

PROMOTING PRESCHOOLERS' GROSS MOTOR DEVELOPMENT THROUGH LITERATURE AND MOVEMENT ACTIVITIES



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Blair: “I can’t slide goodly!”

Teacher: “Here, let me help you. I can put some powder on the slide. Now try it!”

Blair: “I did it! It is much better when you put powder on the slide! Can you put some more?”

THIS WAS A CONVERSATION between a 4-year-old and her teacher as the teacher helped Blair at a slide on the preschool playground. Running, balancing, chasing, swinging, jumping, hopping, galloping, skipping, kicking, throwing and catching balls, and sliding contribute to preschoolers’ physical development (Morrison, 2015). Preschoolers simply cannot learn physical skills through just playing (Battaglia et al., 2019; Pica, 2013) since they tend to repeat some of the same patterns of movements. To ensure early and sustained success for children’s healthy development, carefully designed movement environments and progressive educational experiences are needed (Haibach-Beach et al., 2018).

This article presents the importance of gross motor development for preschoolers and describes three developmentally appropriate physical activities through the use of literature and

movement with music. Literature refers to “the imaginative shaping of life and thought into the forms and structures of language” (Huck et al., 2000, p. 4). Early childhood teachers already use books and stories throughout their curricula; thus, this strategy will not require extensive time to implement in classrooms. We also present a list of books that children and teachers can read to promote children’s gross motor skills (see Table 1).

The Importance of Gross Motor Development for Preschoolers

Activities that promote children’s gross motor skills are vital to maintain healthy bodies because inactivity is one cause of obesity in young children (Gomes, 2021; Harlow et al., 2020).

Children’s busy schedules, less outdoor playtime, and playing indoors with computer-related games contribute to their obesity (Izumi-Taylor, 2022). Preschoolers need to be active throughout the day (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.; Morrison, 2015) and to learn about themselves, others, and environments through unconstrained physical activities (Harju, 2022).

Children are innately drawn to moving around their environments, and responding to and moving with music

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can increase children's cognitive development (Battaglia et al., 2019). As children's brains develop, their balance and perceptual skills improve, making it possible for them to control their own gross motor skills (Pangelinan et al., 2011). When preschoolers have well-developed motor skills, they find it easy to engage in physical activities. One way to engage children in movement activities is through literature (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2012).

Benefits of early development of gross motor skills through literature and movement activities are well-known (Battaglia et al., 2019), and teachers need to implement such activities for preschoolers every day. Because preschoolers' early experiences with literature and movement activities can determine their later cognitive knowledge and attitudes (Battaglia et al., 2019), teachers must use developmentally appropriate teaching strategies (Coppie & Bredekamp, 2009). Much of preschoolers' learning should come from the large muscles (Morrison, 2015), so they need to engage in early gross motor activities. Through careful observations of children, teachers can determine what kinds of movement activities they can offer to their charges.

Promoting Gross Motor Skills Through Literacy and Movement Activities

Children's literature functions as a link between what children see and what they think about the world around them (Galinsky, 2020). Reading and discussing carefully selected books can support children's developmental skills that they need to learn (Meredith et al., 2020). Such books can encourage and support children's sensory motor, fine motor, and gross motor skills. Children's books are versatile, and children can develop their fine motor skills by pointing to books and turning pages. They also can develop gross motor skills by imitating body postures and movements in the books (Gonzalez-Mena, 2014). Teachers can select books that encourage children's engagement in movement activities.

Creating authentic environments that encourage children's imagination and creativity through movement is important in promoting their gross motor development (Edwards et al., 2009). Through reading high-quality books, teachers can offer preschoolers opportunities to develop the basic movement skills (Bailey, 2006). When teaching movements, teachers can use direct approaches such as modeling, demonstrating, and imitating (Edwards et al., 2009). Preschoolers enjoy nursery rhymes, including "Simon Says," "Follow the Leader," "Three Little

Table 1

LIST OF BOOKS ON PROMOTING CHILDREN'S MOTOR SKILLS

- Adrienne, M. (2005). *Move it! Motion, forces and you*. Kids Can Press.
- Bradley, K. (2005). *Forces make things move*. HarperCollins.
- Buehner, C. (2004). *Snowman at night*. Dial Books.
- Burk, R. (2021). *Stomp, wiggle, clap and tap: My first book of dance*. Rockridge Press.
- Carle, E. (1995). *The very busy spider*. The World of Eric Carle.
- Carle, E. (1999). *From head to toe*. Harper Festival.
- Cauley, L. (1992). *Clap your hands*. G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers.
- Craig, L. (2012). *Dancing feet*. Knopf Books for Young Readers.
- Cronin, D. (2005). *Wiggle*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers.
- Edwards, D. (2021). *My first animal moves: A children's book to encourage kids and their parents to move more, sit less and decrease screen time*. Explorer Publishing.
- Evans, L. (2000). *Snow dance* (C. Jabar, Illus.). Scholastics.
- Jackson, C. (2020). *Animal moves at the zoo*. Spring Willow Books.
- Litwin, E. (2010). *Pete the cat: I love my white shoes*. Harper Collins.
- Mitton, T. (2016). *Dinosaurumpus!* Cartwheel Books.
- Montague, M. (2021). *Damien the cow: A yoga story for kids*. Independent Publishing.
- Neitzel, S. (1990). *The jacket I wear in the snow*. Scholastics.
- Page, R. (2018). *Move!* Clarion Books.
- Raffi. (2020). *Shake my sillies out*. Knopf Books for Young Readers.
- Rosen, M. (2003). *We're going on a bear hunt*. Aladdin Paperbacks.
- Smee, N. (2007). *Clip-clop*. Boxer Books.
- Stille, D. (2004). *Motion: Push and pull, fast and slow*. Picture Window Books.
- Thomas, J. (2009). *Can you make a scary face?* Beach Lane Books.
- Wallace, A. (2020). *How to catch a snowman*. Sourcebooks Wonderland.
- Willems, M. (2010). *Can I play too?* Hyperion Books for Children.
- Williams, L. (2019). *The old little lady who was not afraid of anything*. Harper Collins.
- Yoo, T. (2012). *You're a lion! And other fun yoga poses*. Nancy Paulsen Books.

Pigs,” “Rain, Rain, Go Away,” “One Potato, Two Potato,” and “Pussy Cat, Pussy Cat” (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2012). Children and teachers could record their singing and use that for movement activities (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2012). Teachers can enhance children’s enjoyment of movement by providing them with simple instruments and enough room to move around, selecting developmentally appropriate books and songs, keeping activities short, and using a direct approach.

Activities to Develop 4-Year-Olds’ and Older Preschoolers’ Gross Motor Skills

The following are several examples of physical activities that involve the processing of sensory-motor stimulation, integration, and adaptation that would result in greater benefits of healthy motor development for children.

Step Reaction Time on Visual or Auditory Signal

Benefits of the Activity

This activity requires children’s eye-foot coordination, wherein children can learn decision-making skills. Children are encouraged to react as quickly and accurately as possible.

Book and Summary

Together the teacher and children can read Watty Piper’s *The Little Engine That Could* (1990) and discuss the importance of trying things. Children have been enjoying this classic story for over 60 years.

Strategies Using the Book to Support

Children’s Gross Motor Skills

Teachers can ask children questions: “What do you think of this little engine? Can we move like this little engine? Do you think this little engine has a positive ‘can-do’ attitude? Have you ever said to yourself, ‘I think I can?’” Then they can invite children to participate: “So, everyone, let’s try this game and see what happens.”

Teachers can model how to move like an engine, and then introduce the following fun physical activities to children:

- Ask the children to stand with both feet apart, approximately the width of the shoulders.
- Draw one square in front of the left foot and one square in front of the right foot. Draw one square behind the left foot and one square behind the right foot.
- Use a pointing finger pointing in a direction as a visual signal or verbal signal, such as “left-front,” “right-front,” “left-back,” or “right-back.”

- Ask the children to react to the signal as fast as possible by stepping on the designated targeted square, then quickly return to the original start position.
- Wait for the next signal.

Musical Chairs

Benefits of the Activity

This activity encourages children’s trust and confidence and also promotes attention skills. Teachers need some music, but no chairs.

Book and Summary

Children and the teacher can read Jeremy Tankard’s *Grumpy Bird* (2007) and talk about the importance of being friends. They can discuss how we might feel grumpy when waking up, but if our friends stick with us to walk everywhere, we might just feel fine and happy. Grumpy and his friends walked and walked, and then he felt better because of his friends.

Strategies Using the Book to Support

Children’s Gross Motor Skills

The teacher can ask questions about this book, such as “Have you ever felt grumpy after getting up? Do you sometimes feel like you don’t want to get out of bed?” To reflect on children’s understanding of the book, the teacher can ask, “Why do you think the grumpy bird felt better after walking? Do you have friends who are nice to you even if you are grumpy?” Asking open-ended questions can promote children’s thinking skills. After the discussion, the teacher can announce, “I know the grumpy bird and friends walked a lot, and now let’s walk in a circle with music. Listen to the music and pay attention when it stops. Watch how I do it.”

- Have the children form a circle, then turn toward their right (left shoulders to the center of the circle).
- Ask them to move comfortably closer, so that the circle becomes smaller.
- Put on some music and ask the children to walk in a circle.
- Stop the music. The children will bend their knees and sit on the thighs of the child behind them in a “chair pose.”
- Start the music up again.
- Variations: Have the children turn around and move in the opposite direction or raise their arms overhead as they sit.

Mountain Range

Benefits of the Activity

Creativity and problem-solving skills will be developed through this game. It requires the group to cooperate and move together; it encourages camaraderie.

Book Summary

Barnyard Dance! by Sandra Boynton (2014) is a fun book for children and the teacher to read. It is about high-spirited and fun animals who want to dance, clap their hands, and stamp their feet. It is easy to read, and its simple pictures are enjoyable.

Strategies Using the Book to Support Children's Gross Motor Skills

The teacher and children can discuss this book's beautiful illustrations and colors. The teacher can ask the children what they think of these fun-loving, dancing animals: "Would you like to dance with the animals? Can you stomp your feet? Can you clap your hands? Are you ready for a barnyard dance?" After discussing the barnyard dance, the teacher can model what they are going to do by saying, "Now, everyone dance and move around; we can do this mountain range movement. I'll show you how to do this, and we'll try it."

- Demonstrate the mountain pose by placing the hands in a peaked position. Then ask the children to stand side by side in a line in mountain pose, their feet hip-width apart. Each foot must touch the foot of the person on each side.
- The group has to walk across the room without separating their feet from those of their partners.
- If the group separates, they must begin again.
- Variation: Ask the children to walk on their toes.

Conclusion

By understanding how preschoolers' physical and gross motor skills develop, teachers can recognize why active learning is important. Preschoolers need to learn and test their bodies, and they need to learn what they can do and how they can do it (Morrison, 2015). Highly skilled teachers implement integrated music and movement activities with literature to support preschoolers' physical development. Developmentally appropriate literature and movement activities with music can support such development in children. As they engage in such activities, children strengthen the development of their brains through cognition, balance, and perception. When teachers offer in-

triguing music and movement activities through literature daily, children experience the joy and beauty of physical activities. •

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