

Elevating Physical Development Through Quality Interactions

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. Suzanne has a passion for outdoor learning, including taking practitioners to see Norwegian Kindergartens for many years, and has extensive knowledge about children's physical development and quality interactions.



Physical development is a foundational area that enables children to engage with the world around them and lays the building blocks for later physical capabilities and health.

Education Endowment Foundation

Observation: The Foundation of Intentional Support

Effective support begins with careful observation. Skilled educators notice subtle differences in the quality of children's movements—some are coordinated and confident, while others may be hesitant or underdeveloped. These observations allow educators to modify their guidance, introducing extra challenge or simplifying tasks when needed. This responsive approach aligns with Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development, in which the adult becomes a co-participant in the child's learning, providing just enough support to extend their capabilities.

Moving Beyond Supervision to Meaningful Interaction

Physical play is not automatically developmental—it requires thoughtful adult interaction to become truly educational.

Research indicates that when educators actively engage with children during movement play, the results are profound: expanded movement repertoires, increased language use, and deeper engagement.





Educators can:

- ★ Model appropriate movement and language.
- ★ Demonstrate how to use equipment safely and effectively.
- ★ Scaffold learning through prompts, questions, and encouragement.
- ★ Encourage perseverance, offering emotional support when tasks are challenging.



For example, guiding a child through a balance beam might include comments like, “Try spreading your arms for balance. What happens if you look straight ahead?” Such interactions turn physical activity into a rich learning experience.

Planning for Purposeful Movement

Intentional planning ensures that physical development is a priority, not an afterthought. Educators should design movement experiences for both individuals and groups, indoors and outdoors, with specific goals in mind. Effective planning incorporates:

- ★ Varying levels of difficulty to accommodate diverse abilities.
- ★ A range of physical environments and resources.
- ★ Opportunities for problem-solving and cooperative play.
- ★ Integration of movement into daily routines.

Simple strategies—like incorporating animal walks to strengthen core muscles—can be built into transitions (e.g., moving like a bear to the bathroom).

Teaching Movement and Developing Vocabulary

Research indicates a strong link between early years physical development and vocabulary development, particularly in the areas of communication and language.

Not all children instinctively know how to jump, land, or throw. Skills such as batting a ball or balancing on one foot must often be explicitly taught. Educators should not only demonstrate these movements but also teach the accompanying vocabulary.

Suggestions and questions such as “Try jumping so that you bend your knees and land with both feet together” or “Can you spin as you jump?” help children articulate their experience and build cognitive connections.

Supporting Risk, Struggle and Emotional Growth

Children benefit from challenge. When educators recognise when to step in and when to let a child persist independently, they strike a crucial balance between safety and growth. This judgment requires attuned emotional support - motivating without over-directing, encouraging without rescuing. Children who experience appropriate levels of risk and challenge develop resilience, confidence, and mastery over their own bodies.





Conclusion:

High-quality interactions between educators and children are essential for effective physical development. Rather than assuming that movement play is self-sufficient, educators must engage with intention, insight, and empathy. By observing carefully, modelling clearly, scaffolding thoughtfully, and planning strategically, educators become catalysts for physical growth.



Key Takeaway:

Be more than a bystander - be a co-participant in children's movement:

Observe ➤ Support ➤ Reflect REPEAT

Reflective Questions:

How intentional are you in your interactions during movement play?
What might you do differently this week?



Resources:

- <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/supporting-physical-development>
- Archer, C., and I. Siraj. 2017. Movement Environment Rating Scale (MOVERS) for 2–6 Year Olds Provision. Improving Physical Development Through Movement and Physical Activity. London: Sage. Gloucestershire: Hawthorn.
- <https://www.earlymovers.org.uk>
- Department for Education. (2024) Best start in life part 2: The 3 prime areas of learning – Physical development. GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/best-start-in-life-a-research-review-for-early-years/best-start-in-life-part-2-the-3-prime-areas-of-learning#physical-development>

Feedback:



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For more information on Physical Development please access [The Thames Valley Early Years Stronger Practice Hub](#) Webinars by Suzanne Taylor 'Prime Areas of Physical Development' 13th & 20th May 2025 or email admin@tveysph.org for more details and resources.

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