



Blog

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Bend, Balance and Bear Hunts

- Building Physical Literacy Through Story

INTRODUCTION

My name is Ruth Heath and I am the Physical Development Lead at Alferton Nursery School. A sensory audit of enhancement opportunities for children with physical development challenges, led to the development of our Bend and Balance sessions. The principles behind these sessions could be easily implemented into any early years setting, leading to opportunities for children to explore physical development through a creative narrative that is both captivating and familiar.

WHY USE STORY TO BUILD PHYSICAL LITERACY?

In our setting, we've found that embedding movement into narrative play is more than just fun—it's a powerful tool for developing physical literacy. This week's PD enhancement, Bend and Balance, uses *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* to support proprioception (the body's ability to sense its position and movement in space, which aids coordination and balance), coordination, and emotional regulation.

To date, a small amount of research, available in the EEF Evidence Store, indicates that physical development approaches can have an impact on cognitive development outcomes such as executive function or concentration. Whilst more research would be needed to explore this further, we find that when movement enhancements are purposeful, repeated over a 4 – 6 week period, creative in delivery, and embedded in meaningful contexts, outcomes are higher for children.

HOW DO WE START THE JOURNEY?

We begin with a calm, sensory-rich environment. Children sit on their bears—making sure they don't move—and identify their names. This links to early mark-making and memory development. A snow scene ASMR video plays softly, setting the tone for our journey.

We recall the story together, using flat hands and bear paws to exemplify the story character. This supports proprioception and joint awareness. "Can you see your paw prints in the mat?" we ask. Practitioners observe for signs of hypermobility and over-flexing, adapting movements as needed.



WHAT PHYSICAL CHALLENGES DO WE EXPLORE?

Each part of the story becomes a movement challenge:

- **Wavy grass:** Stretch tall, push grass aside, then log roll and squash it. This supports core strength and lateral movement.
- **Deep cold river:** High knees to splash, stepping stones for balance. Add water spray for sensory stimulation.
- **Thick oozy mud:** Balance along a rope 'log'—a test of posture and coordination.
- **Swirling whirling snowstorm:** Tear paper to create tiny snowflakes (fine motor), spin on a spinner (for those with a specific sensory need) while friends throw 'snow'—a proprioceptive delight. For some children, time under a weighted blanket during the snowstorm (for those with a specific sensory need).
- **Deep dark forest:** Stumble trip legs—crossing limbs to challenge left-right brain integration. To add challenge, some friends may try and navigate legs by stepping over them.
- **Narrow gloomy cave:** Tiptoe around the mat's edge and enter the cave to find the bear.

Within nursery, PD activities are often based on familiar, fun and engaging provocations. EEF guidance supports the use of playful and child selected activities, to promote physical development:

“Encouraging enjoyment through play and a focus on child-directed choice are effective strategies to further support children’s physical development.”

The Bend and Balance programme and the resources used to exemplify movement have been explored and reviewed over a number of terms, within our schools’ reflective practice.

Sensory integration strategies have become a strong element of practice within Alferton Nursery School. The use of weighted blankets etc. has supported our children within Bend and Balance, as well as other aspects of development. We have found that often, children who need specific physical support, can also benefit from a sensory perspective.

WHAT IMPACT ARE WE SEEING?

In our setting, children are more engaged, calmer during transitions, and show improved balance and coordination. One child said, “I love bend and balance. It makes me happy and it’s soft in there”—a moment of emotional connection and sensory awareness.

Practitioners report increased confidence in adapting movement tasks for SEND pupils. We have found that this is more likely to be effective when adults model and scaffold movement with clear narrative cues.



HOW DO WE END THE SESSION?

We return with the bear for relaxation. Children choose a cushion and watch sea creatures in the sensory tube. They sit however they feel most comfortable—some bounce, some spin, some simply breathe.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Perhaps you could try embedding movement into your next story session? Observe how children respond—physically, emotionally, socially. Adapt tasks to suit their needs and celebrate every stretch, splash, and stumble.

Why not plan your own physical literacy story session this week? Choose a familiar tale, for example 'The Gruffalo', map out movement challenges (creep like a mouse, slither like a snake, or stomp like the Gruffalo), and share your reflections with your team. **Let's keep bending, balancing, and building together.**



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