

A parent's guide to...

# Physical development

Hear 'physical development' and you'll probably think of the health benefits that a good diet and lots of running around can bring your child. In fact, physical development is fundamental to every aspect of your child's life.

Just how important it is to your child's all-round progress is now recognised in the revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), where it is described as a Prime Area of Learning and Development (see box overleaf).

## WHAT IS PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT?

'Physical development' can be subdivided and defined in various ways. There are the two broad categories of activity:

- gross motor skills, which involve using the body's big muscles and include movements such as running, jumping and stretching, and other whole body movements
- fine motor skills, which use the body's small muscle groups, for example, the hands, fingers, feet and toes, and include movements like grabbing, gripping and manipulating.

Important too are sensory development – sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell – and our ability to deal with all the



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sensory stimulation of the world around us.

The revised EYFS also includes 'self-care', such as brushing your hair and teeth, and 'healthy eating' in its definition.

## HOW WILL IT BENEFIT MY CHILD?

With the right mix of physical experiences, a child will

enjoy benefits that extend far beyond a strong, healthy body. Most importantly, repeated movement patterns like creeping and crawling and sensory experiences – like listening to music or playing in mud – play an essential part in brain development. This can make a difference to your child's:

- learning ability

- emotional development and well-being, and
- speech and communication.

By developing movement skills and abilities, a chain reaction of benefits opens up for a child:

- with gross motor skills come co-ordination, stamina and spatial awareness
- fine motor skills link with hand-eye co-ordination and dexterity and are important for playing music and sewing, as well as drawing and writing
- mastering movement skills builds confidence, brings greater mobility and opens the way for your child becoming more independent and enjoying greater freedom to explore, play and learn
- playing with friends and joining in games, in turn, helps a child to develop social skills and builds a sense of identity.

### WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

Be aware that muscles develop:

- from the inside out, so in a baby's earliest days it is the diaphragm – which helps them breathe – that is the hardest working muscle
- from top to bottom – so a child's back muscles strengthen before those in their legs, and
- from large to small – so a child needs to learn to run and jump and pull themselves up before they can learn to hold a pencil.

### No hurry!

As a parent, you will have watched your child grow and develop, eagerly looking for signs of progress and delighting



Children should be encouraged to get mucky and spend time crawling

in new stages. What we tend to forget is that each stage is there for a reason and we shouldn't rush through them. We are starting to understand that if children miss out, or hurry through, some of these early stages it can affect their learning when they eventually get to school.

### Again and again!

It's important that babies repeat movements again and again for only then can they build up the important nerve networks in the brain that enable them to learn and flourish. Have you noticed how your baby rolls over and then wants to do it repeatedly? Not only are they practising – and improving – a new skill, they are actually growing their brain!

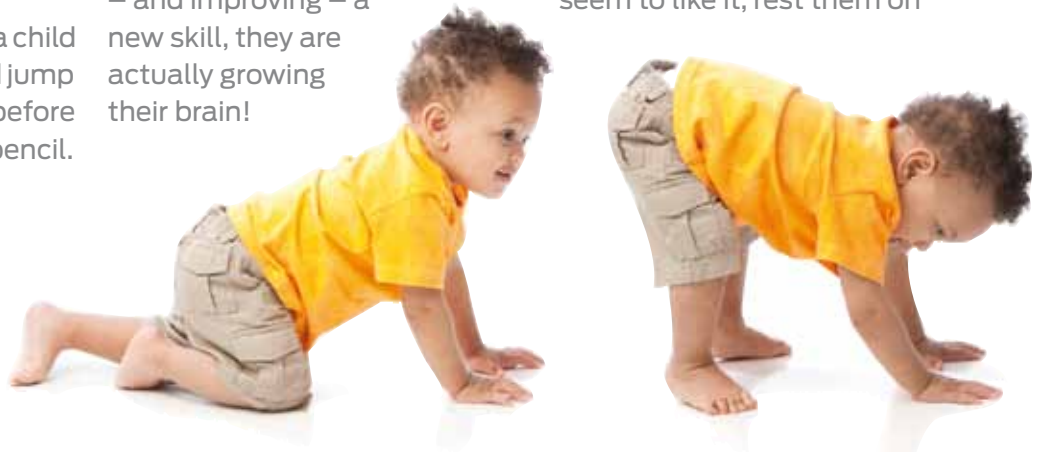
### WHAT DO I NEED TO DO?

To help give your child the best start in life, make the most of movement play experiences:

#### Hit the floor!

Babies nowadays can spend a lot of time stuck in buggies and car seats. They really need lots of opportunities to move right from the start. Spending time playing on their tummies or backs is perfect for their development, principally as it makes them aware of the internal organs and strengthens neck and spine.

Start with just a few minutes, and always supervised, so get down on the floor with them and enjoy the experience. If your child doesn't seem to like it, rest them on



your chest, on your tummy or over your knees.

Tummy time is good for older children too, especially those who didn't get much of it as babies, so play games and read stories on the floor. When you're in the park, wriggle like a snake or creep like a crocodile through the grass. At home, lie on your backs and jiggle and jive to your favourite music.

### At a crawl

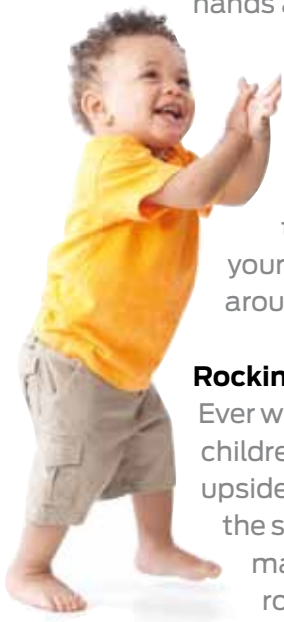
Parents sometimes feel they have to help their baby walk as soon as possible, but babies will do it when they're ready, and crawling is a really important stage that shouldn't be missed. Crawling helps strengthen the body, arms and legs, so increasing stability and co-ordination. As an alternating movement, it helps link both sides of the brain, important for many aspects of learning, including reading. Crawling also increases vision control.

Early walkers need to carry on doing lots of crawling and it's great for older children too. Have crawling races or play chasing games on your hands and knees.

Make tunnels to crawl through and play games on the floor to encourage your child to move around on all fours.

### Rocking and rolling

Ever wondered why children like to hang upside down on the sofa, or spin madly round on roundabouts?



## THE REVISED EARLY YEARS FOUNDATION STAGE

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) sets the standards that nurseries, childminders and other early years providers in England must meet to ensure that children develop and learn well and are kept healthy and safe.

The skills, abilities and knowledge that a child is likely to acquire in the vital early years, between birth and age five, are divided into seven Areas of Learning and Development in the revised EYFS: three Prime and four Specific.

### The Prime areas are:

- Physical Development
- Personal, Social and Emotional Development, and
- Communication and Language

### The Specific areas are:

- Literacy
- Mathematics
- Knowledge of the World, and
- Expressive Arts and Design

All the areas are important and interconnected. However, the Prime areas are seen as fundamental in the earliest years from birth to three, as they support all of children's development and later learning. Without enough of the right kinds of experiences in the Prime areas, children may struggle with their learning, find it difficult to communicate well and their confidence and emotional resilience may be affected.

Importantly, the revised EYFS recognises that children learn through:

- playing
- exploring
- being active
- creating, and
- thinking critically.

It acknowledges too that children develop at their own rates and in their own ways, so 'stages of development' have no fixed age boundaries.

It's all to do with their vestibular system, which is the same part of the brain that soothes them when we gently rock them in a cradle or sit with them in a rocking chair. It's why swings are so popular with children and roller-coasters loved by adults.

The vestibular system needs stimulating if it is to develop properly and children seek out these activities instinctively. Being held in loving arms and swung round and round, or gently rocked to sleep is nurturing your child's development in more ways than you might imagine.

Physical and emotional experiences like this are building and shaping your child's brain, creating nerve networks essential to later well-being and learning.

### Body maps

Young children are learning a huge amount in their first three years about what it means to be them – to be inside their body, to know where it starts and ends, to know that their body is there even when they can't see it. We call this the proprioceptive sense and it is something we take for



granted when it works well and is integrated with our other senses. It can take longer for some children and we think it can be one of the reasons some children find it hard to sleep alone or in the dark. Being able to see yourself, or feeling someone next to you, is reassuring when you haven't yet got a strong sense of your own body.

Physical activity of all kinds is great for building proprioception – stretching, climbing, rolling, etc. Rough-and-tumble games and any activity involving comfortable pressure is good, as well as little jobs around the house like lifting, carrying and sweeping. All these activities move muscles and joints in ways that send messages to the brain that help build our body maps.

### **Make a mess!**

You may not welcome all the extra washing, but there are several important reasons why children should be allowed to get mucky. Sensory experiences are very much part of physical development and positive experiences with touch, taste, smell, sound and the things they see all help integrate their senses well.

Touch in particular has a big impact on brain development so find out about baby massage classes near you – older children will enjoy being massaged too. Make the most of all the little opportunities for loving touch, even washing those mucky hands and faces.

### **At a stretch**

As your child grows and becomes more physically adept, make sure they can enjoy the



**Touch in particular has a big impact on brain development – even in older children**

freedom of the outdoors to build their range of movement skills. To guide you, you could consider two other groups of movement: locomotor or travelling skills and non-locomotor.

Travelling skills involve the body moving from one spot to another so includes skipping, jumping and sliding. With non-locomotor movements, you stay in the same spot, so these include stretching, bending, twisting and turning.

### **Play ball**

Throwing, tracking, catching and kicking – often referred to as ball or object control skills – bring many gains for children, from greater co-ordination and social skills to perseverance and confidence. They are difficult to master and children under the age of two lack the hand-eye co-ordination to tackle them, so build their skills slowly.

### **Brush up!**

It's important that children gradually learn how to care for themselves, and most children are keen to show their independence at dressing or using the toilet, especially when

they are ready for school. Give them plenty of time and a little bit of help.

### **Spinach, anyone?**

With the growing concerns about childhood obesity, it's important children learn about eating well and taking exercise. There are now nutritional guidelines for nurseries, so ask your child's carer for advice. You can download the 'Eat Better, Start Better' guidelines at: [www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/parents-carers/for-parents-carers/](http://www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/parents-carers/for-parents-carers/)

### **MORE INFORMATION**

*For a wide selection of articles on child physical development, visit: [www.livestrong.com](http://www.livestrong.com)*

