

Integrating Movement into Preschool Curriculums to Promote Learning for ALL Children

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Everybody is talking about the importance of movement. As a pediatric PT and OT, we've been talking about it for 25 years! Brain development research and early childhood best practice both promote the critical importance of movement in a child's development. Incorporating movement activities into preschool classrooms is essential for many reasons. Well planned cooperative movement activities facilitate growth in the critical areas of social/emotional, receptive and expressive language, sensory-motor, and cognitive skill development. (Krueger and Sullivan-Coleman 2010)

It is important for movement activities to be structured and meaningful. Using universally designed activities, typically developing children and children with cerebral palsy, autism or Down Syndrome can all learn and play together. We know that the joy of movement, especially when accompanied with music, is an experience all children love to share. A child having difficulties organizing sensory information may avoid or be frightened by movement activities. A child with low muscle tone may look at movement as a lot of work. For these and any myriad of reasons, movement activities must be purposeful and organized.

We believe there are four key elements that must be incorporated into every movement activity. Understanding these four elements provides a framework for teachers and therapists to consider when setting up a movement activity. These include:

- 1) Music: Music is an important learning tool. The left side of the brain processes words while the right side of the brain processes music, thus using music activates the whole brain.(Harman) Music can be calming or alerting for the young child's nervous system and can help keep it at an optimal level for learning. Different rhythms and tempos can help in teaching concepts such as fast and slow.
- 2) Structure and Repetition: Providing structure with strong visual supports within movement activities enhances learning and promotes calmness and internal organization. Children need a predictable environment with clear expectations for optimal learning. Visuals enable most children to understand language better; visuals help children focus on the important information and maintain attention. Repetition is also so important. Brain research is illustrating the critical importance of repetition in order for the brain neurons to connect. (Miller, 2006) Children develop skill transference through repetition of tasks that contain variation. Activities for young children should not be changed too often and too quickly.
- 3) Play: Since play is child's work, we know children stay motivated when they are having fun and playing with friends. Movement activities should not be seen as a "break" from learning, but rather as a powerful way to learn! Research shows that all areas of development are

enhanced through movement activities and meaningful play. Movement activities engage multiple sensory systems, thus enhancing learning for all kinds of abilities and learners.

- 4) Social Interactions: Cooperative sensorimotor activities invite young children to experience the joy of playing with other children and learn how to engage in a simple group activity together. Opportunities for social referencing, turn taking and engagement facilitate friendships among all children.

Movement also promotes better integration of the sensory systems. A child having difficulties organizing sensory information may avoid or be frightened by movement activities such as the playground, because they may not be receiving accurate information through their senses. This can impact every other area of their learning. They may be overly sensitive to movement, touch, sights, and sounds, or not sensitive enough to the same sensory input. Some children show poor balance in movement activities or have difficulty coordinating their movements to learn such tasks as riding a trike. We refer to these children as having sensory processing difficulties. Often what first may look like “bad behavior” is actually a child with underlying sensory processing difficulties. Cooperative sensorimotor movement activities help work on the sensory processing challenges facing these children.

As our culture offers more and more sedentary television and technology game activities, research continues to emphasize the importance of optimizing early brain and motor development through movement, especially in young children. Let’s look at a few of our favorite movement activities in the context of sensory processing and the four key elements:

The Elastablast is a large dynamic stretch band made with soft colored fleece. It won the 1994 Parent’s Choice Gold Award for its unique contribution to movement education. If we were stranded on a desert island with twenty preschoolers, this would be our favorite toy choice. The strength, stretch, and rebound qualities of the Elastablast create a very motivating movement experience for all young children. We have developed a wide range of activities to use with the Elastablast, incorporating music, visuals and structure with each activity. We have developed basic actions that promote teamwork as well as help develop good sitting posture, overall body control, bilateral coordination and valuable tactile and kinesthetic sensory input needed for development. (Krueger & Sullivan-Coleman 2008) In addition the activities work on readiness skills such as colors and shapes, in playful, motivating ways. The Elastablast is an engaging and non-threatening activity for ALL children.

We also incorporate Yoga into the preschool day, whether it is used as a calming activity after gym time, or as a movement activity to increase body awareness and improve strength and bilateral coordination. Again we set a structure by giving each child a small mat, dimming the lights, and playing Yoga music. This sets the framework, and without words, gives children the structure they need to be ready to participate in postures. In addition to an adult modeling each pose, we have large visuals of each posture. The children love it and it begins to set the foundation for a life- long skill.

Obstacle courses in the gym and classroom are yet another great movement activity. An obstacle course is a versatile motor activity that can be structured in any setting. These courses provide children with a natural, organized way to learn basic movement concepts, while also gaining strength, using the two sides of their body in a coordinated manner and improving balance skills. Children move in, out, up, down, under and over to learn concrete spatial concepts while also developing motor planning skills. We always incorporate fine motor components in the obstacle course too such as crumpling paper to stuff a big Valentine. This adds more structure and meaning to the course while also working on important hand development skills.

These are three examples of the many movement experiences we incorporate into the preschool curriculum, but looking at them in the context of the key elements can be very helpful in planning your next movement activity. The ability to develop friendships and relationships is at the heart of real success in school and life. The seeds of learning those skills are planted in preschool and begin to grow as children gather together with a meaningful movement activity.

Elastablast® is a registered trademark of Dye-namic Movement Products



Paired with music, the dynamic properties of the Elastablast encourage playful social interactions while building language and readiness skills.



Obstacle courses provide a structured and organized way for children to gain strength, use the two sides of their body in a coordinated manner and improve balance skills.



Soft Yoga music, child-size mats, and Yoga visuals set up a structure for success in teaching Yoga to young children.

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