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Information Sheet 54

Learning to move: Moving to learn

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All children are born with potential but what is that potential?

When a child is developing differently to other children, this potential is harder to judge. No one can or does know exactly what that potential is: it has to unfold with time.

Parents of children with additional needs often say, "it's not knowing that's the hardest" and many want to know what they can do to help their child's potential unfold. They also want to know they are doing what they can to encourage their children's independence.

Although these concerns can be felt more acutely by parents with children with additional needs, most parents wonder at times about their child's true potential and how they can help them develop this potential.

There is a lot of research about how early learning experiences can affect a child's development and in particular the impact of movement on a child's potential. Your child's brain development, body weight, ability to solve problems, self concept and independence can all be influenced by movement.

Early learning experiences

How a child learns to live in this world is greatly influenced by their early experiences and environment. (McCain M.N. and Mustard 1999)

Children's experiences trigger their brain development. If a child's environment or experiences are limited then their brain development is less likely to reach its potential.

The potential of children's brains is influenced by their experiences even before they are born. Their early experiences guide the way their brain is built and after birth, the first three years of life in particular are crucial to maximising a child's potential.

One of the important experiences for babies in the first year is the touch and handling that can be part of their day to day life.

Babies need us to pick them up, play with and talk and listen to them – not just because it's nice but also because it builds healthy brains as well as healthy relationships. This is because these normal touching and handling experiences build the connections in a child's brain that will last their lifetime.

To help new parents the Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) has produced a new DVD aimed at ensuring babies up to nine months old receive the best handling, touch and play to help prevent movement difficulties.

For more information on this new DVD titled Ready to Move see a box in this article.

Movement challenges and solutions

Motor development can be seen as a process of learning a range of movement solutions to the various challenges of life.

These challenges can be as basic as moving yourself towards a toy or person that you want to interact with. Other situations that require a movement solution might include having the ability to join in a game with your friends or having the skills to feed yourself.

Movement challenges are also relevant for school age children and parents often ask about movement challenges and solutions when their child attends school.

Developing good fundamental movement skills like running, ball skills and balancing open up more opportunities for learning and socialising as well as being part of a healthy lifestyle.

Factors that positively influence a child's wellbeing include independence, problem-solving skills and positive self concept and all these are influenced by a child's motor skill development. (Australian Physiotherapy Association Position Statement, Skill Acquisition in Infants and Young Children November 2004)

"Studies involving a variety of children with special needs have demonstrated that motor skills and positive self concept are critical to children's ability to participate at school". (Jongmans et al 1996, Lightfoot et al 1999) Research suggests that improving motor skills improves children's health and wellbeing and this is reflected in the saying *Learning to move: moving to learn.*

Learning Links is a non-profit charity assisting children who have difficulty learning and their families.

We raise funds to help children from birth to 18 years by offering a range of services including the following.

Early Childhood Services for children from birth to six years.

- Early childhood intervention and support for very young children.
- An inclusive preschool for children with and without additional needs.
- An assessment and consultancy service for families who are concerned about their young child's development.
- Specialist early childhood services and therapy.

School Age Services for children from Kindergarten to Year 12 who have low support needs.

- Comprehensive assessments.
- Small group literacy and numeracy support.
- Occupational and speech therapy.
- Outreach programs.
- The Ronald McDonald Learning Program for seriously ill children and Reading and Counting for Life Programs for children falling behind in reading and numeracy at school.

Family Services helping and supporting families and health professionals.

- Centre and home-based family counselling.
- Parenting Programs and groups for families.
- Case Management Services.

Professional Development for teachers, health professionals and parents.

- Presentations, workshops and advice on identifying and helping children with learning difficulties, learning disabilities and developmental delays.

Learning Links has branches in six Sydney locations at Peakhurst, Penshurst, Fairfield, Miller, Brookvale & Randwick. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, and some programs Australia-wide and in New Zealand. A complete list of branch locations and contact numbers is on the back cover.

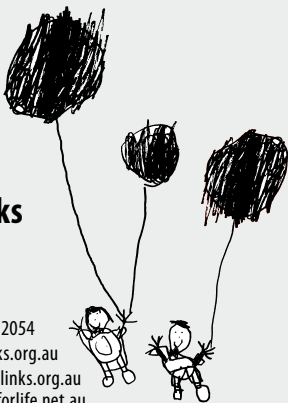
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The Australian Physiotherapy Association Position Statement on Skill Acquisition in Infants and Young children states that “for a child to achieve their maximum potential, they must have optimal motor skills”.

Paediatric physiotherapists are trained to assist families to achieve this with their child. Physiotherapy has been shown to be of benefit when intervention is required and the earlier it starts the better for all.

No matter what a child's potential is, having more movement solutions gives them more options for facing life's challenges and enjoying life. One of the aims of paediatric physiotherapy is to see a child using a variety of movements and positions so that they have a variety of movement solutions.

Healthy lifestyle and healthy weight

Nowadays we are all aware of the importance of physical activity in a healthy child's life. Children with the confidence and opportunity to be involved in active play are less likely to live a sedentary lifestyle.

Healthy Weight 2008 – Australia's Future (Australian Health Ministers Conference 2002) “focuses national effort initially on children and young people and the families that influence and support them”. (The Australian Physiotherapy Association Position Statement on Physical Activity and Healthy Weight in Children, August 2004)

One of the goals of Healthy Weight 2008 is to “increase the proportion of children and young people who participate in and maintain healthy eating and adequate physical activity”.

The Australian Physiotherapy Association Position Statement on Physical Activity and Healthy Weight in Children August 2004, notes that “not only are overweight and obese children less fit, but they often lag in refinement of gross motor skills such as running, jumping and ball skills due to limited practise opportunities”. (Booth M, Macaskill P, McLellan, Phongsavan P Okley T, Patterson J, Wright J, Bauman A and Baur L. (1997).

Considering the serious health problems of diabetes, heart disease and cancer that are associated with being overweight and obese, we really should give our children the best possible chance at leading a physically active lifestyle.

When children watch more than two hours of television a day they are at higher risk of health problems and it is ideal to aim for a maximum of about 30 minutes a day of television viewing for children: www.raisingchildren.net.au.

Active play rather than television can contribute to reducing their health risks and increasing their learning opportunities.

Baby walkers and learning movement

There has been discussion in recent years about baby walkers and their effects. Did you know that many parents choose to buy or use baby walkers or similar devices in the hope that it will help their baby to walk?

These devices can in fact slow down a baby's motor development because they restrain the child in an upright position that is unnatural for their age.

Parents have reported that they use baby walkers as ‘time out’ while they attend to something else. Unfortunately there is a high risk of injury to your baby in a baby walker used in such a way and the manufacturers as well as child safety authorities recommend that they are only to be used with 100% supervision.

Babies learn more movement skills by being placed on the floor to play with interesting toys and people who are interested in them. You face is often your babies favourite thing to look at and your voice their favourite sound to hear! And it's free!

How you can help

Your child's most important influences come from the family and regular carers. It is a good idea to try to increase the movement and learning opportunities your child experiences, no matter what their age.

The most important thing is to give your child plenty of opportunities for active play. Play allows for problem-based learning in a fun environment with natural opportunities to develop movement solutions. Watch how they try to solve ‘movement problems’, offer an encouraging look or comment and only help as much as they need.

Support your child to solve problems independently as this gives them a sense of achievement and encourages them to try again. Ask them what they think they can do to successfully achieve something and congratulate them on trying and any successes they make.

Watch and monitor as your child attempts to move; for example, rolling, crawling, jumping and balancing.

Make sure that you only help when you have to. Check if your child is safe and whether they are fine to continue their activity without help. Monitor their frustration levels – ask yourself if they are too frustrated to continue alone.

Instead of doing something for them, consider offering a light touch, an encouraging face or a little 'hands on' help.

Look at where you can safely take your support away to encourage them to succeed on their own. Always remember to acknowledge your child's achievements.

Don't think that your child needs to do everything in the one attempt or play session. A little at a time is OK. If you let your child decide when they have had enough, this makes them more likely to want to try again.

If you follow your child's lead and make play fun they will learn more and will want to do it again. Consider what your child enjoys and try to incorporate this into the outing or activity.

Playgroups are a great way to support you and your young child as they grow and learn. Supported Playgroups have professional staff to make sure that you have access to a well run playgroup with advice 'on tap'.

Contact Playgroups NSW on 1800 171 882 or your local Community centre to find out about your local playgroups.

Where to get help

If you are concerned about your child's movement skills you can discuss this with a health professional such as a paediatric physiotherapist.

You can contact your doctor, paediatrician or early childhood nurse if you need help finding a paediatric physiotherapist or if you would like to discuss your child's health further.

References

McCain, M.N. & Mustard, F. (1999), Reversing the brain drain: Early study: Final report, Ontario Children's Secretariat, Toronto. Quoted in Ellen Fish. Benefits of Early Intervention. Stronger Families Learning Exchange Bulletin No.2 Spring/Summer 2002 pp.8-11.

Jongmans et al 1996, Lightfoot et al 1999; as quoted in APA Position statement, Skill Acquisition in Infants and Young Children November 2004.

Booth M, Macaskill P, McLellan, Phongsavan P Okley T, Patterson J, Wright J, Bauman A and Baur L. (1997): NSW Schools Fitness and Physical Activity survey – Summary. Sydney, NSW Department of Education and Training.

APA Position Statement on Baby Walkers – www.physiotherapy.asn.au. Follow the "Physiotherapy and Health" tab to Physiotherapy and Public Health and go to "Position Statements".

Further information

Early intervention services – call Early Childhood Intervention on (02) 9873 2593.

Paediatric Physiotherapist – visit www.physiotherapy.asn.au or ask your doctor, paediatrician or early childhood nurse.

www.raisingchildren.net.au

www.raisingchildren.net.au/disabilities – a new online resource for the parents of children with a disability

www.community.nsw.gov.au

www.zerotothree.org

Physiotherapists help parents ensure babies make all the right moves

The way a baby is held and touched lays the foundations for how the child will develop and move through life. Before they start really moving, babies need to learn where their bodies begin and end, and what they can do.

To help new parents the Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) has produced a new DVD aimed at ensuring babies up to nine months old receive the best handling, touch and play to help prevent movement disorders.

The 12-minute DVD titled *Ready to Move*, which costs \$10, gives parents guidance from paediatric physiotherapists on how they can develop their child's pre-walking potential. The DVD is a valuable resource for Maternal and Child Health Centres.

"The need for the DVD arose from the number of inquiries from new parents uncertain about what to do to help their baby's development," APA spokeswoman Noula Gibson said.

Ready to Move provides advice and reassurance from physiotherapists about how to handle a new baby. It demonstrates how just about every interaction with a baby can be an opportunity to build a child's readiness to move. When parents touch, stroke, massage, gently squeeze and cuddle their baby, they are providing the stimulation and sensory experiences their baby needs in order to learn.

Variation in postures and holds will encourage a baby to move and strengthen a different set of muscles and may allow the baby to interact with you or the environment. Attracted by toys and interesting objects hung within

reach, babies will stretch, kick and grasp – developing strength, co-ordination and balance on both sides of their bodies along the way. All of these skills are important as the baby builds up to learning to walk.

There is also a brochure and poster the APA has developed with SIDS and Kids entitled *How to Protect the Head Shape of Your Baby*.

To buy a copy of the *Ready to Move* DVD or the *How to Protect Your Baby's Head Shape* brochure or poster, obtain an order form by emailing enquiries@physiotherapy.asn.au or phone 03 9092 0888 or download a form from the APA website, <http://apa.advsol.com.au/StaticContent/Download/APAResourcesOrderForm.pdf>. For more information, contact APA Media Officer Belinda Parsons on 03 90920806 or belinda.parsons@physiotherapy.asn.au



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School Age Services
– contact your local branch

Family Services
– contact your local branch

All other enquiries
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