

# A Giant Step Forward: Implementing Evidence-Based Strategies to Promote Physical Development in the Early Years

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## Introduction

As we prepare for the new academic year, it's important to reflect on the diverse early childhood experiences of children in our Early Years settings, especially in light of recent challenges. This September, we welcome children born during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic into our reception classes. Despite a return to normality, many practitioners across the country are noticing varied developmental needs among these early years cohorts. At Haltwhistle Academy, one focus has been upon physical development, and supporting the developmental delays we've observed in children entering nursery. The recent publication of the **Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) report on Physical Development<sup>1</sup>** provides a valuable tool to assess and enhance our practices. This report offers insights into evidence-based strategies for promoting physical development in young children, highlighting the importance of active play, adult support, and outdoor learning environments. The EEF report provides several key recommendations for enhancing physical development:

1. **Promoting physical activity:** educators can encourage and provide opportunities, including play, for children to regularly engage in physical activity, both indoors and outdoors.
2. **Teaching the skills needed for movement and handling:** educators can aim to improve physical development by explicitly teaching and consolidating movement and handling skills.
3. **Teaching the skills needed for mark-making and letter formation:** educators can support the development of the skills and mechanics required to actively engage in mark-making opportunities

This blog will focus upon recommendations 1 and 2. It aims to share the actionable strategies we've implemented at Haltwhistle Academy and offers practical recommendations for adapting learning spaces to support diverse physical development needs.

## Implementing Evidence-Based Strategies

### **Promoting Physical Activity**

#### **What does the evidence say?** *Key findings*

- *There is evidence that promoting physical activity improves children's physical development outcomes including a range of movement skills.*
- *Encouraging enjoyment through play and a focus on child-directed choice are effective strategies to further support children's physical development.*
- *Motivating children to be physically active through the use of resources or equipment, both outdoors and indoors, can support children's physical development.*

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<sup>1</sup> [EEF Physical development](#)

- *Educators have an important role to play in structuring the environment and activities to support children's physical development.*

At Haltwhistle Academy, our starting place was to create an enabling environment to foster and challenge physical development. Indoor spaces feature varied levels and heights, encouraging children to sit, stand, balance, and move in ways that promote physical engagement and core strength. Creative structures, such as reflective tunnels and connecting platforms, invite physical exploration and require children to slide, shuffle and crawl as they move themselves between spaces within the classrooms. Allocated areas for movement, dance and performance were important to encourage physical play indoors so platforms and rugs were used to designate these areas. We also were conscious of the need to retain 'tummy time' play for children who needed to further develop strength in the neck, back, shoulder and spaces to stretch rather than slouch whilst engaging in an activity or game were encouraged.



Our outdoor space is expansive and diverse, incorporating natural elements such as logs, rocks, and tree stumps and our hilly woodland space to encourage climbing, balancing, and sensory exploration. Core provision, such as footpaths of different textures, including brick, cobbles, bark and 'rough' undulating paths provide challenge for children to navigate; places to step up and into, such as a bridge, sand tower, role play cottage, and outdoor classroom on stilts; natural spaces such as balancing ropes between trees and a willow tunnel planted by the children, a simple reading space made with log offcuts and a mud kitchen which is stacked with herbs for chopping and stirring into concoctions all provide an endless range of settings for creative and physically demanding play to develop. A variety of loose parts such as tyres, crates, and ropes to inspire creativity and imaginative play while promoting physical activity, and engaging water play has been created features such as a mud kitchen, hand-pumped stream and riverbed to immerse children in sensory-rich experiences that promote fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination.



These environments are designed to stimulate creative and physically challenging play to promote children's activity. They have generated much 'incidental' learning in physical development, alongside children's play and exploration and provided numerous opportunities for practitioners to co-construct learning in physical development as children make sense of their environment.

The **EEF Physical Development guidance** within this section provides useful examples and videos to support new practitioners looking to improve their adaptive teaching approaches so that they can enhance learning through children's self-directed play using the practices of:

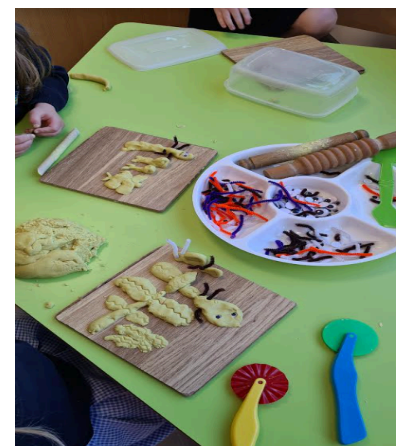
- Participate - participating in active movement alongside children with enthusiasm
- Repetition - creating repeated opportunity, for example through routines
- Combine learning opportunities - integrating physical activity through other curriculum areas such as literacy and numeracy
- Sparking or tempting - using interests to motivate children, eg music, healthy competition
- Suggesting - cueing an opportunity for movement
- Experimenting - with movement to feel safer or reach a goal.

## Teaching Movement and Handling Skills

### What does the evidence say? *Key findings*

- *The approach of teaching children the skills needed for movement has a positive effect on their physical development.*
- *Focusing on a specific skill can help children improve competency in that skill.*
- *Teaching the skills needed for movement and handling may be more effective when educators thoughtfully vary the level of difficulty, give verbal and physical direction, use a playful or motivating context such as dance, and combine some structured teaching time with opportunities for children to practise in less structured time.*

Our curriculum at Haltwhistle aligns with our fine and gross motor skills framework<sup>2</sup>, offering children engaging experiences that respond to their developmental needs, interests and recent experiences. For example, a broken scooter led to the creation of a bike repair shop, bike wash, road safety and the subsequent development of bike obstacle courses which the children created and adapted to their varying challenge needs. The enquiry provided many opportunities for physical development; using tools to fix equipment, organising themselves and their bikes into the workshop area, balancing and washing the bikes etc. Problem solving was incorporated through these activities to develop independent thought, resilience and opportunities to experience challenge and success, allowing children to develop problem-solving skills and physical competence through play.



<sup>2</sup> [Launchpad for Literacy](#)

Fundamental movement skills<sup>3</sup>, the cornerstones of children's motor development are directly taught through a weekly programme of targeted skill development which promotes locomotion (travelling - running, jumping), stability (balance - bending, stretching, holding still) and object manipulation (rolling, throwing, catching). Each session includes a repeatable narrative to secure a focus skill (eg "take big steps to run and small steps to stop", "bend our knees to jump and land") which the children can then use and apply in their own play as they secure these skills, supported by practitioners.

A broad skills progression for gross motor development and fine motor skills<sup>4</sup> is integrated across our curriculum and builds developmentally year upon year through our Early Years setting. This informs our direct teaching, and provision enhancements across early years. In order to prioritise the acquisition of essential skills, progressions for key skills such as scissor use, pencil/ pen grip, and self-care skills to help practitioners support children in securing these skills. Targeted support for children with specific physical development needs, includes gross motor interventions and sensory circuits. These daily sessions focus on essential movement skills, enabling children to move safely and confidently in their environments.

## **Conclusion**

Together these approaches have aided practitioners to support children to attain essential physical development skills. By aligning our practices with evidence-based recommendations, early years practitioners have the opportunity to create enriching learning environments that foster children's physical development and well-being. Through intentional planning, purposeful interactions, and a commitment to ongoing professional development, we can empower children to thrive physically, emotionally, and cognitively. Our spirit of collaboration alongside the many partners and settings of the Great North Early Years Stronger Practice hub has supported this journey as we work together towards a future where every child thrives, one step, leap, and jump at a time!

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<sup>3</sup> Get Set 4 PE - Fundamental skills - Nursery and Reception

<sup>4</sup> Launchpad for Literacy