

Growing Up Fit

Preschool Fitness Activities

It's easy to get preschoolers moving. Ask them to pretend they're a puppy, fly like Superman or tell the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears and you're likely to get all sorts of body language. Their world is a physical one, and movement is one way they learn and interact with that world. However, as any preschool teacher knows, getting a class of four-year-olds to move in the same direction is another matter!

In this publication we'll explore ways you can introduce and teach organized movement to preschoolers (for basic knowledge and movement ideas, see *Preschoolers in Motion*, Pm-1359a). Organized movement helps children build motor skills, learn about physical fitness, and lay the groundwork for an active, healthy lifestyle.

Why Teach Movement?

Hops, skips, and jumps are not simply child's play. Daily movement is an important part of a child's educational experience. Preschoolers are ready to acquire and practice new motor skills at this stage of rapid development. New experiences can help them learn motor skills that they'll use for a lifetime.

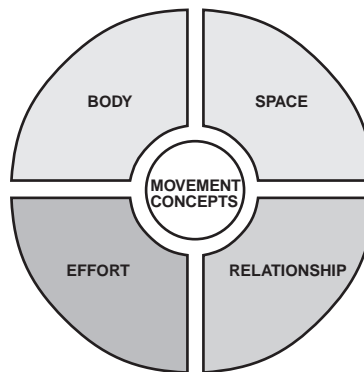
Regular physical activity for preschoolers may:

- improve a child's fitness, in both health-related and skill-related areas.
- build fundamental motor skills like running, jumping, or skipping.
- aid developmental growth.
- increase awareness of the body in space.
- reinforce a good self-concept through participation in success-oriented tasks.
- enhance language skills.
- strengthen social skills.
- encourage expressive/imitative thought and problem-solving.
- instill a love for movement.

How to Describe Movement

As you plan classroom activities, it helps to understand the nature of movement. You must be able to identify, differentiate, and describe various movements so that you can focus on certain skills or concepts, provide a safe environment appropriate for a child's developmental age, and present helpful challenges for learning.

Movement may be functional or useful, such as how to run up and down stairs or throw a softball. It also may express ideas, such as moving gracefully to music or showing feelings of happiness or sadness.



Movement can be described in terms of four concepts: body, effort, space, and relationship. This establishes a way to define all types of physical activities. Using this approach, you can change certain concepts that will change the movement and focus on a different set of skills.

The first concept, body, describes what the movement is. What is the body doing?

Body movements can be locomotor such as running, jumps, or hops. Other body movements are non-locomotor, continual movement such as bending or stretching. Manipulative

body movements use another object, such as a ball, and an action, such as throwing or catching.

The second concept, effort, describes how the movement is done. Effort can be described using time (fast or slow), the amount of force (strong or light), or the flow of the movement (stoppable or ongoing).

The third concept, space, describes where the movement takes place. Spatial concepts can be defined by direction (forward, backward, sideways), by level (high, middle, or low), or pathways taken (straight, curves, zigzag).

The relationship concept describes the interaction between persons or objects in the environment. Examples would be tossing a ball to someone, crawling under a chair.

Every physical activity can be described using these four movement concepts. As an example, consider this task: Walk (body concept) slowly (effort concept) forward (space concept) around cone markers (relationship concept).

To vary the activity, modify one or two concept areas. For example, changing the body concept from walk to run will offer a new challenge. Children will not become bored from repetition if they perform a task differently each time they do it.

If you want to change a functional task to an expressive task, focus on the effort concept. Using the previous example, here's an expressive movement: Skip (body concept) happily (effort concept) forward (space concept) around cone markers (relationship concept). The combinations are endless.

Most elementary school physical education textbooks further explain the four movement concepts. See also the bibliography at the end of this publication.

A Question of Balance



It's easy to tell when someone doesn't have good balance. But how do you learn balance?

Balance is the ability to maintain and control body position while in place or moving. Unlike the popular misconception, balance is a learned ability that develops in a logical manner based on experience and practice.

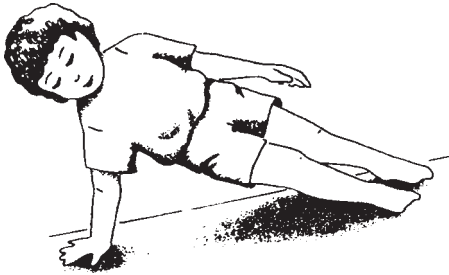


Figure 1: Simple Balance Task

Children develop balance from infancy until that ability stabilizes around the age of 10 or 11 years. Newborns try to gain control of their bodies early in life, first in holding up their heads and sitting by themselves, then in the dynamics of locomotion. Young children must be constantly challenged to control their bodies in an ever-changing environment.

Balance helps children better perform certain motor skills and enjoy movement. Try to include activities specifically for balance in a preschooler's daily movement program.

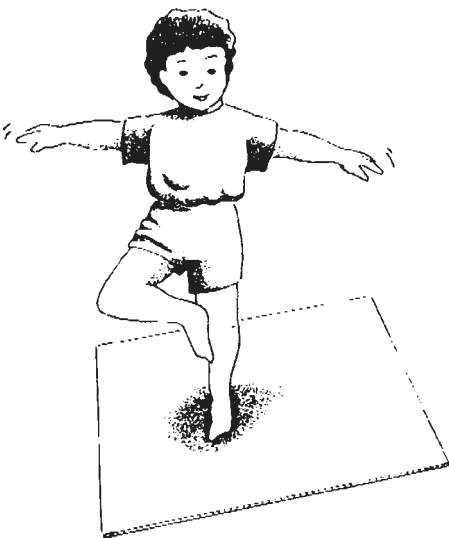


Figure 2: Simple Balance Task

Balance development follows a logical progression from simple to complex: from balancing in place (static balance) to balancing while moving (dynamic balance); from balancing independently to balancing with other objects; and from balancing on stable support to balancing on unstable support. Using a simple to complex approach, a child can gain experience, confidence, and skills before moving on to the next challenge.

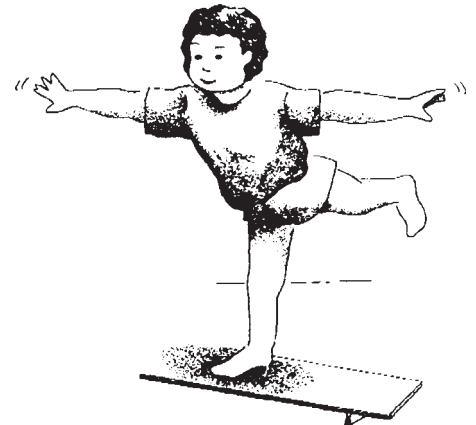


Figure 3: Balance Tasks on Stable Objects

Encourage balance on a wide base of support before offering narrow bases of support, at low heights before higher ones, and stable bases before unstable ones. Let them experience stationary balance on equipment before they move across the equipment. Children should be able to balance independently before they try to balance themselves and small objects such as bean bags and rubber rings.

Challenge the children to balance and then move. Can they keep control of their bodies? Encourage them to change levels or perhaps direction, vary their speed of movement, or control movement to stay within lines, or paths.

Start with basic balancing tasks (see Figures 1 and 2). Simple equipment can be used, such as carpet squares, lines or ropes on the floor, or more sophisticated equipment such as rugs with



foot-print patterns, plastic spots for the floor, or colored stationary floor hoops.

Vary the task in several ways: balance on different levels, on equipment; balance in place and while moving; balance bean bags or other small objects.

Then introduce balance on stable equipment or surfaces (see Figure 3). Equipment might be 4x4-inch

Words to Describe Movement Relationships

I can move...

By their position:

across, under, along, over, toward, away from, onto, off, in front of, behind, at the side of, near or far from

By how they occur:

successively, alternately, in cannon

By when they occur:

*together
simultaneously*

By their results or reaction:

*leading/following
meeting/parting
mirroring, matching, contrasting*

Source: *Children & Movement*, J. Wall and M. Murray, WCB, Dubuque, Iowa, 1990.



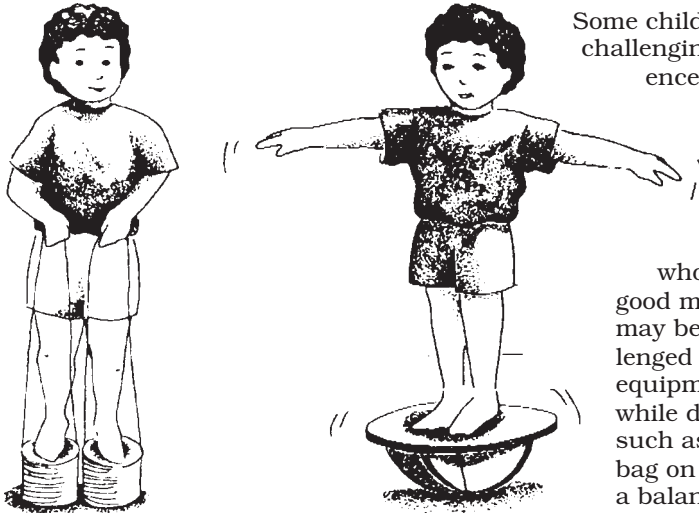
wooden or foam blocks, balance beams, tires, or a sturdy bench.

Vary the tasks by using flat beams, rounded beams, beams with wide bases, narrow bases, low bases or high bases. The equipment may be level or inclined. The child should be able to balance first before balancing small objects while on the equipment.

such as balance boards, stilts made from coffee cans or foam blocks, or play items like skateboards or roller skates. Vary the challenges with equipment that has a wide base, narrow base, low base or high base and move from balancing self to balancing self and small objects while on the equipment. Another progression would be to add a pattern or path to follow.

keep it firmly in place. Homemade equipment can be well suited to these tasks as long as they're free of sharp corners, rough edges and nails (see bibliography for resources to build your own).

As children move through the stations, an adult should help and assist them in their first attempts on stable or unstable equipment. Remind children to wait for their turn and to not interfere with or distract others while they use the equipment.



Some children have had more challenging balance experiences than others. The most appropriate teaching style might be to use stations and offer individualized help. The child who appears to have good motor development may be additionally challenged by balancing equipment on body parts while doing another task, such as balancing a bean bag on head while walking a balance beam.

Figure 4: Balance Tasks on Unstable Equipment

The most difficult balancing challenges use unstable equipment (see Figure 4)

And a word about safety. If possible, place all equipment on padded floor mats or room-sized rugs. Stabilize equipment to

Preschool Jump Rope for Heart

The American Heart Association's (AHA) "Jump Rope for Heart" has become a familiar way in elementary schools to raise interest in physical fitness as well as money for the organization. Most preschoolers have neither the coordination nor muscular endurance to jump rope, but that doesn't have to exclude them from such activities.

Movement specialists for the AHA have adapted the Jump Rope for Heart program for younger children, ages 2 to 5. It has been used successfully in

Jumping Animals: Can be a separate station or as a break. Play music and ask children to jump like a variety of animals, such as a frog or kangaroo.

Broad Jump: Although skills vary widely, children like to see how far they can jump. You may want to mark varying widths to represent a river. For additional safety, children can jump over mats.

Jump Bump: The child tries to bump a hanging object, such as a beach or foam ball, suspended from a low ceiling. Ask the child to bump the object with a different body part each time.

Jumping Down: This station has many possibilities. The task is for children to jump and land on both feet from a low elevation to an area marked by a hoop. As the child

demonstrates body control, the height can be increased. Always use spotters.

High Jump: This station requires two adults, a mat, rope, and a hoop. The challenge is to jump over the rope and land on both feet in a marked area. Raise the rope as the child shows control.

Hoop Jump: A child holds a hoop in both hands in front of the body and jumps through it. Although a hoop is easier for children to handle than a jump rope, this task is recommended only for older preschoolers.

Jack Be Nimble Jumps: Preschool children enjoy the chance to act out stories. Ask each child to jump over "candlesticks" without knocking them down. As each child jumps, sing the rhyme and insert his or her name.

Jump the Shot: An adult squats in the center of a circle of children and slowly swings a rope with a bean bag tied on the end. Children must jump as the bag swings under their feet. Stop the rope in front of very young children and tell them to jump.

Jumpscotch: This variation of hopscotch uses bicycle tires or hoops laid in a pattern. Young children may need mats under the tires or hoops. They may have difficulty because their feet barely leave the ground.

Jump Up: This station challenges children to increase vertical jumping ability. If a low ceiling is available, hang wiffle balls at different heights for children to jump and touch. A chalkboard may be hung on the wall. Although it requires more coordination, the children can mark on the board as they jump.



preschool, nursery school, and kindergarten classes.

The preschool program uses a series of 10 stations with different types of jumping activities. These large motor activities help develop muscular endurance, some muscular strength and, if the activity is intense and sustained over time, cardio-vascular endurance. Children also can practice jumping skills, an opportunity most preschoolers enjoy.

Familiar animals, stories, or characters exercise the children's imaginations as well as their bodies. For example, children may be challenged in the broad jump station to cross a river of croco-

diles. In some kindergarten classes, the event was scheduled as part of a unit on the letter "J". In addition to the movement fun, children can experience and visualize the "jump" words and the variety of jumping movements.

Of course, a major concern is safety. Do you have enough space to do the activities safely? Do you have floor mats? Always use spotters for higher jumps. More safety information is available from the AHA for use in planning the event.

Parent volunteers, teachers, and "significant others" (like older brothers and sisters or members of a Boy Scout group) may participate in the

event, too. This can motivate young children, who need positive reinforcement while they learn. Encourage children to try all 10 stations (see box on page 3), then allow time to choose a favorite activity.

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For more information on movement for preschoolers:

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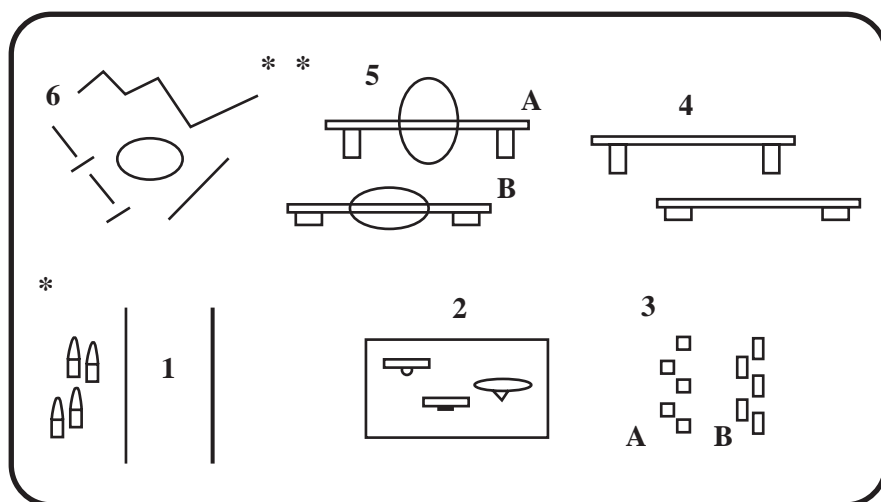
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Set-up for Balancing Stations



Here's a plan for six balancing stations that can be set up in a large room or gymnasium. A supervisor can stand near the * to see all stations, or by the ** to help with more difficult stations.

Station 1: Walking Cans - The child walks on stilts made from coffee cans.

Station 2: Balance Boards - The child uses both feet on a balance board suited to his or her skill level. Boards may have rounded bases, small bases, or wide bases.

Station 3: Balance Blocks - The child walks on 4x4-inch and 2x2-inch wooden blocks.

Station 4: Beam - The child walks across low, then higher, balance beams.

Station 5: Hoop on Beam - The child steps over a hoop laid flat on a low beam, then through a hoop held vertically on the beam.

Station 6: Pathways - The child balances bean bags on different parts of the body while walking along pathways taped in straight, zigzag, and circular lines.

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File: Family Life 4

... and justice for all

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