

Why physical development matters



What the EYFS says: *Physical development* involves providing opportunities for young children to be active and interactive; and to develop their co-ordination, control, and movement.

Most practitioners are well versed in the components of physical development and already provide opportunities and resources that enable children to be “active and interactive, to develop co-ordination, control and movement”, as outlined in the EYFS. If all areas of learning and development are planned for and given equal value, children should have many opportunities to use fine motor skills, gross motor skills and other aspects of physical development across a broad range of the activities and experiences.

The fact that physical development is a fundamental aspect of a child’s growth should not lead to complacency when it comes to planning. We all know that most babies will be able to roll over, pull themselves up and at a certain point take their very first steps. We similarly understand that they will develop hand-eye co-ordination as they grasp and steer small objects towards their mouths. As such, it is often tempting to view this pattern of development as inevitable for all children. In the same vein, we expect older children to run, climb and jump using any available piece of equipment or furniture.

It is therefore easy to assume that all of this will happen to all children with minimum input from adults because it follows the ‘natural course of things’. However, practitioners should be mindful to recognise that learning and development in the area of physical development is an active process which occurs at different rates and stages for different children and that this development shares the

characteristics of effective learning with all other areas of development and learning.

Physical development and the characteristics of effective learning:

- As children **play and explore**, they are investigating their environment, testing out newly found skills and abilities and experiencing new things.
- Babies who are reaching for objects and steering them towards their mouths are **actively learning**: they concentrate, try again and again then delight in the taste and touch of their ‘prize’.
- Children who are playing outdoors with, for example, milk crates and wooden blocks can be observed **creating and thinking critically** as they work together to build a bridge, testing out new ideas, creating new strategies when the bridge collapses and looking for others way to make it stable.

Perhaps more than any other area of learning and development, the area of physical development reminds us of the importance of focussing on the characteristics of effective learning, rather than concentrating solely on what the child is learning.

Development Matters, the non-statutory guidance which supports practitioners in implementing the statutory requirements of the EYFS, identifies effective learning as the child “reaching out” to relate to people and objects, a

concise but comprehensive description of a complex concept. Why would a child put energy into learning how to, for example, “pick up small objects between their thumb and fingers”, “kick a large ball” or “jump off an object” unless motivated to do so by the excitement involved in seeking challenges, making predictions, finding new ways of doing things or testing ideas?

The skill of the practitioner lies in fostering relationships and providing an environment that will support and encourage exciting, challenging activities that engage the child’s mind and body. This is a long way from an approach in which the adult simply looks for an opportunity to tick a box marked: ‘Can kick a large ball’.

Active engagement

The UK chief medical officers recommend that under-fives are physically active for at least three hours every day. While this would seem to be easily achievable, this is largely due to the common misconception that toddlers are always ‘on the go’. In fact, young children are unlikely to be able to sustain moderate or vigorous activity for more than a few minutes at a time and, instead, are likely to be physically active for short bursts throughout the day.

It is the responsibility of the practitioner to ensure that children are given the opportunity to engage in such activities. Long gone are the days when outdoor play consisted of brief sessions slotted into the daily routine, plus an occasional walk to the shops or local park, all governed by the availability or motivation of the practitioner rather than the needs of the children. For children who may be in a childcare provision for a large proportion of the day, free access to appropriate spaces and resources, both indoors and outdoors, is vital.

Another aspect of physical development that requires equal consideration is the promotion of good health and hygiene. The EYFS states that “children must also be helped to understand the importance of physical activity and healthy choices in relation to food”. Practitioners should be careful not to fall into the trap of planning formal or abstract activities that may look good on a planning sheet but do very little to embed healthy choices. Bringing, for example, a mango or a pineapple to the table for the children to prepare at snack-time and discussing where it grows and how it got there may be fun, but as a one-off activity, it gives children very little upon which to build their understanding of healthy eating. Likewise, marching children to the bathroom to wash their hands may result in children’s compliance with adult direction, but is unlikely to effectively embed good habits for hygiene.

Rather than planning one-off activities or ‘drilling in’ hand-washing and other routines, adults need to see emerging daily health and self-care habits as opportunities to, as put by *Development Matters*, “give feedback and help children to review their own progress and learning”. Practitioners should talk to children about what they are doing, how they plan to do it, what worked well and what they would change next time – in other words, support effective and life-long learning in these key life-saving and life-enhancing areas.

Most importantly, by taking this approach, adults can effectively support children in developing a real understanding of the value of physical activity and healthy choices, an understanding that lasts long after the pressure to comply with adult direction has gone.

In order to give value to planning for the elements of physical development that appear to be naturally occurring, practitioners should consider several things:

- What opportunities for physical play does the child have at home, both indoors and outdoors? Does the environment and community in which they live in restrict access?
- How does the planning and layout of the environment in your home or setting facilitate physical development through the characteristics of effective learning?
- Is there room to run, stretch, climb both indoors and out? If not, how can you overcome this, making sure, for example, that 15 minutes of sedate walking to the park is balanced by 15 minutes of physical activity that leaves both practitioners and children out of breath?
- What is the role of the adult when children are outdoors? Is it seen as a time when practitioners can get on with other tasks?
- Do you model the characteristics of effective learning when involved in physical activity yourself?
- Are opportunities for physical activity balanced by opportunities for rest, quiet and refuelling, with regular healthy snacks and drinks?

Adapted from *Why Physical Development Matters (Under 5, February 2013)*



Useful publications

Playing and Learning Outdoors (Pre-school Learning Alliance 2008) offers children the opportunity to engage with, explore and find out about the natural world, supporting all areas of early learning. For further details please visit www.pre-school.org.uk/shop.

The Pre-school Learning Alliance is the largest and most representative early years membership organisation in England. An educational charity, the Alliance represents the interests of over 14,000 member settings who deliver care and learning to over 800,000 families every year. We offer information and advice, produce specialist publications, run acclaimed training and accreditation schemes and campaign to influence early years policy and practice.

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