

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Box: The Home-School Connection

Suggest that parents try these activities at home with their children. Emphasize that the most important aspect of these activities is that families can enjoy them together.

- Take neighborhood fitness walks. Hold hands while running and skipping down the sidewalk. Balance on low walls. Jump up and down low steps.
- Play catch with soft foam balls, balloons, or yarn balls. Your child will be more eager to throw and catch if they don't have to worry about hurt fingers.
- Have your child help carry laundry and groceries to build strong muscles. Acknowledge those muscles with admiration.
- Let your child vacuum for a few minutes under your supervision, praising his helpfulness and strength.
- Ask your child to retrieve objects that have rolled under furniture—the twisting and turning and effort to not bump his head builds coordination.
- Construct an obstacle course together made of chairs, pillows, and tables. Coordination is required to navigate this and you can gently increase the level of difficulty.
- Play music often and dance around a bit. Don't forget to sing too! Singing and dancing are universal forms of play. Your child loves to see you play and doesn't care a bit if you are off-key or out of step.
- Play some quick games of chase in a safe area. End with a hug when you catch your little bug!
- Minimize the time that your child is confined in a car seat. Walk or bike whenever possible.
- Offer and enjoy the most nutritious diet you can provide. Emphasize how you love to see your child grow and develop strength.

Keep in mind that while you may have to stretch to warm up before physical activities, your young child is typically ready to go. Also, remember that children really don't like repetitive drill activities or structured aerobics. Their minds are too active for boring repetitions. Keep physical activities fun with novelty and change!

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