Unlocking Physical Development in Early Years: A Look at the Education Endowment Foundation’s Physical Development Evidence Store

As early years educators, we know that physical development is more than just children learning to move their bodies—it is the foundation of their overall growth, health, and future success. Whether it is balancing on a beam or mastering the coordination required for holding a pencil, physical skills are crucial in the early years, setting the stage for everything from academic achievement to social confidence. To support educators in nurturing this vital area, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has introduced a valuable resource: the Physical Development Evidence Store.

But what is this resource, and how can it help early years educators boost children’s physical skills? Let us take a closer look.

The Importance of Physical Development

Physical development is one of the three prime areas in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), recognised for its critical role in early childhood development. Research shows that young children’s physical skills—both gross motor (large movements like running and jumping) and fine motor (small movements like writing and cutting)—are not only essential for physical health but also contribute to cognitive development, emotional regulation, and social skills.

Early years settings are uniquely placed to influence this development. By encouraging active play and movement, educators can foster children’s coordination, balance, and fine motor skills while also improving their ability to concentrate and engage in learning.

What Is the Physical Development Evidence Store?

The EEF’s Physical Development Evidence Store is a comprehensive resource designed to help early years practitioners build knowledge and apply research-backed approaches to promote physical development in their settings. The content is a living resource and is frequently updated. The aim is to present the most relevant research in an accessible, easy-to-digest format, helping educators feel confident in using evidence-based strategies to support children’s growth and development.

This evidence store pulls together key findings from various studies (19 for PD), offering guidance that is both practical and grounded in research. Importantly, it provides a summary of approaches that have been shown to improve outcomes for young children, particularly those who may need additional support in developing physical skills.

Key Insights and Approaches

One of the main messages from the evidence is the importance of creating a positive culture around physical activity. Children who enjoy being active are more likely to engage in physical play, which in turn supports their gross and fine motor development.

Active play helps children practice essential movements, such as running, jumping, balancing, and climbing, all of which contribute to their overall physical competence.

The Physical Development Evidence Store highlights several approaches that early years practitioners can adopt:

* Promoting Physical Activity: Establish a culture of movement where children feel encouraged to be physically active throughout the day, whether through structured play or spontaneous activities.
* Active Play: Incorporate play that stimulates physical movement, helping children develop coordination, strength, and balance.
* Gross Motor Skill Development: Focus on large muscle groups through activities like dancing, obstacle courses, or outdoor play, which help children build the physical foundations for more complex movements.
* Fine Motor Skill Development: Support children in developing the smaller muscle movements needed for tasks like writing, cutting, and threading beads by introducing age-appropriate tools and activities that refine these skills.

How Can Educators Use the Evidence Store?

The resource is designed for practical application in the classroom. Early years educators can use it to:

* Develop a Shared Understanding: Ensure that all staff in a setting have a shared understanding of the importance of physical development and its link to other areas of children’s progress, such as cognitive and emotional development.
* Identify Opportunities: Recognise where opportunities exist to embed physical development into daily routines and activities. This could be through setting up more outdoor play sessions, integrating movement into story time, or using hands-on activities that engage fine motor skills.
* Plan Next Steps: Equip staff with the knowledge and tools to guide children through their next developmental milestones. By using evidence-informed approaches, educators can tailor activities to individual children’s needs, helping them progress at their own pace.

Building Educators’ Confidence and Knowledge

The Physical Development Evidence Store does not just provide information—it empowers educators to act on it. By presenting the research in an easy-to-understand format, it allows practitioners to quickly access the most relevant findings and incorporate them into their day-to-day practice. This resource serves as both a training tool and a reference guide, making it easier for educators to stay up-to-date on best practices in physical development.

Moreover, it encourages educators to reflect on their practice with questions such as:

* Do we have a shared understanding of physical development?
* Can we spot opportunities to support physical growth throughout the day?
* Are we confident in our ability to support children’s next steps in their physical development?

These prompts help early years practitioners continuously assess and improve their approach, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to develop their physical abilities in a supportive, engaging environment.

Final Thoughts

Physical development is a cornerstone of early childhood education and underpins many other areas of learning and development. The EEF’s Physical Development Evidence Store is an invaluable tool for educators looking to refine their practice. By bringing together research and practical guidance, it equips practitioners with the knowledge they need to create environments where children can thrive physically and, in turn, in all other areas of their development.

By staying informed and embracing evidence-based strategies, early years educators can play a pivotal role in shaping children’s physical competence, well-being, and lifelong health. Join me to explore the Physical Development Evidence Store and unlock new ways to support the physical growth, development and active play that are so essential to a child’s early years.

**Helen Battelley MA**

**Helen Battelley, an internationally respected Early Years Physical Development consultant, trainer, author and brings energy and a motivational approach to raising the profile of PA in the early years. As the chair of the National Early Years Active Start Partnership (NEYASP), she leads a diverse group of stakeholders from across the UK to address the systemic challenges in the early years sector to ensure that every child benefits from the positive outcomes of play and PA. NEYASP are taking positive action to inform and support policy makers and inspection bodies to ensure the sector is taking an evidence-informed approach and valuing the place of physical development in a child’s life, right from the moment they enter the world!**

In 2024 Helen was the movement consultant for ‘Animal Movers and Mini Me’ a series for young children on SKY TV.

The series will be released on Sky later in 2024. This year also saw the release of the Physical Activity Adventure Pack (PAAP), a scheme of work developed specifically for early years children, drawing on developmentally appropriate practice, movement play and aligned with the DfE’s Early Years Foundation Stage Profile. The scheme was cocreated by Helen and Brianne Pearson.

Helen works as a lecturer and trainer, for 4 universities delivering Initial Teacher Training (ITT) modules in Primary PE and Early Childhood PE Pedagogy as well as Early Childhood Physical Development. She is also an approved provider for the UK’s Association for Physical Education (AfPE) and a member of the Chartered Association of Teachers.

Helen’s consultancy takes her all over the world, from Malaysia to Dubai, from China to Romania. The movement philosophy Helen promotes is to embed movement within the curriculum and framework to enable a movement philosophy. The embodiment of her training is to raise confidence in the areas of movement play and physical activity. The training Helen delivers ranges from supporting educators in developing activities to support the Early Years Physical Development, to working with coaches and PE leads to create PE schemes of work and methodology suited to young children.