

Strength in Motion: How Reflective Practice Elevated Physical Development at Woodentops

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Introduction: Why Physical Development Matters Now More Than Ever

Across the early years sector, there is a renewed urgency to strengthen physical development from birth—an urgency underscored by OFSTED’s research review *Getting It Right From The Start*. The review highlights that while practitioners demonstrate strong understanding of communication and social development, **“their knowledge of supporting physical development was weak”**, noting that **“more support is needed to help practitioners understand how to support the physical development of babies and toddlers.”**

This national picture places physical development firmly in the spotlight, especially as early entitlement expansions mean even more babies and toddlers will enter early years settings.

At the same time, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) reinforces how critical high-quality physical development opportunities are for long-term learning. EEF evidence shows that **“approaches supporting physical development and activity in young children can have a valuable positive effect on their learning of five months additional progress, on average.”**

The EEF further emphasises that physical activity is not only beneficial for health, but forms the foundation for wider learning, stating that **“physical development is a core part of early years education and has many important benefits beyond the cognitive outcomes.”**

Against this backdrop, Woodentops’ commitment to deepening reflective practice and enhancing physical development provision is both timely and aligned with the highest-quality national research. The case study below

References:

Department for Education (EYFS Framework)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework>

Birth to Five Matters

<https://birthto5matters.org.uk>



illustrates how Woodentops is not only responding to these calls—but leading the way.

Woodentops Case Study

Three senior teachers from Woodentops Nursery attended a physical development training for under twos delivered by the London South Early Years Stronger Practice Hub at Coin Street Nursery. The training provided a valuable opportunity for reflective practice, allowing experienced practitioners to come together, share ideas and evaluate existing high-quality provision. One practitioner highlighted that “it’s a great training opportunity for an apprentice starting their learning journey in early childhood development,” emphasising its relevance across different levels of experience.

Existing Good Practice at Woodentops

Woodentops already demonstrates strong practice in supporting children’s physical development, with continuous access to climbing equipment across the nursery. A key learning point from the training was the professional discussion, which provided a valuable opportunity to reflect on how our existing resources and environment layouts can be used even more effectively to enhance children’s learning and development.

Enhancing Provision Through Reflective Practice

For example, discussions around transporting resources, such as water buckets, reinforced current practice while encouraging deeper thinking about how these opportunities could be extended. Following the training, staff reflected on how to maximise indoor provision by introducing a wider range of transporting activities, including the use of spoons and containers for children aged 18 months to 2.5 years, supporting fine motor development, coordination and concentration.

Supporting Safe Risk-Taking in the Baby Room

In the baby room, the training further supported reflective thinking around safe risk-taking. While climbing equipment is already embedded in practice, our team

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is now reviewing the layout to ensure more consistent and accessible indoor opportunities, including the use of slide equipment, to enhance children's physical exploration.

Progression Across the EYFS at Woodentops

Woodentops' strong progression in physical development, from baby climbing environments to pre-reception children confidently riding pedal bikes outdoors, reflects best practice aligned with the Department for Education EYFS framework and Birth to Five Matters.

By building on existing strengths, practitioners were able to refine practice further, leading to enhanced opportunities and improved outcomes for children's physical development.

Research Connections: What Leading Bodies Recommend

Below are the **directly cited research statements** that reinforce and validate the practices highlighted in the Woodentops case study.

Harvard Center on the Developing Child

Serve-and-return interactions underpin physical and neurological development, reinforcing the importance of adult-child engagement during physical exploration.

"Brains are built over time, from the bottom up... early experiences shape brain architecture—and all our developing biological systems."

"Responsive, attentive interactions between a child and a caring adult, known as serve and return interactions, shape brain architecture."

These concepts support Woodentops' reflective approach—ensuring staff are intentionally present, responsive and attuned during physical activity experiences.

Education Endowment Foundation (EEF): Physical Development Approaches

References:

Department for Education (EYFS Framework)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework>

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The EEF strongly links physical development to broader learning outcomes:

“Approaches supporting physical development and activity in young children can have a valuable positive effect on their learning of five months additional progress, on average.”

“Physical development is a core part of early years education and has many important benefits beyond the cognitive outcomes summarised here.”

These findings align with Woodentops’ emphasis on climbing, transporting, coordination, and active physical exploration.

EEF also highlights the importance of **variety and thoughtful environment design**:

“Physical development approaches may be more effective when educators thoughtfully vary the difficulty of tasks, provide feedback to children, combine instruction with active play, [and] provide a range of resources and environments.”

This directly supports Woodentops’ efforts to reconsider room layouts and expand transporting activities.

British Heart Foundation (BHF): Early Years Physical Activity Guidance

The British Heart Foundation provides clear guidelines emphasising **daily movement, active environments**, and reducing sedentariness:

“Physical activity should be encouraged from birth, particularly through floor-based play... Children of pre-school age who are capable of walking unaided should be physically active daily for at least 180 minutes (3 hours).”

“All under fives should minimise the amount of time spent being sedentary (being restrained or sitting) for extended periods.”

This directly validates Woodentops’ commitment to continuous access to climbing and the ongoing development of indoor physical environments.

Further, BHF stresses the importance of early physical activity for long-term wellbeing:

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“The first five years of life are fundamental to children’s growth and development... physical activity impacts on children’s health and plays a key role in their development.”

This aligns with Woodentops’ long-term progression from baby climbing to pre-reception pedal biking.

Conclusion

By refining already strong practice and aligning with the insights from **Harvard, EEF**, and the **British Heart Foundation**, Woodentops is not only enhancing children’s immediate physical development opportunities—it is actively contributing to their **long-term cognitive, emotional and physical wellbeing**.

Useful references:

[Getting it right from the start: how early years practitioners work with babies and toddlers - GOV.UK](#)

[EEF | Physical Development](#)

[LSR56-British-Heart-Foundation-Best-start-in-life-early-years-manifesto.pdf](#)

References:

Department for Education (EYFS Framework)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework>

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