Physical development: Activities for preschoolers

Movement activities help children become aware of their physical presence, spatial relationships, self-control, balance, and breathing. Children enjoy activities that involve the senses and movement; they are natural explorations and they are fun! As a result, children are more attentive and engaged, which can heighten the learning experience at hand.

**Proprioception and body awareness**

As children practice moving their bodies—arms, legs, hands, feet—in all directions, they gain a sense of the space around them and how to control their movements in that space. In the dance world, the term proprioception, or body awareness, is well known. Proprioception cannot be seen, yet is a sense that is used every day. The muscles, joints, and tendons have receptors that tell the body where it is to help it maneuver in the environment. Proprioception helps children have a physical identity or a sense of self. It is hard to self-regulate if the body and brain do not receive body awareness information. Children need proprioception to understand personal boundaries and other’s personal space.

“Early learning is all experiential ... We learn to move through and communicate with the world by using the basic elements of creativity: curiosity, observation, experimentation, translation, communication. No wonder ‘sitting still and being quiet’ is so difficult and discouraging for many young learners. We are being asked to abandon approaches to learning with which we have had great success.”

- Janet Eilber, Advisor for Arts Education in the News
What to try

Preschool programs have a unique opportunity to help children become more physically and mentally engaged by providing opportunities for structured and unstructured activities. Include movement activities during the day to support children’s body awareness and physical development skills. Consider using these activities in your preschool program:

Large motor activities:

**Move with multiple materials** – Dance and move while holding balls, brooms, stuffed animals, scarves, or baskets. Children can hold and move with pillowcases stuffed with towels.

**Dance like me, dance like you** – Play follow-the-leader-type movement activities where children take turns showing their moves for others to try.

**Movement for transition times** – Dance like a ballerina to the bathroom; move like slithering snakes to the coat cubby, etc.

**Movements tell a story** – Use physical actions and encourage the children to act out a story with you.

**Provide meaningful chores that include movements** – Sweep the floor, take out the garbage, weed the gardens, and carry baskets of toys to put away.

**Extended learning** – Film and/or photograph the children as they dance and move. Display the pictures for children to revisit.

**Push, pull, and carry** items, such as large hollow blocks, boxes, or pillowcases filled with soft items.

**Play movement games** and songs such as “Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes.”

Create simple, yet slightly challenging, **obstacle courses**.

**Try yoga.** Cut yoga mats in halves or thirds for children to use.

**Jump** into and out of hula hoops or large circles of yarn placed on the ground.

Small motor activities:

**Paint with various tools:** cotton balls, twigs, cotton swabs.

**Explore play dough and clay with a novel tool** (pipe cleaners, golf tees, garlic press).

**Offer small connecting-style blocks.**

**Supply tongs and tweezers** to pick up small items such as cotton balls.

**Use tools** such as screwdrivers and hammers (with adult supervision).

**Offer various sized cups** for pouring at the sensory table.

**Offer drawing materials in unique areas** such as the block area or outside (use clipboards).

References


