Overcome Resistance to the "M" Word and Make Movement Part of the Program

by Rae Pica

When I first began my journey as an early childhood consultant specializing in physical activity, I imagined everyone would be as excited as I was about the possibilities inherent in exploring movement with young children. Instead I found that all too often, upon hearing the words 'children' and 'movement' in the same sentence, early childhood professionals backed away from me as though I was a dentist with a drill in hand!

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Thirty-five-plus years later, attitudes have mostly improved. Due to the efforts of organizations like NAEYC, the childhood obesity epidemic, and brain research demonstrating a strong link between moving and learning, early childhood professionals have become increasingly aware of the value of physical activity. It's even possible that the push toward academics and away from play in early childhood has contributed to that awareness. With children now more sedentary than ever, teachers and caregivers are witnessing for themselves how detrimental it is for children when they *don't* move.

However, the movement message still isn't welcomed with open arms. ECE professionals may better understand the value of physical activity, but that doesn't necessarily mean they're chomping at the bit to facilitate movement experiences. Over the years I've encountered four principle reasons why. Listed here, I have included recommendations for addressing each.

"I don't know enough about movement/motor development."

Sadly, the reality is that most early childhood professionals haven't had training in these areas. But while the desire to be an expert is commendable, it isn't necessary to be an expert in order to facilitate physical activity with children. Rather, for the most part, motor development and physical fitness take care of themselves — *if* the children are given the time, space, and opportunity to move. With that said, it's

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incumbent upon ECE professionals to help build confidence and competence in children by detecting and helping to correct difficulties (for example, the child who doesn't move confidently and competently will likely be the child who eventually *stops* moving, becoming one of the many couch potatoes among us and yet another statistic in the obesity crisis). However, this involves only a basic awareness of what fundamental motor skills are and the observation that is part of every quality program. If a teacher or caregiver notices an ongoing problem or the possibility of one and is unable to correct it, she can seek the help of a professional such as a physical education teacher or an occupational or physical therapist.

Since early childhood centers are where most young children spend the majority of their time, ECE professionals also have a responsibility to observe — and encourage — moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity (MVPA). The Children's Activity and Movement in Preschools Study (CHAMPS) determined that children enrolled in preschools were engaged in MVPA during only 3.4 percent of the preschool day (NIEER, 2010). Others (Pate et al., 2008) observed 2,000 children and found that "children attending preschools were engaged in MVPA during only 2.6 percent of observation intervals. During over 85 percent of intervals, children were engaged in either very light activity or sedentary behaviors" (p. 443).

MVPA is not only essential for healthy bodies, it also provides the nutrients — water, oxygen, and glucose — that ensure healthy, optimally-functioning brains. The solution, again, is for ECE professionals to provide children with the time, space, and opportunity to move. And should the children need encouragement, teachers can facilitate such rousing games as "Follow the Leader," "Blob Tag," "or Statues."

Movement tends to be a topic that intimidates. The belief is that one has to be an expert in the subject in order to 'teach' it; but, truly, that isn't the case.

"I don't feel comfortable moving/doing physical activity myself."

In the same way many teachers and caregivers believe they can't 'do music' with children if they 'can't sing,' they're convinced they can't 'do movement' with children if they aren't 'athletic.' Perhaps they have painful memories of being picked last or failing to climb the rope in gym class, or perhaps they're among those more comfortable reading a good book than swinging a tennis racquet. Whatever the cause, there is a cure and it's called *exploration*, or divergent problem solving. This is actually the teaching method that should be most widely used in children's movement experiences and requires primarily that the teacher verbally present movement challenges. For example, the teacher asks the children to demonstrate a crooked shape. She then issues additional challenges to extend and vary the exploration ("Yes! Now show me you can do it another way [closer to the floor; using more body parts]!"). No physical activity is required on the part of the teacher and the children have opportunities for creativity, self-expression, problem solving, and divergent thinking, in addition to the physical benefits involved.

Photo by Bonnie Neugebauer

Of course there are times when a more direct approach that requires demonstration and imitation is called for. Activities such as the Hokey Pokey and Follow the Leader entail conformity and uniformity and therefore don't lend themselves to exploration. Among the benefits to children of such activities are a feeling of belonging and practice, both with

following directions and physically imitating what the eyes see (helpful for other activities such as drawing and writing). Clearly, such activities don't demand athleticism on the part of the teacher. Moreover, as any ECE professional knows, young children do not sit in judgment. They are not going to point out physical 'failings.' What they *will* do is revel in the joy of having their teacher be part of their play. And the teacher will have served as a role model, demonstrating to the children that the important adults in their lives value physical activity.

"We don't have the time/space for physical activity."

The concern about time is the objection I hear most often. For years I was told, "We're too busy preparing the children for kindergarten/first grade academics." Now that most programs are required to focus on academics, the concern has become a belief that it's simply not possible to fit one more thing into the schedule.

At the top of the Let's Move! Child Care checklist is the recommendation that children have one to two hours of physical activity throughout the day. This aligns with the recommendations of other organizations, including SHAPE America, whose guidelines state that:

- Toddlers should accumulate at least 30 minutes of structured physical activity and at least 60 minutes of unstructured physical activity each day.
- Preschoolers are encouraged to accumulate at least 60 minutes of both structured and unstructured physical activity per day.

Early childhood professionals look at these suggestions and feel overwhelmed. They can't fathom how they can attend to the children's bodies when there's so much they're supposed to be addressing with their brains. But the brain and body are inseparable, with the three developmental domains — cognitive, social/emotional, and physical — intertwined in the early years.

Listed are some suggestions for how physical activity can be woven into the program.

Using movement across the curriculum. When children jump like rabbits and kangaroos they develop muscular strength and endurance and, depending on how continuously they jump, cardiovascular endurance. At the same time, they're exploring the math concepts of light/heavy, big/small, up/down, and high/low. Word comprehension is promoted as children physically experience these terms, so emergent literacy is also addressed. And, should the children work in pairs, the social studies skill of cooperation is added to the mix. ECE professionals can be assured that regardless of the content area or concept under consideration, there is a way for children to experience it physically.

Taking brain breaks. Research going back to the 1880s demonstrates that children accomplish more when they have breaks (Jarrett, 2013). A brain break can be any kind of physical activity that gets the blood flowing (and glucose, water, and oxygen to the brain) and provides a change of pace. Examples would be jogging in place while pretending to be in a marathon, or playing a fast-paced game of "Simon Says" (without eliminating players).

Taking advantage of transitions. Several times in the course of a day children move from one activity to another, so they may as well move in ways that are both functional and fun. Teachers and caregivers can promote flexibility by challenging children to move in a tall, straight shape or a crooked shape; to tiptoe; or to move only three body parts. They can enhance muscular strength, muscular endurance, and cardiovascular endurance by challenging the children to hop, skip, or jog lightly. The possibilities are endless.

The examples above further demonstrate that large gymnasiums aren't necessary for most movement experiences. Of course, where large-muscle movement (running and jumping) is concerned, if there truly isn't adequate space indoors for such activities, they can and should be experienced outdoors.

"I'm afraid the children will get out of control."

I suspect that, regardless of what other objections are offered, this is the one that worries ECE professionals the most: the mental image of children 'bouncing off the walls.' An in-depth exploration of management techniques clearly isn't possible here, but there are a few essential points that can allay a teacher's concerns.

First, if the teacher has established rules of conduct for the classroom, as well as a respect for others' personal space, these will transfer to movement activities. The teacher must simply remind the children that the rules are still in effect and give the children a chance to practice them in relation to physical activity.

Second, movement exploration lends itself to successful, active involvement. Children who are experiencing success

and who are actively engaged aren't likely to want to wreak havoc upon the class. Additionally, the teacher has in his favor the fact that young children love to display their abilities to the important adults in their lives. When the teacher introduces challenges with phrases like "Let me see you…" or "Show me you can…" children want to demonstrate that they can! It's a simple but amazingly effective technique.

Perhaps the most overlooked fact among those who worry about losing control of moving children is that the children most likely to 'bounce off the walls' are those *not* given the opportunity to move!

Conclusion

Of the objections cited above, three can be considered fear-based, with the one about time and space typically offered as 'reality.' However, *all* of them can be overcome. As they say, where there's a will there's a way. And if ever there was a good reason to will away objections, it's the fact that humans were meant to move — *especially* in early childhood — for the sake of both the body and the brain.

References

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