



BLOG BY LIZ CLARK

Physical Literacy

East Midlands
**EARLY YEARS
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What do we mean by Physical Literacy?

In 2022 Sport England commissioned research into a definition of physical literacy. After consulting with stakeholders from education, health, sport and a wide range of communities, they released the consensus statement.

Physical literacy is our **relationship** with **movement** and **physical activity** throughout life.

A personal relationship
Having a positive and meaningful association with movement and physical activity.



Movement and physical activity
How we move (physical), connect (social), think (cognitive) and feel (affective) during movement and physical activity plays a crucial role.



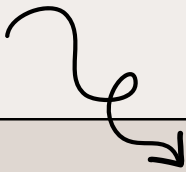
Throughout life
Influenced across the lifecourse by individual, social and environmental factors.



There is a substantial and significant body of knowledge from neurologists, health specialists, movement analysts and therapists about the importance of physical activity. Moving does matter! There are so many physical, social and emotional reasons why we should all move, more often.

One of the joys of working with children in their early years is the ease with which they move as part of their everyday experience; Mohammed spinning slowly on the swing... Matildhe swaying her fingers gently through the messy play, Eric thumping passionately on the mark making easel... all children explore their fascinations through their bodies.

Dance and creative movement have so much to offer in the development of physical literacy. It can offer potent ways for children to develop a positive relationship with their bodies. In developing physical literacy through movement we need to create opportunities for two things:



**ADULT INITIATED MOVEMENT PLAY
(INVITING CHILDREN TO MOVE)
&
CHILD INITIATED MOVEMENT PLAY
(WHERE THE CHILD DIRECTS THE WAYS TO PLAY)**



ADULT INITIATED MOVEMENT PLAY: DEVELOPMENTAL MOVEMENT INVITATIONS

Developmental movement patterns are the body's own internal, innate 'software' that help programme the brain and body for functioning, and therefore, learning. Spinning, rocking, rolling, crawling, curling, being upside down... there are a myriad of ways the body needs to move in order to develop and thrive. The importance of visiting and revisiting these movement patterns is well documented the work of Sherbourne, Jabadao, Bette Lamont, Dr Sally Goddard-Blythe and Dr Lala Manners.

”Movement play is about children moving in specific ways as they go through a developmental sequence of significant movement patterns that link the body and the brain.”

ARCHER & SIRAJ

Children's bodies are naturally hardwired to explore these patterns. Perhaps next time you are in your setting, notice the child that spins whilst zooming cars along the floor, the child that plays flat on their stomach rolling over to reach the next jigsaw piece for the puzzle or the child that curls up tight in the book corner between the cushions!

Children will often complete the necessary developmental movement patterns to thrive but many children are experiencing more challenges and barriers to engaging with full bodied movement play at the moment. For lots of children, an adults open, warm, welcoming invitation to rock, roll, crawl etc is all that is needed. But there are increasing instances of children needing more direct support in accessing these fundamentally important movement experiences. We are now seeing social, physical, emotional challenges facing children in our settings ranging from:

- Difficulties in seeking emotional connection with adults
- Lack of sociability with peers
- Communication challenges (including speaking selectively)
- Dysregulation
- Difficulty in accepting care

What our children need now is the opportunity to move both in close relationship and close contact with their significant adults; whether that's carers, early years practitioners, older siblings or parents. The 2021 BERA research states that in order to negate the sedentary, socially isolating effects of the pandemic "*emphasis should be placed on the 'processes' involved in moment-by-moment relational interactions*". Dance, that draws children and adults into a trusting, warm, playful relationship can start to fill some of the gaps in experiences that our children have encountered. Adults and children can rock and tip together, with children tucked in between the adults legs. Adults can lift and fly children through the air, carefully tipping them head down (a firm favourite with the children at Pen Green). Together we can wrap, squash, wriggle, pull, tip and spin together.

What are the developmental movement patterns that your children have perhaps missed out on? What invitation do you currently offer as part of your free-flow or as part of an intervention for smaller groups?

**INVITATIONS TO MOVE
ARE YOU AND YOUR SETTINGS MOVEMENT
READY?**

Is your floor space gritty? (no one likes sliding and rolling among biscuit crumbs)

Have you moved furniture? (children can help with this!)

Do you have a floor surface that is helpful for moving? (i.e. not carpet or rugs)

Are you moving and exploring, modelling a good relationship with movement yourself?

Are there any wires, plugs, buttons or electronics that could be a draw for children once furniture is moved?

Are other distractions (usually toys) helpfully covered over?

CHILD INITIATED CREATIVE MOVEMENT PLAY:

A quality early years curriculum is a blend of adult initiated and child led learning. Enabling children to take the lead is vital in them developing a meaningful, positive relationship with their bodies.

When a child initiates movement we can notice, observe and join, trying out the movement on our own bodies and thus reflect the exploration back to the child, like a mirror. We can tune into children's movement explorations, no matter how small – even if it's the blink of an eye. It is an approach which has its roots in Intensive Interaction, Dance Movement Psychotherapy but also in Dance Improvisation. In some settings I have worked in, this has become affectionately named "mirror play". However, it is never an exact mirror. In reflecting back a child's movement choices, a movement conversation builds, with each contributor learning from the exchange of ideas. You can see a movement conversation happening in a setting as part of their free-flow provision [here](#).



Mirror play turns interactions in setting 'on their head' and creates a power shift and a purposeful, democratic space where children can lead and take charge. This approach is wholly strength based and leads children into a more confident relationship their body and their ideas. It is accessible and inclusive as it focusses on the non-verbal aspects of communication such as gesture, touch, posture, facial expressions and gaze. These interactions create what Elinor Goldschmied calls "Islands of Intimacy" – special, intimate times of shared experience between the practitioner and child. These exchanges have the potential to change our view of the outward expressions, learning and, potentially, the behaviour of children as their worlds are observed with curiosity, they are understood and their creative endeavours are recognised and celebrated.

Tuning in to the child's experience has the effect of cultivating an 'empathic understanding' of what it is like to be the child. The approach can help us to engage more radically with the notion of becoming child-like, which includes being playful and exploring creative possibilities.

Time and time again these attuned, 'in the moment' interactions have yielded surprising, joyful and often magical experiences as adults and children feel a connectedness on a deep level that does not rely on words. And what better way to create a lifelong relationship with moving than through joy?





About Liz Clark

Liz is Artistic Director of Turned On Its Head www.turnedonitshead.org. She works exclusively in early years and with children with special educational needs through creative movement and dance. She is an experienced trainer in movement and creativity and is currently Associate Artist for People Dancing with the responsibility for development of a national network to support artists and practitioners who want to work through dance in Early Years. From April 2020-April 2021 she was Lead Artist for the Talent 25 research programme into creativity with babies and their families in Leicester. She blogs thoughts and ideas about creativity, interaction and dance at ourcreativeadventure.com.



The research has been featured in Early Years Theory and Practice 4th edition by Ioanna Papaioiologou (full chapter) 2021 and Developing a Loving Pedagogy in the early years 2021 by Tamsin Grimmer (case study). In 2022 Loughborough University Nursery were nominated for an NDNA Award for how the programme supported children with SEND.

Liz has worked with Pen Green and Charnwood Nursery and Pre-school group over the last 5 years, working with children, families and their practitioners and is sharing their story at the Pen Green Celebration on the 2nd March 2024 and through her webinar on 15th February 2024.



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