



Scott Warrington suggests using stories and imaginative themes to create stimulating physical activities for your children...



Every parent, carer, teacher and early years practitioner understands the importance of developing young children's literacy and numeracy, but what's sometimes overlooked is the importance of physical activity and the early development of their fundamental movement skills. We know it's vital to introduce reading, writing and numbers as early as possible in a child's life, but do we afford children the same opportunities when it comes to their physical ABCs (agility, balance and coordination)?

There's much evidence from bodies such as the National Institute for Clinical Excellence and the Youth Sport Trust which recommends that young children should be physically active and start to develop their fundamental movement skills at the earliest possible age. Highly regarded sports scientist Istvan Balyi's Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model suggests that up to the ages of eight or nine years old, children should experience a range of skills and movements rather than sport-specific activities. This is to ensure children develop a 'broad-base' of skills, helping to set them up for an active lifestyle in their later years.

Unfortunately, many sport and physical activity programmes are not appropriate for younger children, leading to them either taking part in activities designed for older children (which can lead to some children not engaging with the activities), or which are sport-specific, meaning the children taking part are only developing a certain set of skills and movements. In England in particular, the sporting landscape is dominated by football and other 'traditional' sports, and whilst these activities have lots to offer children, it's up to those responsible for their care and development to offer a variety of opportunities to engage in physical activity and develop a range of skills and movements.

reasons
to get **act**

findoutmore

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Getting physical

Stories are a fantastic way to stimulate the imaginations of children and subtly introduce learning points and activities. We all know how much children love Peppa Pig, Thomas the Tank Engine, etc. and the basis of character/story-themes can be used to similarly engage young children in their learning. Thinking creatively can lead to some really exciting and inspiring activities that can help develop children's physical skills – below are a few pointers to help get you started.

1 Choose an enjoyable theme

Whether it's pirates, princesses, monkeys or magicians, you'll know just what your children enjoy drawing, painting or dressing-up as. Create a simple story using these themes and characters, and use basic equipment as props to get the children active and involved. The imagination of young children is a fantastic tool for professionals to build upon when it comes to engaging them and introducing new skills, especially when it comes to physical activities.

Example: *Marvin the Monkey has lost his favourite banana and is travelling around the jungle trying to find it.*

Introduce movement and sport skills

Think about how you can incorporate multi-skill development and physical activity into the story you've created. Think creatively and use the equipment available to you in your setting. It might be cones that children can run in and out of, bean-bags they can throw and catch, or balance beams they can travel across. Link the activities to the story so the children think

and feel like the characters you've created.

Example: *Children pretend to be Marvin the Monkey by 1) running as fast as they can around the hall to try and find their banana, and 2) throwing and catching a yellow ball or bean-bag which is the lost banana they've finally found.*

3 Work on teaching points for each skill

Though it's vital that children are given the freedom to play as they wish and explore their own abilities and environments, it's also important to encourage correct movements and techniques when it comes to physical activity, even at this early age. These teaching points should be highlighted before the children undertake the activities – verbally or via a demonstration of the activity – and reinforced at the end to emphasise how to perform them successfully.

Example: *When running children must keep their head up so they can see what's around them and travel lightly on their tip-toes to help develop their speed and agility. When throwing and catching children must keep their eyes on the ball/bean-bag, bring their hands together and gather it into their chest to stop it from spilling out.*

4 Constantly praise and reinforce

As with all educational activities, positive reinforcement is a key factor to delivering successful physical activity programmes. Children enjoy the feeling of achievement and success, and it's vital in these early experiences of sport and physical activity that they're exposed to this as much as possible. Good effort and correct behaviour are what deliverers should focus their positive feedback on so that children will feel good about what they've been part of and look forward to taking part in the activities next time. Simple aspects of sportsmanship can also be introduced such as following rules and instructions, respect for others and being part of a team.

Example: *All the children give each other a round of applause at the end of the activity, each child gives the deliverer a high-five as they finish the activities, or says "well done" to one other child in the group.*

What's healthy?

In July, the Department of Health issued new physical activity guidelines for under-fives...

Before they're walking

Physical activity should be encouraged from birth, particularly through floor-based play and water-based activities.

After they're walking

Children of pre-school age who are capable of walking unaided should be

physically active daily for at least 180 minutes, spread throughout the day. (Based on current averages, this equates to an extra 30–60 minutes per day.)

All under-fives should minimise the amount of time spent being sedentary (being restrained or sitting) for extended periods (except time spent sleeping).

Visit tinyurl.com/68zn7ml to download fact sheets explaining these guidelines.

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