



Blog

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Physical Development

- Squeezing and squashing Physical Development into and out of everything we do

INTRODUCTION

As a childminder with 17 years of experience, I've always known physical development (PD) was important. But engaging in sustained, high-quality professional development helped me to truly understand the why behind it. It's not just about catching balls or threading beads—it's about laying the neurological and muscular foundations for life.

This blog is for early years educators who want to deepen their understanding of PD and embed it meaningfully into their everyday practice. It's also for those who want to feel confident explaining to parents why squeezing a sponge matters just as much as holding a pencil.

WHAT'S REALLY BEHIND FINE AND GROSS MOTOR SKILLS?

Fine motor development isn't just about picking up tiny objects. It's about building strength across the whole hand—squeezing, pinching, rolling, and twisting. In my home, we use everyday tasks like peeling oranges, using spray bottles, and squeezing sponges to build these muscles. This is more likely to be effective when it's embedded in real-life, purposeful activities.



Gross motor development, meanwhile, supports much more than movement. It builds the vestibular and proprioceptive systems—essential for balance, coordination, and even emotional regulation. Activities like jumping, climbing, and crossing the midline help the brain's hemispheres communicate, which supports reading, writing, and self-care skills like tying shoelaces (Education Endowment Foundation [EEF], 2021).



HOW DO WE EMBED PD IN EVERYDAY PRACTICE?

In my setting, physical development is not a standalone session—it’s part of everything we do. In the garden we’ve created a mud kitchen with clay, play dough, and herbs for scissor skills. We use pump bottles filled with paint to strengthen hand muscles and promote independence. Children pump, twist, and squeeze—building strength while expressing creativity. A little gentle jazz can provoke children to move as they paint, bringing a level of emotional connection to their play.

We also use upright mark-making surfaces like Perspex boards and windows, which encourage shoulder and arm strength. I find this has been more effective when children can access these resources independently and repeatedly.



Indoors we use spaces creatively. We run and dance with purpose, learning to control our bodies and manage space. We use music and movement games—wiggling like worms, jumping like rabbits, and chasing bubbles—to develop gross motor skills. These activities also support self-regulation and executive functioning, which are crucial for school readiness (EEF, 2021).

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

According to the EEF’s Early Years Toolkit, physical development strategies that are embedded in daily routines and linked to self-regulation are more likely to have a positive impact on learning outcomes. The toolkit highlights that “approaches which focus on developing self-regulation and executive function can have a positive impact on learning” (EEF, 2021). Collaborative building, moving to music, balancing on logs and overcoming challenge, all support children to physically, emotionally and cognitively regulate their behaviours.



WHAT'S THE IMPACT?

In my setting, I've seen children become stronger, more confident, and more independent. One child who struggled to mash potatoes now does it weekly with ease. Another who couldn't squeeze a spray bottle now uses it to clean the table after lunch. These small wins build self-esteem and prepare children not just for school, but for life.



CONCLUSION

As an experienced practitioner, I constantly ask myself: **Why am I doing this? Who is it for?**

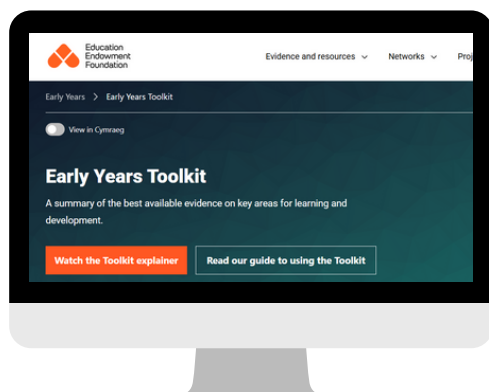
When we strip it back to the basics—putting on shoes, squeezing sponges, climbing logs—these are the building blocks of lifelong learning.

If we stop overthinking and start embedding physical development into everything we do, our children will learn to access their physical world with skill, confidence and creativity.. Whether it's a mud kitchen, a spray bottle, or a dance around the kitchen table—ask yourself: **How does this support the child's development?** Then do more of it.

REFERENCES



[Education Endowment Foundation \(EEF\). \(2025\). Early Years Toolkit. Available at: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/toolkit](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/toolkit) (Accessed: 12 November 2025).



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