

LET'S GET ACTIVE!

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS AND PARENTS DISCUSS THE IMPORTANCE OF PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT AND HOW TO CREATE PLAY AND MOVEMENT OPPORTUNITIES.



MAIN PHOTO On Ashton: Polo tee & bermudas Gingersnaps. Jacket, Marks & Spencer. Sneakers New Balance. On Beatrice: Striped top Gingersnaps. Tulle skirt & leopard print sneakers Cotton On Kids. On Mirabelle: Denim jacket & top Gingersnaps. Romper & shoes Cotton On Kids. On Cahaya Ariana Fatimah: Dress kookiesandmilk.com. THIS PAGE On Chin Suan: Cardigan & floral top Marks & Spencer. Skirt Crayon. On Muhammad Sameer: Polo tee & shorts Gingersnaps.

Motor skills acquisition allows children to explore the world around them. Research shows that introducing physical activity early into a child's daily life helps foster gross and fine motor skills. Gross motor skills are the big movements involving the legs and arms, such as running, climbing and hopping. Fine motor skills refer to small movements using the hands and wrists, such as holding a spoon or pencil and picking up small items.

Developing motor skills in young children leads to better physical, cognitive and psychological health, in areas such as cardio-respiratory fitness, brain development and self-esteem, among others.

If physical development undergirds development in other aspects, how then can we best support children in this domain of growth? These early childhood educators and parents weigh in.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR CHILDREN TO BE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE?

Oh Chiah Ching: Being physically active helps children develop stamina and motor skills. Expendng their energies also helps children sleep better. As a result, they will get refreshed and can focus and regulate their emotions better in the day. Research also shows that physical activities help children learn values like taking turns and working together as a team to achieve the same goals.

Siti Noraisha Mohamad

Sa'at: Physical activity lays the groundwork for children's intellectual, social and emotional learning. It builds children's self-confidence when they are able to complete a task independently. It also increases their self-esteem when they overcome challenges and, more importantly, resilience when they



AIM FOR 150 MINUTES of physical activity per week for a healthier you. This is the recommended target for adults aged 19 to 49, according to the National Physical Activity Guidelines by the Health Promotion Board (HPB). This number seems high but it is achievable if you break it down into 10 minutes of exercise three times a day, five times a week.



don't. Engaging in physical activities is an emotional outlet for children. It helps them release negative emotions through exercising. That's why we include physical activities in the centre's daily programme to support children in this area.

Loo Chin Suan: Through movement, a child is able to explore the environment and develop important spatial awareness skills. This is an important cognitive skill that allows him to see himself in relation to people and objects, and develop his sense of perception. Movement also allows a child to access, explore and interact directly with materials using his senses. For young children, this is how their brain develops.

EDUCATORS, HOW DO YOU CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHILDREN TO MOVE AND PLAY AT YOUR CENTRE?

Siti: Our preschool activities feature an integrated learning approach. For example, in our Language and Literacy lessons, arts and craft is used as a means to develop the children's fine motor skills when they create their own story puppets or cut them out using scissors. We help nurture their social skills, such as cooperating with one another, when we play games related to the story.

We also run daily activities focused on physical development. For example, during Music and Movement class, children hop, skip and dance to the selected music. Incorporating musical elements like beats and rhythms support their cognitive development, while they learn to discriminate and differentiate. Scarves, sticks and castanets are also included to encourage creativity and imagination, besides facilitating movement.

“Through movement, a child is able to explore the environment and develop important spatial awareness skills.”

MDM LOO CHIN SUAN, 52
Infant Educator, Heartyland Infant Care

We dedicate a daily 40-minute outdoor session to encourage children to run, climb and tumble, using equipment such as trampolines, climbing frames and tricycles. As they play in a safe environment, teachers are also on hand during these sessions to supervise and interact with children. This further helps develop the children's language and communication skills. Children who are trying out new activities feel reassured as they know there is someone they trust to help and support them.

Chin Suan: At our infant care centre, we have designed different spaces attuned to the infants' physical and exploration needs.

For those aged two to six months who have not yet mastered sitting up independently, we have an Activity Room which houses the baby gym. Hanging objects and toys stimulate their senses and imagination. These objects and toys encourage muscle development in their arms and legs as the babies reach for, grasp and kick them. They also enhance cognitive development as the babies learn to recognise colours, shapes and textures.

For seven- to 12-month-old babies who are learning to push themselves up and stand on their own, we have carved out a large area, which encourages safe exploration. It has an infant crawling ramp, a wall-mounted mirror for them to visually track their progress and a hand rail to provide support.

For 13- to 18-month-old infants who are at the stage where they are learning to walk, we have an indoor toddler slide, and a water and sand play area. The play space encourages them to work on their fine motor skills as they handle different materials and equipment to scoop, sift and pour. It also enables them to practise their hand-eye coordination.



A BETTER DIET IN PROGRESS

Singaporeans are starting to improve their diets and reduce calories intake, according to the 2018 National Nutrition Survey. We are eating more wholegrains, fruit and vegetables, but our high consumption of sugar and salt is still a cause for concern, says the report.

PARENTS, HOW DO YOU SUPPORT YOUR CHILD'S PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT AT HOME?

Muhammad Gazzali: Our son Sameer is beginning to walk. He enjoys the slides in the playground and loves climbing up the steps on all fours. So we bring him to the playground often where he can explore and play freely.

His favourite activity currently is stacking cups and we do it together frequently. I call out the colours so he can learn the names as well. He gets excited when I clap and encourage him. This activity develops his motor skills, especially his dexterity.

Chiah Ching: My husband and I bring our children outdoors as often as we can, to the park, the playground or anywhere with a big open space for them to run around. Sometimes we bring balls, scooters or a frisbee to encourage them to move about more. We also enjoy swimming and cycling as a family. I think the trick to getting them

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MS SITI NORAISHA MOHAMAD SA'AT, 42
Centre Leader, Wee Care Kindergarten



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Dates: 14 and 28 October 2019



MR MUHAMMAD GAZZALI, 39
Driving Instructor, Father of Muhammad Sameer, 1

to try a new activity is to make sure it's fun and enjoyable!

There are also games involving physical movements — such as musical chairs and “What's The Time, Mr Wolf?” — which they've played in preschool and have shared with us. We play these games with them at home too!

EDUCATORS, DO YOU HAVE ANY OTHER ADVICE FOR PARENTS TO ENHANCE THEIR CHILD'S PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT AT HOME?

Chin Suan: Clear away clutter to create space for your child to move around, be it to crawl or to run. Invest in sturdy furniture such as coffee tables, which can serve as a support for the child when he is at a stage to pull himself up. Look for push and pull toys which build strength, balance and confidence. Large empty boxes make good push and pull toys. Improvise. But remember to supervise your child at all times.

Siti: Join in your child's active playtime, when he is playing ball games for instance. Do provide opportunities for children to do their daily routines independently. These include brushing their teeth or eating using a spoon or chopsticks during mealtimes. These tasks help strengthen their small muscles over time — these important muscles are used for writing and other self-help skills such as dressing. Maintaining good nutrition is also important for healthy physical development. Be a role model to your child by practising healthy dietary habits such as eating more fruits and vegetables.

THIS SPREAD ON SITI: Striped shirt & wide-leg pants; Marks & Spencer; Jacket; Crayon. On Muhammad Gazzali: Shirt; Marks & Spencer. On Muhammad Sameer: Polo tee; Gingersnap. On Chiah Ching: Blouse; Crayon. Striped pants; H&M. On Mirabelle: Jacket; Marks & Spencer. Shorts; Gingersnap.

THE BIG PICTURE



ECDA Fellow Dr Jacqueline Chung, Senior Principal and Academic Director of St. James' Preschool Services, sheds light on how physical activities influence other developmental domains in children.

Observing parents at her centre, Dr Chung finds that they are often more concerned about their child's cognitive development and occasionally, his social and emotional development. “Fewer parents ask questions about a centre's physical development programme unless there are medical concerns to address,” says Dr Chung. She shares three important benefits of physical activity:

Develops Tenacity & Confidence

Movement activities do far more than improve physical fitness. Children who are confident in their physical coordination abilities — run, jump, climb, throw and catch, for examples — are often also willing to try and persist at new activities. This has a positive impact on their self-esteem and strengthening dispositions such as persistence and resilience.

Enhances Focus & Learning

Active ‘movement breaks’ during class, sometimes called ‘brain breaks’, have been identified to help improve young children's focus and attention. When children are involved in physical movement, blood flow is increased, leading to more oxygen going to the brain. The boost in energy can help children to be more engaged in their learning.

Nurtures Thinking, Social & Communication Skills

Physical activities often involve social interactions and communication with other children. In team games, children learn to anticipate the movements and actions of their peers. They also learn to judge speed, distance, force, etc. These require motor planning, i.e. to think about a movement, plan, and carry it out in a sequence from beginning to end.

“Above all, young children enjoy moving, so physical activities are seen as fun which results in happier, vibrant children,” says Dr Chung.

“Being physically active helps children develop stamina and motor skills. Expend their energies also helps children sleep better.”

MS OH CHIAH CHING, 41
Analyst, Mother of Beatrice Lai, 5



IS MY CHILD'S PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT ON TRACK?

DR SANDRA SYLVIA MASCARENHAS ON THE FACTS AND FALLACIES ABOUT GROSS MOTOR DEVELOPMENT IN INFANTS AND CHILDREN.

Motor development varies from child to child, and is influenced by genetic and environmental factors. For example, two nine-month olds — one who is sitting up while the other is crawling — could be considered within the 'normal range' of development, if everything else is normal.

Children who have experienced limited movement opportunities during their development (e.g. due to restrictions on physical movement because of safety or hygiene reasons) may show delayed skills. Those who have been hospitalised for a long time may also exhibit slow motor development with subsequent 'catch up.'

However, pushing them to catch up with their peers may have detrimental effects. Independent walking cannot be hastened by a parent's "hand or finger holding" to help a child walk. Stability of the trunk and coordination is necessary before independent first steps can be taken. The infant will need to master these skills on their own. Parents who use baby walkers are putting their children at risk. Evidence has shown that baby walkers will not hasten independent walking; it is also associated with injuries and gait problems.

Concerned parents can refer to the child's health booklet and complete the developmental checklist of milestones. If your child has not achieved a milestone, consult a doctor to review his developmental milestones and medical history, as well as perform a physical examination.



DO THIS TO DEVELOP MOTOR SKILLS

Making active play part of your everyday routine will enhance your baby's motor development.

1. Integrate music and movement into daily activities. Sing interactive nursery rhymes to your baby. Put in action words to encourage your baby to bounce, clap and tap. These enhances interaction and early literacy skills.
2. Motivate your baby to crawl further. Place a tower of blocks that is just out of his reach or roll a soft ball on the floor away from him.
3. Set up an obstacle course with pillows and cushions on a carpeted floor and play peek-a-boo. It is a fun way to engage and encourage your baby to move.



The child may need to see a paediatrician if he is unable to:

- > Have head control by five months of age
- > Sit independently by nine months of age
- > Stand independently by 12 months of age
- > Walk independently by 18 months of age
- > Walk with foot flat on the ground, or is persistently toe walking ●

Dr Sandra Sylvia Mascarenhas

Dr Mascarenhas is a consultant at the Department of Child Development of KK Women's and Children's Hospital. She is part of a team of over 100 staff comprising doctors, allied health professionals and nurses, who sees a range of developmental issues such as gross and fine motor developmental delays, handwriting difficulties, as well as learning and behavioural problems. The department also runs community programmes, partnering with preschools, philanthropic organisations and other government ministries to bring early intervention to the classroom for children with developmental needs.



ON COVER: On Ashton: Hoodie Marks & Spencer, T-shirt Gingersnaps, Leopard print shorts & hat Cotton On Kids, Sneakers Mothercare. On Caiyaya Ariana Fatimah: Top Gingersnaps, Headband Stylist's own. On Chin Shan: Striped linen dress Mango. On Mirabelle: Striped tee Cotton On Kids. On Muhammad Gazzali: Cotton shirt Marks & Spencer. On Muhammad Sameer: Geometric tee Marks & Spencer. On Beatrice: Top & striped playsuit Gingersnaps.