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Moving to Write: Why Big Movements Matter in Little Learners

About the AUTHOR

Suzanne Taylor has had a long career within Early Years and is a former Adviser, National Leader and Headteacher of a large nursery school and children's centre.

She is now an Early Years Consultant with a strong knowledge of children's development. Having worked in early years all of her professional life she is passionate about creating environments that foster play-based, movement-rich learning experiences in the early years.

> **Children's early motor coordination is not only important for physical development, but also plays a significant role in their long-term academic success."**
> Bart, O., Hajami, D. and Bar-Haim, Y. (2021)

Have you ever watched a toddler climb, run, or hang upside-down on a climbing frame and wondered how that connects to their ability to hold a pencil later on? In the Early Years, movement is more than just physical development—it's the foundation for learning to write. As we observe children navigating their environment, we're also witnessing the beginning of handwriting readiness.

Building the Bridge from Gross Motor to Fine Motor

The link between gross motor skills and the development of writing is increasingly supported by research and reflected in high-quality early years practice. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) highlights that developing strength and control in the core, shoulders, arms, hands, and fingers is essential for children to access writing tasks confidently.

The Hidden Connection: Big Movements Before Small Ones

Development in early childhood follows a "top-down" and "proximal-to-distal" pattern —meaning control starts from the head and moves downward, and from the centre of the body out to the extremities. A child must first have strong core and shoulder stability before they can effectively control their hands and fingers.

Imagine trying to draw a straight line while sitting on a wobbly chair. That's what it's like for a child with underdeveloped gross motor skills trying to write - they're spending so much effort just staying upright that little energy is left for pencil control.That means children need strong cores, stable shoulders, and coordinated arms before their hands and fingers can work independently with control.

Research has shown that children with a strong core and well-developed balance develop better writing skills than those with poor muscle control (Cowley 2012).

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Gross Motor Skills Support Early Writing

Gross motor development directly connects to writing readiness in the early years:

- Core strength helps children sit upright at a table without slouching.
- Shoulder and arm stability allow for smooth, controlled hand movements and pencil control.
- Balance and coordination build overall body awareness and posture.
- Crossing the midline supports fluid hand movements from left to right across a page.
- Bilateral coordination allows one hand to stabilise paper while the other writes.
- Hand:eye co-ordination enables the precise movements and visual feedback necessary for forming letters, controlling spacing, and achieving smooth, legible handwriting

In the settings that I led, we embedded movement into the daily routine - not as an 'extra' but as a core element of literacy development. For example:

- Outdoor climbing and vertical mark-making help children strengthen shoulder and arm muscles.
- Balance bikes and swings support core stability and balance.
- Crawling and dancing encourage crossing the midline.
- Throwing and catching games support hand:eye coordination.
- Drawing on the floor on large sheets of paper giving 'tummy time' to develop a strong core.
- Reaching up high or climbing a ladder strengthen bilateral coordination.

These activities strengthen core, shoulder, and arm muscles, improve balance and coordination, and encourage cross-body movement—all crucial precursors to writing.
One child who struggled with pencil grip became much more confident after regular sessions using spray bottles, balance bikes, climbing. Over time, their mark-making became more intentional, and their writing flourished. The staff observed fewer signs of fatigue, and the child's engagement improved.

Gross motor development is not separate from literacy—it's a prerequisite. When we enable children to move freely and purposefully, we're setting the stage for strong, confident writers.

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Key Takeaway:

Before they write, children must move. Big body movements build the muscles—and brain connections—needed for small ones.

Reflective Questions:

What opportunities in your environment allow children to develop the large physical skills that underpin early writing?

Resources:

- Bart, O., Hajami, D. and Bar-Haim, Y. (2021). Predicting academic achievement from early motor coordination: A 10-year longitudinal study. Child Development, 92(2), pp.602–616. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13428
- EEF Early Years Toolkit – Physical Development
- Help for Early Years Providers: Writing

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For more information on **Moving to Write** please go to **The Thames Valley and South Central Early Years Stronger Practice Hub**. There are two recorded webinars in this series that can also be accessed **Gross Motor Skills (access here)** and **Fine Motor Skills (access here)** or email admin@tveysph.org for more details and resources.

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Funded by UK Government
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