

Born to move

The first year of life is of vital importance in the development of movement skills and an understanding of the world, says **Barbara Isaacs...**

Recently I was reminded of the importance of movement in the early days of human life, when a colleague, who is expecting her first baby, arrived in the office beaming and sharing the happy news that she had felt her baby move for the first time. For all expectant couples, this is the first tangible sign of the new life. As the newborn experiences his/her first day of life, the parents and medical team search for reaction to the innate reflexes. These are the child's first expressions of a journey that is inextricably linked with a range of physical skills.

The transition from the womb to parents'/carers' arms is supported by various customs. In some cultures babies are swaddled in blankets to recreate the condition of life before birth. In others, the baby is submerged in water to feel the freedom of floating as she/he stretches out all limbs. Like Frederic Leboyer, the author of *Birth Without Violence*, who inspired my generation of parents by writing about the first days of life, Maria Montessori, in her *Secret of Childhood*, also advocates giving newborns as much sense of freedom as possible from the moment of birth, whilst establishing a close bond with the prime carer.

We do not often think about the importance of free movement in the first year of life, as we focus on a baby's feeding and sleeping patterns, and their general safety. Yet, it is fundamental to every child's development: the spine needs to unfold and strengthen; both hands and feet start to explore and learn about their new home. With the help of our limbs we begin to appreciate the tastes, smells and textures of our environment; most of the objects a baby discovers are also experienced by the mouth.

As an infant grows, the need to move increases as rolling over and more controlled movements of the head give him/her new opportunities to find out about the world. Having the freedom to practise these movements provides an essential progression towards slithering on the floor and gradual ability to crawl and sit before pulling oneself up, standing, and finally making the first steps.

It is important for prime carers and early years practitioners to create the optimum environment for babies from the moment of birth, as opportunities to move are closely linked with infants' fast-developing cognitive

capacities. We should really think not only about their safety but also about babies' facilities to grow in physical competence, which provide increased opportunities to learn about the world through the senses and develop vital connections in the brain. Placing desired objects just within the reach of an infant, so that she/he has to stretch and be challenged in getting to them, is one of the best strategies of encouraging physical development in first year of life. Ensuring that the baby is dressed in comfortable clothes that do not restrict free movement is also an important consideration, as is the unrestricted opportunity to explore the floor.

In such conditions we witness real determination and an urgent need to move, both inside the home and in the garden or park. When put on a blanket on the lawn, a baby will soon be found exploring the grass and all that can be found within it. Yet so much baby paraphernalia is designed to restrict natural movement and to contain, cots, high chairs, car seats. And whilst safety must always come first, we should give all infants opportunities for free movement, which will reveal first expressions of their individuality and their interest in the environment. Close observation will lead parents/carers and practitioners to a deeper understanding of the tremendous learning potential of infants, and to opportunities to name and share in the children's experiences and establish early relationships rooted in respect of individual needs.

More mobility, which usually comes with growing levels of physical skills such as sitting and crawling, will also mean more vigilance on the part of the adult. Sally Goddard Blythe, in her book *The Well Balanced Child*, explains the close relationship between movement and brain development and focuses on the links made between the right- and left-hand side of the brain in the cross-lateral movements that occur when babies crawl and climb stairs, or play passing

games with adults or more able peers.

Giving infants opportunities to move and freely explore their immediate environment certainly nurtures their cognitive skills, long before we really think of formal learning. [For more on the development of infants' movement skills, turn to page 38 - Ed.]

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Montessori Centre International has announced new 'Diploma in Montessori pedagogy - Birth to seven (Early Years Educator)' qualifications, due to launch September 2014. For further information, visit montessori.org.uk/mci_training

