Hot Tips for the 0-5 years

Your Child's Fitness and Cognitive Growth – Making the Connection

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We keep hearing about how more and more children are becoming overweight and how unfit they are becoming. We all know the side effects of this in terms of children's health, motivation and self esteem, but what is it doing to their brain development and ability to be able to cope when entering formal education?

Research tells us, that children who are well coordinated often find learning easier than those who are uncoordinated and more sedentary. Teachers will tell you, that the children who have difficulty in their classrooms are usually those who cannot hop or skip. There is a definite pattern.

Children's brains need to "integrate" fully before formal education should begin. In other words, both sides of the brain need to work together automatically, in order to process the thousands of messages that feed in and out every hour. To integrate the two hemispheres of the brain a young child needs to pass through all the physical stages of development (milestones), preferably in sequence and within the parameters we would expect a normally developing child to do so. Of high importance are the cross patterned movements such as crawling, climbing and marching. When doing these movements, the brain grows pathways that connect the two sides together. The more pathways, the better the communication.

Rolling, crawling, walking, jumping, midline crossing, hopping and skipping are what we refer to as the physical milestones. While these parameters vary from child to child, the important thing is that they happen and that

we are not in a rush to pass the child from one stage to the next. It is therefore wrong to assume that the earlier a child walks the "brighter" it will be. It is rather the time spent on the floor, growing the pathways and communicative links between the two sides of the brain that is the important thing, not how fast we can get children into the upright position.

Human babies were meant to spend time on the floor in a prone (lying down) postition. Unlike lambs, calves, foals and many other baby animals that get up and walk right from birth, human babies don't. We need to spend time on the floor where we grow our brains. We need to develop memory, communication and logic. On the floor, in the first year of a child's life is where all this begins. If we are in a hurry to rush our children into walking and being upright, then the preparation required for formal learning is not completed and it is possible children will not achieve to their genetic potential.

In today's society, we have many time saving inventions that are designed to help make parenting easier. Baby car seats (fine for when the child is in the car, but not designed to carry a child around in for long periods of time), walkers, jolly jumpers, bouncinettes, back packs, pushchairs and supermarket trolleys to name but a few.

Our days are hectic and many of our children go from one "appliance" to another without even a hand or foot touching the floor. On average a baby crawls for 400 hours before it walks! How many of our little people are getting that these days? And then there are those children who have difficulty sitting still, who wander constantly, have short attention spans – this is often a "boy" problem. There is a huge correlation between those children who hang in an upside down position, roll and spin regularly and those who sit still. (There are other reasons why children don't sit still, but this is one of the main ones). It is more often girls who participate in those kinds of activities and are also the ones who have better concentration and sit still for longer periods. And what about those who are late to develop fine motor skills and writing? We know that those children who participate in regular messy tactile play and develop good upper body strength by doing activities such as hanging and swinging from bars, walking on hands, flying foxes, wheel barrows and climbing trees, will have better prepared skills for writing when they get to school. But, because our children are hearing – "don't do that, you might hurt yourself" and are less physical, these foundation skills for learning are not happening as much.

We need to get back to basics. Let our children walk (safely with your support) along the tops of fences, jump over and in puddles, walk along the cracks and WALK to the park, instead of going in the car or pushchair. It's a time factor – something many of us seem to have less and less of. The busier we get, the more automated we get and the more sedentary we become.

So, right from birth, let's get back to basics and include some of these activities in our children's daily lives to get them more physical and their brains integrated. Here are some ideas –

BABIES:

- Roll (both ways)
- Move babies (supported) through space
- Gently tip (supported) into a position where the head is lower than the rest of the body (photo)
- More awake "tummy time" (this means doing activities with your child when in this position – not just putting it on its tummy and leaving it) another article I think!
- Slowly spinning the baby both ways (1 revolution per 8 seconds)
- Baby massage and tactile stimulation
- Dance and exercise to music
- Leaving the child with bare feet more when in a warm environment

TODDLERS AND PRESCHOOLERS:

- All of the above
- Walking places instead of always going in the car
- Providing circuits in your home that encourage crawling, climbing, jumping, hopping, balancing, spatial awareness, challenge and safety
- Use language about "my body" and direction when doing activities
- Using the environment as a resource. eg autumn leaves for stamping on etc
- Providing "upside down" time daily
- Messy play – play dough, finger paint, clay etc
- Fine motor activities – threading, pasting, carpentry, box making etc

Form more ideas. A new book, just recently produced by two early childhood educators – Gill Connell and Robyn Crowe called "Moving To Learn" is now available. Indorsed by Sport and Recreation New Zealand and Bounty Services, the book is designed to "help make the connection between movement, music, learning and play for children aged 0-3 years. Gill and Robyn wrote this manual for parents, teachers and caregivers, to provide many practical, easy, inexpensive and age related activities to help enhance children's fitness and to develop the "holistic" child. For more information about this 308 page manual, which comes with a 67 track CD of original music, go to www.movingtolearn.com or your local book store.

Subsequent articles?

- Where Movement Begins – the primitive reflexes and why they are important
- Fine Motor Development – don't be in a rush to have your child write. Ideas on how to develop foundation skills for writing.
- Safety – teaching children to experiment with physical activity in a safe way
- Equipment in the home. Things to make (that are inexpensive) and how to use them.
- It's not a competition – taking the pressure off children