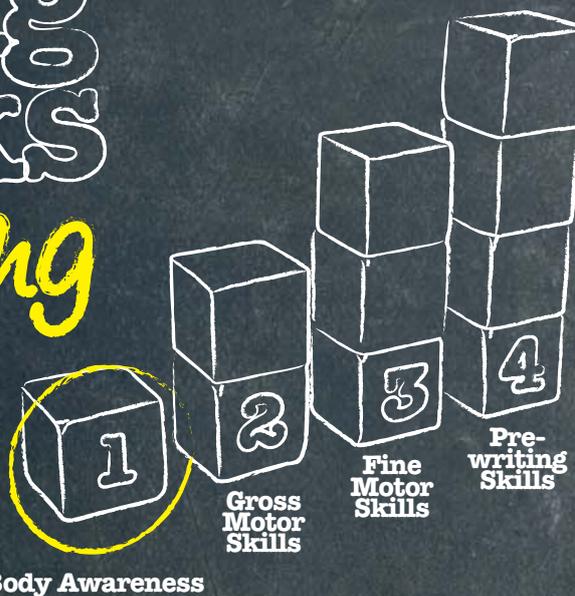


# THE Building blocks for learning



Developing motor skills is about taking one step at a time, says paediatric occupational therapist

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This new series of articles is going to introduce you to best practice in encouraging nursery age children to develop motor skills, thus preparing them developmentally for transition into primary school.

Basic skills are vital and, once mastered, allow the child to concentrate on learning higher cognitive skills. The steps we are going to take are developmentally appropriate in that one step comes before the next.

## Why are motor skills so important?

Learning to move your body and coordinate your arms and legs is a crucial phase of development. Children have to learn to make careful, planned, large movement before they can refine this to the more intricate motions required for tasks such as handwriting and cutting. Children need to have body awareness – which is more than just knowing you have arms and legs! It's about having an internal awareness of your body and where it is without needing to look. For example, being able to close your eyes and know where your hands are. You would be surprised how many children lack this ability.



Young children are still using a great deal of 'brain energy' to enable them to know about their body position, and when they are applying their concentration elsewhere, you often observe them fall, slide off a chair and be generally uncoordinated.

The child with developed body awareness is more able to assist with dressing and pushing his arms into his sleeves. He is more able to move around and enjoy nursery, and better able to coordinate his hands and fingers in play activities.

Body awareness informs the brain in developing a dominant side, and becoming more fluent in tasks which require a clearly defined dominant hand, such as painting and colouring. Without body awareness, dominance does not become established and this can lead to ongoing difficulties for the child.

## Step 1 - body awareness

Body awareness comes from our proprioceptive sense which informs the brain about our position and movement in space. Receptors are in our muscles and joints and activate with pressure and movement. When body awareness has developed, we automatically know where our body is in space and where our limbs are placed. For young children, this skill is less automatic and develops gradually over time.

## 5 Playful ways to develop body awareness

**1** Place mirrors in the dressing up corner and encourage children to look at themselves. Maybe they would like to check out their dressing up outfit? What do they like best about their costume? Is everything on the right way around? Children can stand next to a friend to compare height, hair colour, or outfits.

**2** Simon Says or action songs are great to use at nursery, but have you ever thought about asking children to try these activities with their eyes closed? Observe which children can still do the actions, and who is less aware of what to do unless they have their eyes open.

**3** Make a small obstacle course with items to climb over, under or through. Children might squeeze through a cardboard box, step into a hoop and bring it up over their head.

**4** In pairs, ask children to stand with their hands touching their partner's hands. As they move, can the children stay together? Can one child take the lead and the other follow?

**5** Get the children to draw around each other on wallpaper. They could try this lying on the floor or standing against a wall. Now ask them to paint their portrait on the body shape.