

**Building Strong
Foundations:**
Supporting Physical Well-
Being in Early Childhood

Leap[®]



Physical Well-Being

What does it mean?

Provide me with your understanding of the term



Early childhood physical well-being refers to the overall health and physical development of children from birth to around seven years old.

- Physical development: Growth and development of gross and fine motor skills, such as crawling, walking, jumping, and hand-eye coordination.
- Health and nutrition: Access to nutritious food, sufficient sleep, and regular health check-ups to support healthy growth.
- Physical activity: Regular opportunities for active play, movement, and exercise to build strength, coordination, and stamina.



Early childhood physical well-being refers to the overall health and physical development of children from birth to around five years old.

- Self-care and independence: Learning basic hygiene routines, dressing, and feeding themselves, which supports both physical and emotional well-being.
- Safety and environment: A safe, supportive, and stimulating physical environment that encourages active exploration and movement.

All of these aspects work together to support a child's ability to grow, learn, and engage confidently with the world around them



MOVEMENT MATTERS

Most of us can recall rich and vibrant play experiences from our childhood. Memories of climbing trees, chasing our dreams with our friends, endless days of freedom, exploring secret places and the unfolding of time.

Physical play broadens our capacity to grow and is essential to a child's optimal development.

Young children need time and space to thrive and flourish and to move with pleasure.

The more a child moves, the more they are stimulated, and the brain is hungry for more stimulation!



Physical Activity and Health Report, 2022

“Without effective, co-ordinated measures led by Government, we run the risk that the next generation of adults will be the least healthy in living memory” Baroness Frances D’Souza, 2022

Children aged 3-5 years average daily screen time is 3 hours.

By the time a child is 8, they have spent over 1 year of their life on screens.



What is the recommended amount of physical activity a child aged 2-5 should have every day?

20 mins

30 mins

60 mins

90 mins

180 mins



The recommended amount of PA a young child should have each day is **180 minutes**, **60 minutes** of that time should be high impact, cardio exercise.

Opportunities for children to explore movement should be available both inside and outside.



Lifestyle advice for kids

Recommendations by the World Health Organization

Activity / Age	Less than 1 year	Between 1 and 2 years	Between 3 and 4 years
Interactive floor-based play	✓		
Tummy time (lying on stomach)	✓	<i>Physical activity is associated with better cognitive and motor development, psychosocial and cardiac health</i>	
Physical activity	✓ Several times a day	✓ 3 hours or more	✓ 3 hours or more
Including moderate-vigorous physical activity		✓	✓ 60 minutes or more
Sedentary time (in prams, highchair, strapped to one's back, etc)	✓ Not more than 1 hour at a time	✓ Not more than 1 hour at a time	✓ Not more than 1 hour at a time
<i>Engaging in reading and storytelling is encouraged</i>			
Screen time	✗	✗ (2 years: -1h/day)	✓ Not more than an hour
Sleep time	✓ 0-3 months Between 14-17 hours 4-11 months Between 12-16 hours	✓ Between 11-14 hours including naps, with regular sleep and wake-up times	✓ Between 10-13 hours including naps, with regular sleep and wake-up times

© AFP Source: WHO



Inclusive Movement Opportunities

Moving to music plays a powerful role in early childhood development, supporting children's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth.

Engaging in movement activities set to music enhances language acquisition, listening skills, and creativity, making learning both joyful and meaningful.

Crucially, moving to music fosters inclusivity. It creates a shared space where all children, regardless of background, ability, or developmental stage, can participate, express themselves, and connect with others. The universal nature of music allows children to explore different cultures and perspectives, while the freedom of movement ensures that every child can engage at their own pace and in their own unique way. Through this playful, expressive medium, children build confidence, a sense of belonging, and a foundation for lifelong learning. (Battelley 2024)



ACTIVITY

Diwali





Early Childhood Well-being

Time spent in the first seven years of life matters in terms of brain development and other developmental milestones.

Early experiences in children's lives are associated with important later-in-life outcomes like **physical and mental well-being and educational attainment**. (Chia et al, 2022)

Interestingly there is a correlation between sufficiently rich **physical** play experiences in early childhood and the adult personality trait of **attachment** (Suzuki et al, 2020)



Physical Development in infancy is
Experience Expectant Learning – both
body and brain need it!

The brain **needs** and **expects** this
development.





...what about your physical well-being?

Read the checklist – tick off the ones applicable
to you



Educator Physical Well Being Checklist

- ✓ Are knowledgeable about the physical development of young children, including the role played by early reflexes;
- ✓ Are encouraged to draw on and develop their own physicality to engage and play with children in a range of physical activity including dance and sport with enthusiasm and enjoyment;
- ✓ Support children's sensory development through careful choice of materials, resources and experiences, taking care to gauge stimulation levels appropriate for individual children;
- ✓ Monitor children who may have difficulties with sensory integration and other aspects of physical development, seeking advice and guidance as appropriate



Educator Physical Well Being

- ✓ Provide healthy, nutritious food in relaxed, comfortable settings appropriate to children's' age and development, with opportunities to grow, harvest, cook and serve food as appropriate
- ✓ Raise parental awareness of the importance of physical development for future learning and well being as well as essential health and safety and risk management;
- ✓ **Ensure that policies for physical health and wellbeing are embedded into practice and regularly reviewed;**



Our 8 Senses

Young children should be exposed to a canopy movement experience which includes a range of gross motor (whole body), locomotor (travelling) and manipulative (fine motor) opportunities that stimulate the **vestibular, proprioceptive and Interoceptive** senses.

These systems are closely linked to balance and spatial awareness – both of which impact on emotional wellbeing. The **vestibular** system can be supported by the following movements: swinging/spinning, sliding/climbing, rocking/rolling, hanging upside down.



Our 8 Senses

The **proprioceptive** system may be supported by engaging in 'heavy' movements that include digging, pushing/pulling, lifting/carrying, sweeping, rough and tumble play.

The **Interoceptive system** can be supported through mindfulness, yoga, rhythmic movements, emotional activities and exposure to movement in variable weather changes.



Reflect on your current provision

Are there any deficits in your current provision available to children to support the following movements?

- **swinging/spinning,**
 - **sliding/climbing,**
 - **rocking/rolling,**
- **hanging upside down**
 - **digging,**
- **pushing/pulling/tugging**
 - **lifting/carrying,**
 - **sweeping,**
- **rough and tumble play**
- **Emotional movement**
 - **All weather play**
- **Mindfulness and yoga**



Sound

Children exposed to musical experiences from a young age show stronger neural connections for language and auditory processing .

Sound is deeply linked to movement.

Music, rhythm, and sound cues support:

- Gross motor coordination (dancing, jumping, marching to a beat)
- Fine motor timing (clapping, finger plays)
- Body awareness and timing, helping children organise their actions in time and space

Sound is central to how young children communicate, connect, and make sense of the world. By offering a sound-rich environment full of music, voice, natural sounds, and playful noise-making, we nurture their ability to listen, learn, move, and express themselves with confidence.



Rhythmic Entrainment: Sound

Scientists have noted babies as young as 2 months show rhythm discrimination, at 7 months can infer an underlying beat and at 9 months can notice timing discrepancies.

Rhythmic entrainment causes an emotion reaction when internal body rhythms adapt to the external rhythm of the music, activating the reward system modulate memory formation and brain plasticity. (Miendlarzewska & Trost, 2014)



ACTIVITY:

Rhythmic Entrainment





Touch

Tactile experiences are vital for children's development promoting physical and emotional well being and nerve growth. Being touched increases serotonin levels thereby reducing levels of cortisol, slowing heart rate and enables deep sleep.

Early Childhood touch releases oxytocin, responsible for bonding and attachment.



ACTIVITY: Co and self-Regulation

Stimulating senses & vagus nerve

Stroke
Pitter Patter/tap
Squeeze
Pat
Rub



Touch

Basic human contact is just as central to a child's development as nutrition. Emergent neuroscientific evidence shows that nurturing touch is essential to foster the physical and emotional security that every child needs in order to thrive.

The skin contains sensory receptors classically described as coding for touch, temperature, pain, itch and a fifth modality, pleasant touch.

Children who are deprived of touch (or avoid it) are at higher risk for sensory/emotional processing problems and the avoidance of social touch in infancy is a predictor of autism spectrum disorder in older children. Lack of touch impacts the sensory scaffold on which the perceptual distinction between 'self' and 'other' is built; further impacting social responses and abilities throughout development. (McGlone, Wessberg, Olausson 2014)



Touch

Positive, contingent touch from educators has been demonstrated to increase on-task behaviour and reduce disruptive behaviour in young children.

Given the importance of affective social touch for an infant's formation of secure attachment and children's subsequent cognitive and linguistic development and emotional regulation, optimising their touch environment is a fundamental right that will have far-reaching effects if denied to them.

Touch enhances the ability to adjust and become engaged in independent and creative 'social connecting.'



DISCUSSION:

Think of ways to sensitively introduce touch to your provision.

“We are programmed for touch, whether we like it or not!”

(McGlone, 2025)



What else to consider?

- autonomy and warmth in the interaction when considering the children's values and interests and when providing purposeful guidance and instruction.
- coercive control should be avoided as it is consistently associated with unfavourable motivational PA outcomes in children.
- it is important to consider children's perceptions when promoting their PA.
- Meet the child where they are – developmentally appropriate provision

(Battelley 2020; Arto, 2020)



What should educators consider?

- Priming with an enabling environment will offer a variety of physical opportunities but unless staff can scaffold or ‘nudge’ children to participate, only those children who prefer PA will access it (Battelley, 2020).
 - Allow time for curiosity and wonder
 - Play and more play (Bruce, 2023)
- When children feel physically secure they have a much better basis for emotional security (Goddard-Blythe, 2023)
- Teachers’ early childhood experiences and body confidence greatly impact on inclination and exposure in the area of early childhood physical activity.



Professional Love



**‘Young children need time and space to explore.
Rich environments, produce rich minds.’**

Battelley, 2018



Are you worthy of imitation?

Rudolph Steiner



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