

# steady go!

## READY

Whether they require balls, bats, skittles or tracks, sporting activities offer pre-school children a host of learning opportunities, says **Wendy Bowkett...**

**W**hen I first started teaching in nurseries in the early seventies, we used the playgrounds as often as we could, whatever the weather. There was rarely any shelter, but there was space to move and play, run and have fun. They were usually drab expanses of tarmac, but what they lacked in appearance was made up for in what we used the areas for.

Nowadays playgrounds are more usually a mass of colour, with flowerbeds, borders and plants in tubs, picket fences and summer houses, tables and benches, not to mention all the wooden play equipment set in bark or protective matting. But are these spaces used effectively?

When I visited an under-fives class late last year, their outdoor area was beautiful, colourful and busy. It was crammed with all manner of toys and equipment, but there was very little room for running at all. Climbing frames and the other play equipment provided the children with ample exercise opportunities but little space to do 'sports'.

For most pre-schoolers, running and playing actively are as natural as breathing. They have endless energy which should be channelled to provide fun and enjoyment, as well as giving them the chance to participate in a wide range of physical activity while developing an understanding of how their bodies work and move.

### How can parents help?

Many pre-schools have an annual sports day and, weather permitting, parents look

forward to cheering their child to the finishing line – they may even join in for their own special race! Perhaps a parent or two might like to add their own ideas and help organise an alternative 'sports' day – or you could invite parents who play a particular sport to bring along their equipment to show your children. Ask for unused items for an unusual display – e.g., which racquet goes with which ball?

Many physical activities for under-fives are 'cross-curricular' and, although not 'sports' in the traditional sense, they do cover all aspects of the Early Years Foundation Stage with a little planning and preparation.

### 1 Warming up (Communication, language and literacy)

When chatting with under-fives about 'sports', most children will mention football and, depending on the time of year, tennis and cricket. Some children at our nursery mentioned sailing, fishing and golf too. Yet any activity that involves rules or customs can be classed as a sport.

■ Make an 'I can do' book of physical activities that each child can physically do. Take photographs (with authorisation from parent/guardian) or cut pictures from magazines, adding words as appropriate. There are some excellent CDs for use in pre-schools that show children skipping, hopping, jumping, balancing, etc. that can be printed without the need for adult

guidance as required in accessing internet images.

■ 'Simon Says' is a fun activity, requiring listening and concentration skills, ideal for 'sports' indoors. Set up a trampete, balance bars and an area for rolling, and you're all set for gymnastics! But only do it if Simon says!

■ Do some simple warm up activities like wiggling fingers, making a fist, shaking hands and feet; wobble arms and legs, rotate shoulders, stretch high and crouch





Active adult **involvement** is essential in the early years to help **develop** each child's **strength**, balance, **control** and coordination

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low, then clap your hands and ask each child to use their body to make the shape of a letter or number. Some children may work together to form shapes and others may need a lot of guidance, but the reward is the fun you have! Are you flexible enough to make number and letter shapes?

## 2 The big race (Creative development)

Our nursery had a wonderful week preparing for our sponsored race day. Bunting and banners were hung along the fencing above chairs placed for visitors to sit around the race course (two chalk lines several metres apart) in the playground. Children chose two

activities to take part in and the monies raised went to a local children's charity. Some of the activities were quite inventive: two four-year-olds came up with the idea of walking backwards around the track, another child wanted to balance a beanbag on her head while scooting round the course, and a three-year-old wanted to somersault 10 times, which he completed indoors on safety mats! Try something similar – you'll be amazed at the ideas!

■ The flags were used by the spectators to cheer the participants and one was used by the race starter: "On your marks, get set, go!"

- Make a microphone from plastic tubing or cardboard rolls for the race commentator to excite the crowds.
- Give self-adhesive reward stickers for everyone taking part and double if they completed the course!

## 3 All round performance (Knowledge and understanding of the world)

At one nursery where I worked, we would regularly devise an obstacle course in the playground. Carry a beanbag on your head for a distance; pick a hoop and climb through it; jump over a plank of wood or length of string; step along a chalk line;



pedal a tricycle round to the next hurdle to jump over; through a tunnel to finish by rolling a ball into a box!

- Ask the children to think about an obstacle course. What will they start with and how will it end? Give them an outline map of the area they can use and help them to draw a plan of how it will look. Try it out. Is there enough room for all the activities? Perhaps limit the equipment they might use. Does that make the job easier?
- Talk about the differences between different games played. Is a bat or racquet used for rugby, tennis or hockey? Collect a selection of balls to compare with each other – which belongs to which sport?
- Discuss the changes to their bodies when they run for long. How do their legs feel when jumping? What do they need to keep healthy and strong?

#### 4 Fitter, further, faster!

**(Problem solving, reasoning and numeracy)**  
Physical activities are an ideal starting point for counting and adding on, estimating and measuring, as well as comparing:

- Are my five jumps longer or shorter than...?
- How many tries of kicking the ball to score a goal?
- While we count to 10, where will you cycle to?

**Set up some skittles, made with sand-weighted plastic bottles.**

- Roll a ball – how many have you knocked down?



**Tip: As under-fives are still developing their ball skills, always keep this type of game away from other physical activities. Wayward thrown balls and stray rolled or kicked balls are hazardous to children on wheeled toys or playing other games.**

- How many skittles need to be knocked down to leave only three?
- Guess how many rolls of the ball it will take to knock down all the skittles.

**Races are an excellent way for children to learn ordinal numbering.**

- Line up three or four tricycles and their riders. Explain the 'circuit' layout – no cutting corners! Ready, steady, go!
- Guess who will reach the finishing line first, second, third.
- Who was the fastest / slowest? Were they last or first to finish?

#### 5 A sporting chance

**(Physical development)**  
Although pre-schoolers may not be ready for competitive games, there are numerous sporting activities that can be adapted and simplified to suit them. All ball games help to develop hand-eye coordination, dexterity, balance and control, allowing children to move with confidence in a large space aware of others around them. They also give children the opportunity to improve their skills, especially for developing a sense of direction when throwing, aiming and catching.

- **Cricket** – draw stumps with chalk on a wall or fence, and place a marker on the ground a few feet away. Roll, rather than throw, the ball at the cricketer with the bat. If the ball is hit, the cricketer can run to the marker and gain a run. Limit each batsman to a number of minutes, or an over (six rolls of the ball).

- **Football** – no need for a team; use two upturned buckets set apart as the goal posts preferably near to a blank wall or fence (to save lots of running after stray balls), a large ball, a goalkeeper, a footballer or two and away you go!

■ **Netball or basketball** can be played with a hoop held by an adult at a height of a little over a metre and a ball. Practise throwing and aiming over the hoop so that the ball lands through the gap.

#### 6 Play for the team

**(Personal, social and emotional development)**  
Turn-taking and teamwork during 'sports' activities allow children to learn the value of friendship and partnership, and help develop good relationships.

- Follow the leader is a prime example of working in a group or team, taking charge or towing the line. Everyone has the opportunity to lead others through a series of movements; hopping, running, jumping, balancing or twirling. Concentration, observation and listening skills are needed to keep up!
- Take the idea of musical bumps or statues a step further. When the music stops, take a partner and help each other to balance on one leg, without wobbling! How difficult is that?
- Copy a pattern of movements – like a triple jumper: run, hop, jump, run, hop, jump! Use a trampete – jump, clap, sit. Try a beanbag – balance it on a head, walk, kneel. Let children invent their own triple pattern of movement.