

# Encouraging Motor Skill Development

There are three areas of motor skill development that every parent and caregiver needs to be aware of helping children develop. Locomotor, Nonmanipulative, and Manipulative are academic classifications for **moving skills** (like crawling, walking and running), **balance skills** (including bending, stretching, and reaching) and **object interaction skills** (such as throwing, kicking, catching and collecting.)

Research shows that infants and toddlers develop these skills to a greater degree when they are given both opportunities to practice and coaching from adults. One study from 1995 illustrated this point by following a group of children learning to jump. The two-year-olds who were coached to bend their knees and crouch before jumping acquired a higher skill level and greater comfort with the activity, than the children who learned from demonstration and observation alone.

Many studies have also shown that the most successful environments for children to learn a healthy approach to life are those that embed physical activity and nutrition education into every age level of early childhood. Here are some suggested activities for different age ranges to help you promote movement, balance, and interaction skills:



Practice climbing & balancing helps develop motor skills

## EARLY INFANCY

By two months of age, babies should accumulate at least 30 minutes of tummy time daily in order to practice muscle development in that position. (Sleeping on stomachs doesn't count!) Parents can provide infants with interesting objects to touch and reach for while they lie on a blanket on the floor. Large, soft toys that a baby can grasp, and then at a parent's urging release, teach object interaction skills. After changing a baby's diaper, parents can massage and help babies manipulate their limbs to reach for colorful, common objects like a balled sock or a scrunchy. Babies also enjoy kicking while lying on their backs, especially if they see that their exertion creates a powerful reaction in their physical environment, like shaking a table or sending a soft ball flying through the air.

## BABY ON THE MOVE

From about 8 to 18 months, depending on each baby's unique rate of development, exploration movement will be a key physical focus. Babies at this stage are captivated by things they see, and are willing to make an effort to move toward them. Starting with toys that crawlers can push or chase will quickly lead to emerging walker toys that allow the toddler some walking support—like push carts, wagons, or baby carriages. Playing with balls by pushing, kicking, and retrieving them, or challenging children to make specific motions while dancing to a favorite song, encourages interaction and balance skills at this age.



## TODDLING TOWARD PRESCHOOL

Children age 2 to 3 are ready for even more routine scheduling of physical activity. Teachers and parents should plan at least 2 30-minute periods of vigorous physical activity and at least 2 to 3 more hours of unstructured active play each day. Toddlers should learn to push scooters and peddle big wheels or tricycles. Active play that promotes muscle control like twisting in patterns to music, rolling like a log with legs and arms kept close together, or walking on tip toes, contributes to balance skills, while running around cones, catching balls, and lifting materials that vary in shape, size, and weight allows children to develop a sense of the principles of effort necessary for object interaction skills.

