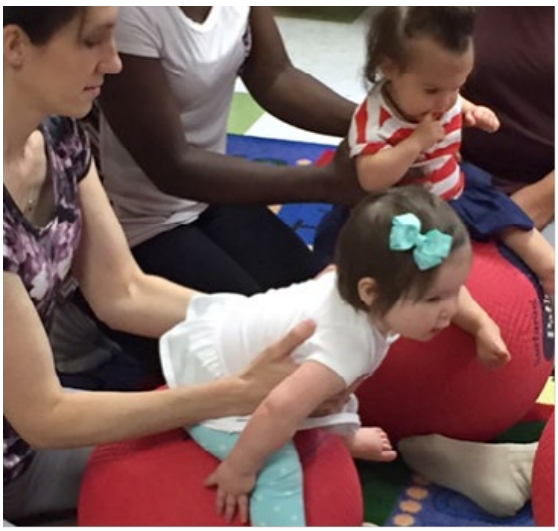
Spinning, rolling, and swinging! Oh my!



Children need the dizzying input that comes from spinning, rolling, and swinging. These important movement experiences help the child's nervous system to mature and organize. Many adults eventually start to dislike the feeling of spinning or repetitive swinging, but for children, it is a crucial sensory and motor skill input.

Children need to spin, roll, and swing indoors and outdoors. One preschool team wondered how the tone of their room would change if they created an indoor gross motor area. They were worried that it would be loud and distracting, but they found just the opposite. When children were allowed to use their big muscles and move in active ways, their minds and their emotions settled more easily to focus on other play later in the schedule.

This program opened a tumbling mat, and children steamroll the length of the mat. Sometimes they somersault over their friends, all under the watchful eye of a teacher who is an arm's length away from the play. Another program drapes a mat over the three steps in their gross motor room and invites toddlers and preschoolers to roll down the padded incline. Still others encourage children to swing gently, cocooned in low hanging hammocks or therapy swings. Some invite children to crawl into a nylon/canvas tunnel. Then teachers rock the tunnel back and forth, to the toddlers' delight!

Don't stop the movement

Remember, if children incessantly spin in circles, it is because their bodies crave that stimulation. If they roll and tumble and stand on their heads, it is because they need that sensory fix. If they rock or rhythmically sway, it helps their bodies to organize and function. Create spaces where they can do these activities anytime the children need to.

What does spinning do?

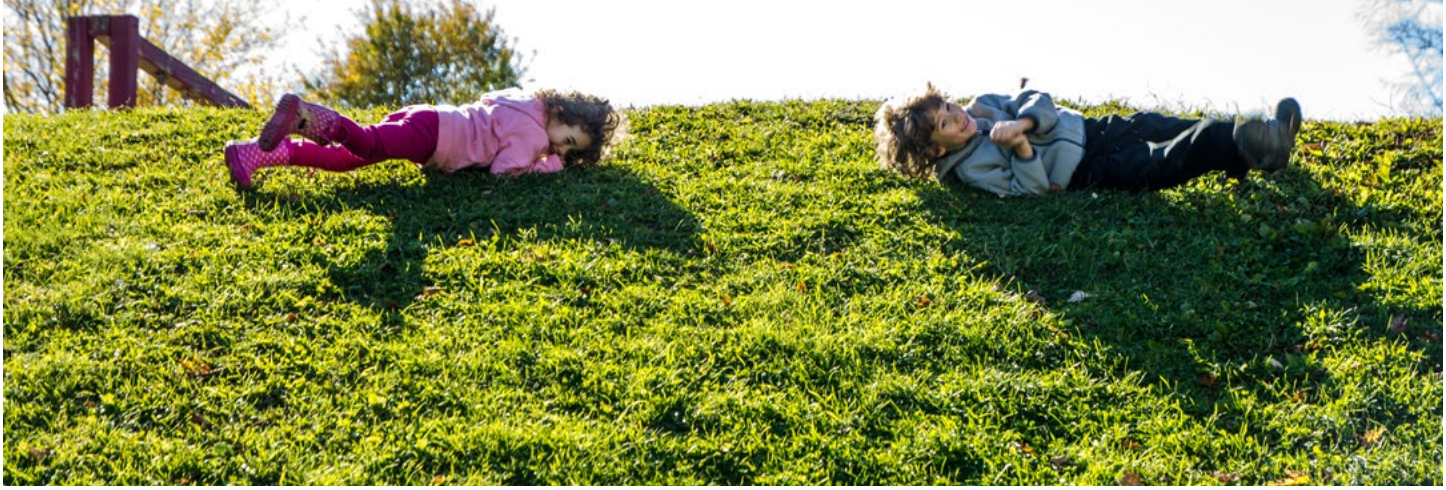
The vestibular, proprioceptive, auditory, and visual senses work in concert. These fancy words are labels for sensory systems in humans that often work behind the scenes, taking in information and shaping the brain's network.

Spinning in circles is one of the best activities to help children gain a good sense of body awareness. Through spinning they figure out where their "center" is and then are more able to coordinate movement on the two sides of the body.

Rather than making children susceptible to falls, spinning actually improves a child's surefootedness, and it also improves their ability to concentrate in the classroom.

According to Kawar, Frick, and Frick (2005), the centrifugal force experienced on things like merry-go-rounds activates the fluid-filled cavities in the inner ear. These sensors tell the brain the orientation of the head which develops grounding and sustaining attention to task.

The vestibular system controls a person's balance, posture, gaze stabilization, and spatial orientation. It also impacts impulse control (Angelaki and Dickman 2017). This nerve development is necessary for future tasks like following lines of text across a page (White 2013). Sometimes occupational therapists build spinning or rocking experiences into a child's therapy if the child struggles with sensory integration.



Some practical ways to spin, roll, and swing in an ECE setting

Besides the obvious swings, what equipment and play features support these movements?

- sloped, grassy hills
- hoops
- fabric streamers
- hammocks
- monkey bars or suspended rings – be sure to check design regulations from Consumer Product Safety Commission

- tumbling mats
- aerobic/therapy balls
- padded barrel crawl forms, or wedge mats

- jump ropes
- plastic/foam bats
- rocking chairs
- rocking boats
- rocking horses

If full-force rolling is not an option, perhaps children can roll back and forth on top of an exercise ball. This is also great vestibular stimulation for infants.

Activities that invite spinning, rolling, and swinging

Traditional games like London Bridge and Hokey Pokey are filled with fun movements. Other ideas include:

- Allow children to experiment with centrifugal force by spinning around holding a small bucket with a bit of water in it. Or spin with a kite or a windsock.
- Encourage children to sway in the wind.
- Pretend to be a steamroller, a caterpillar, a log, or a snowball.
- Child-sized butterflies: Use elastic hair ties to secure ends of shiny/sheer fabric wedges to children's wrists, so children can "fly" around the play yard as butterflies, ladybugs, dragonflies, and birds. Don't be surprised if they dance and swirl into a wonderfully rich fantasy world.
- Clock game: Children space themselves out, then at the leader's command, each child "clock" extends arms above heads, touching fingertips. On command, they tick their arms and legs numerically around the imaginary dial, getting faster and faster until they start to spin. They spin, arms wide at their sides, until they unwind on the ground and a helper lifts them back into position for another round.
- Roly-Poly derby: Children sit on the ground and wrap their arms around their legs, forming a body ball. Next they try to roll toward a preset finish line. Allow occasional collisions along the way as long as there is laughter.

If you suspect that a child has sensory integration issues that need more support, it may be helpful for the family to have a conversation with Early Intervention.

If you'd like to learn more about how to add adventurous movement play to your program, check out these Better Kid Care On Demand modules:

- Adventurous Play: The Whys and Hows
- Family Child Care: Overcoming Barriers to Lead Fun Physical Activities
- Get Outdoors. Explore.
- Physical Activities for Young Children: Lead with Confidence

References

Angelaki, D., and J.D. Dickman. 2017. "The Vestibular System." In NOBA textbook series: *Psychology*, edited by R. Biswas-Diener & E. Diener. Champaign, IL: DEF publishers. DOI:nobaproject.com

Kawar, Mary J., Ron Frick, and Sheila M. Frick. 2005. *Astronaut Training: A Sound Activated Vestibular-Visual Protocol For Moving Looking & Listening*. Handbooks for Innovative Practice.

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