

Physical development

What the early years foundation stage (EYFS) framework says about physical development

Physical activity is vital in children's all-round development, enabling them to pursue happy, healthy and active lives.

Gross and fine motor experiences develop incrementally throughout early childhood, starting with sensory explorations and the development of a child's strength, co-ordination and positional awareness through tummy time, crawling and play movement with both objects and adults.

By creating games and providing opportunities for play both indoors and outdoors, adults can support children to develop their core strength, stability, balance, spatial awareness, co-ordination and agility.

Gross motor skills provide the foundation for developing healthy bodies and social and emotional well-being.

Fine motor control and precision helps with hand-eye co-ordination which is later linked to early literacy.

Repeated and varied opportunities to explore and play with small world activities, puzzles, arts and crafts and the practise of using small tools, with feedback and support from adults, allow children to develop proficiency, control and confidence.

Core Strength and co-ordination

Why core strength and co-ordination is important

Core strength is children's ability to keep their position and move from the centre of their body outwards. If core strength is underdeveloped, children will struggle with gross motor skills and fine motor skills, stability and balance. This will affect their ability to coordinate more refined movements.

Coordination is the brain's ability to control movement of different body parts at the same time. When babies are born, their most developed body part is their head, and the least developed is their feet. It takes 2 months before an infant recognises their hands as their own.

To be confident with movement children must develop both core strength and coordination.

Developing core strength and co-ordination supports children's ability to communicate, learn language and eventually read and write. Whole body movements contribute to the accurate use of small tools and delicate materials. Writing, drawing and painting should be considered as whole-body skills.

What this means in practice

Children must have plenty of opportunities to play indoors and outdoors. They need to be active and use their whole bodies in as many different, challenging ways as possible. Over time children have more control over their bodies, and what they can do. Less happens by chance, and movements become more deliberate, being achieved with confidence.

Children are naturally curious and love to play physically, exploring possible movement opportunities. Movement play, encouraged through challenging spaces and open-ended resources, allows children to start their own games.

Observe how the core strength of babies and children is developed. You can then decide if what you provide, indoors and outdoors, is meeting their physical development needs.

When observing babies and young children at play, notice their 'postural reflexes' that support their ability to sit up, stand still, maintain balance and move in a coordinated way.

Observe their confidence using tools like a gardening trowel, and wheeled toys such as a wheelbarrow, tricycle or balance bike.

Plan what you provide, so babies and young children can roll, crawl, walk, run, jump, balance, throw, catch, and ride wheeled toys. Well-planned play spaces let children move freely, developing their body strength.

This core strength helps develop senses, spatial awareness, gross motor skills, fine motor skills, visual development and limb co-ordination.

Gross motor skills

Why gross motor skills are important

Gross motor skills are the skills that children develop using their whole body. You can see this from a baby's earliest efforts to move and travel, to young children coordinating whole body movements. By using their whole bodies children become increasingly confident, agile and flexible.

All children need to be confident in their gross motor skills and movements. For some children this confidence will come in smaller steps and take longer to achieve. Be patient, giving them time and space, and encouraging words. Take expert advice for children with physical and mobility additional needs. This may increase childrens' development of muscular strength, ability to take well intentioned, safe risks and become increasingly well-coordinated.

Gross motor skills affect wellbeing and give children opportunities to socialise in play. Confidence and coordination in gross motor skills are essential for children in developing their fine motor skills.

What this means in practice

Children need access to indoor and outdoor environments that help develop their gross motor skills, with you to guide and support them, every day. **Outdoors is where children have the freedom to be as physical as they can be.**

Walking to local green spaces can help build children's stamina. If babies and children have to be pushed to a destination, on arrival, give them opportunities to move around on the woodland floor, the grassy area in the park or the pebbly beach.

When considering children's gross motor skills think of crawling, walking, running, jumping, hopping, skipping, creeping and slithering, spinning, turning, twisting, pushing and pulling. Babies need to have daily 'tummy time' to develop their muscles for sitting and crawling.

Older children engage in weight bearing skills and develop upper arm strength, mobility, control and balance. This could be by hanging from climbing equipment or lifting and manipulating large, heavy and awkward objects.

You should notice what children are doing physically and make sure that what they can use indoors and outdoors is challenging enough. You need to know about each child's physical development.

Children need to take safe risks. However, most children will self-regulate and not attempt movements that they are not confident with.

Consider what equipment you have in your setting that support gross motor skills such as den making materials. Try to have a variety of objects children can lift, transport and organise on their own.

Try to help children to be physically active for at least 3 hours each day.

Fine motor skills

Why fine motor skills are important

Fine motor skills involve small muscles working with the brain and nervous system to control movements in areas such as the hands, fingers, lips, tongue and eyes.

Developing fine motor skills helps children do things like eating, writing, manipulating objects and getting dressed.

A baby uses their fingers and thumbs to pick things up. They will also feel and taste objects with their mouth and lips. An older child will use their fine motor skills for actions like pulling up a zip or using scissors to cut up paper. These important skills will contribute to a child's development and independence across all areas of learning.

Research shows that the development of fine motor skills depends on the development of gross motor skills and that a joined-up approach to physical development is important. Young children need many opportunities to develop fine motor skills alongside gross motor skills so they can become confident to explore the world around them.

From a very young age, children are exploring different materials. With these materials a child will naturally start to make marks. Babies might use their whole bodies to make marks with mud, paint or cornflour in a tuff tray, or with food at mealtimes. A toddler might splash in a puddle and notice the prints they make.

Mark making is an important experience for children because over time they can attribute meaning to their marks. Combined with a child's developing dexterity, these marks become refined and deliberate, until the point at which the young child labels their marks, either as pictures or writing.

What this means in practice

You can help children develop fine motor skills by providing an environment, experiences and activities that encourage a joined-up approach to physical development.

Your environment should provide rich and varied opportunities for large and small movements. For babies this may involve providing materials that they can grasp, grip, bash, squash and poke such as crinkly paper, wooden spoons and stretchy fabric. For older children, provide activities that require small hand movements such as stirring a magic potion, pegging washing on a line or exploring wet and dry sand.

Provide interesting experiences which help children practice fine motor skills. Cooking, gardening, sewing, fixing and making things are all good examples of

activities that involve using tools and small movements with accuracy and precision. The fine manipulative control skills developed in these activities will begin to provide the foundations for holding a pencil for drawing, mark-making and writing when children are developmentally ready.

You should make sure that every child is supported in developing their fine motor skills. When a child experiences difficulties, you can support them by making changes to materials or activities, or by giving gentle praise and encouragement.