Moving Experiences that Will Last a Lifetime

by Joye Newman and Carol Kranowitz

It's 50 degrees and raining outside. The playground is all mud and puddles. The morning has just begun, and the preschoolers are full of energy. You, like most early childhood educators, want to give your young students a leg up and a head start in reading and other academic endeavors. So, how do you use this time? Do you:

1) Set up your four year olds at the computers to play the latest 'educational' video games?
2) Conduct a longer-than-usual Circle Time?
3) Bring out the flashcards and try to entice the kids to call out quick answers?
4) Take your children outside to splash in the puddles?

Would it surprise you to learn that the last option will have the most profound impact on your children's physical, emotional, academic, and overall success? How can that be?

In options 1, 2, and 3, the children are involved in sedentary activities. Only in the final option are they using their whole bodies to move through a three-dimensional world.

The years from birth through about age six are the time that the most sensory-motor, perceptual-motor, and visual-motor development occurs. Motor development is sequential, with each skill emerging from a previous one. This is the time for children to learn about their world by moving through it, by feeling it, and by learning how their body parts move in relation to themselves and to the world around them. Only by experiencing the three-dimensional world can a child build the solid foundation upon which all subsequent skills will be built. The more opportunities a child has to move, the more comfortable he will be in his body. Being comfortable in his body is the first step to being in-sync. Our experience has taught us that an in-sync child has a head start at being successful.

So how does playing in the rain help a young child (let's call him Joey) develop pre-reading skills? How does it help him to become an in-sync child? Let's look at what's involved in our rainy-day adventure.

The more Joey uses his sensory systems, the more they help him function well throughout the day, and the better equipped he is to develop good self-help skills. Now, Joey needs to put on his boots, so he leans forward to grab hold of them. Thanks to a smoothly functioning vestibular sense, which tells him where his head is relative to the surface of the Earth, Joey maintains his balance and does not fall over. As Joey pulls on his boots, he is developing his proprioception, which is the unconscious awareness of sensations coming from muscles and joints. This information tells a child whether he is stomping or tiptoeing, how hard to press down on a crayon, and how to flex and stretch his arm to throw a beanbag. His feet are in the boots, and now Joey stands up straight. But what's this? His tactile sense tells him that his socks are sagging. Using his vestibular, tactile, and proprioceptive skills, he tugs up the socks so they don't bunch inside his boots. Ahh, that's better.

Joey uses perceptual-motor skills, too. He takes his rain slicker out of his cubby and lays it on the floor. Practicing the 'up-and-over' trick, he uses bilateral coordination to thrust both arms into the sleeves. As he adjusts his rain slicker, he is learning about body awareness: the mental picture of one's own body parts, where they are, how they interrelate, and how they move. Then he reaches for his rain hat. He can do this with just one hand because of laterality, the ability to use one side of the body separately from the other. During this process of

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putting on boots, slicker, and hat, Joey is also developing his motor planning skills: the ability to organize and sequence the steps of an unfamiliar and complex body movement in a coordinated manner. This skill will enable him to maneuver through an obstacle course, master handwriting, and play sports — and, one day, to write a book report, dissect a frog, and fill out a job application.

Joey will use his visual skills to take the umbrella you hand him. He will continue to develop his proprioceptive and tactile senses, as well as eye-hand coordination, as he pushes his umbrella open and feels it lock into place. As Joey moves out the door, down the steps, and into the rain, he will enhance his directionality: the awareness of concepts such as up, down, forward, backward, sideways and diagonally and the ability to move in these directions on command. Directionality is crucial for learning to read and write.

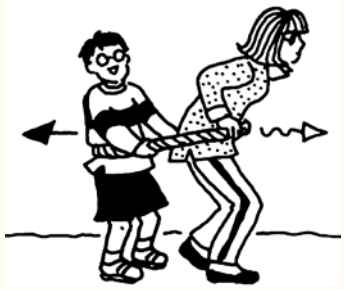
And we haven't even gotten to the puddles yet!!

These are just a few of the skills that can be learned only by moving. It is not possible to learn about our three-dimensional world by spending time in a two-dimensional one. Unfortunately, the advent of technology has resulted in a world where sedentary activities have become the norm. And modern conveniences such as remote controls and Velcro make it easy to move less.

Many educators and parents believe that the earlier a child learns to read and write, the better off he will be. To that end, they provide video and computer programs, paper and pencil games, and other sedentary tasks, hoping to develop the child's academic skills. Teachers and parents may not understand that for the young child, learning about the active movements their bodies are capable of making is a much more developmentally and academically appropriate use of the child's time.

Here is a sample of a fun activity from *Growing an In-Sync Child*.

BUS DRIVER



Most children are very excited to ride on the big yellow school bus. This game lets your child be both Bus Driver and Passenger. As Driver, he will take you for a slow or speedy, straight or curvy ride around the yard. As Passenger, he will soon learn to control the bus's direction and velocity from the 'back seat.'

Helps Your Child Develop and Enhance . . .

- Proprioception (for pulling yourself onto a bus and hanging onto the pole)
- Vestibular processing (for staying on your feet when the bus turns a corner)
- Motor planning (for stowing your backpack and lunch box)
- Visual processing (for picking out an empty seat in the crowded bus)

What You Will Need:

- Bicycle tube (free from the bike shop), with metal valve snipped out (a hula hoop is fun, too, but does not provide the resistive, stretchy quality of a tube)
- Plenty of space to run around
- Small hoop or paper plate for driver's wheel (optional)

What to Do:

1. Show the bike tube to Joey and say, "Let's play Bus Driver. We both need to step into this bike tube. Do you want to be the driver or the passenger?"
2. If Joey chooses to be the driver, say, "Put the tube across your tummy." When it is his turn to be the passenger, say, "Put the tube behind your back" (at the waist). Say, "Pretend the tube is a seat belt. Hold on to it so it doesn't fall down."
3. If he is the driver, say, "Drive!" Or if you are the driver, say, "Hang on to your seat belt! Here we go!"
4. Drive around the yard together. As the driver, Joey will take you for a joyful ride as he pulls you around. As the passenger, he will delight in slowing you down when he pulls back and in changing your direction when he presses on the right or left side of the tube to rein you in.

Ways to Make It More Challenging:

- Give Joey a hoop or paper plate to be the driver's steering wheel. To steer with it, he must let go of the 'seat belt' and use his body to keep the tube from relaxing and falling down.
- Experiment with Joey by winding inside the circle, rotating from belly to back against the resistive tube.

What to Look For:

- Joey is able to pull his weight against the resistance of the tube.
- As the passenger, he keeps his balance.
- As the driver, he slows down and corrects his direction when approaching trees, fences or other obstacles.

Introducing movement, movement, and more movement into your children's day is really not difficult. It doesn't take a lot of time, and it's certainly much less expensive than computer games, or educational CDs, or even flashcards. And, it's fun!! Here are some ideas, many of which are from our recent book, *Growing an In-Sync Child: Simple, Fun Activities to Help Every Child Develop, Learn, and Grow* (Perigee, 2010):

- Play the "Animal Game." Every time your children need to move from room to hallway to playground, ask them to move as if they were a bunny, a snake, a giraffe, or a bird. Or suggest a way to move

other than walking. For example, "Can you show me a way to come to the carpet, moving on your bottom?" or "Wriggle to the door without using your feet."

- Let toddlers climb into their chairs (and car seats) by themselves instead of placing them there. It may take an extra minute, but they will be learning about directionality (which will later help them understand how to write their names in the upper left corner of the paper).
- Think outside the box; in fact, just think OUTSIDE! Are flash cards and workbooks part of your children's routine? You can modify almost any written, academic chore into an enjoyable outdoor activity. Indeed, adding a movement component will enrich the learning experience.
- If your children are learning letters, have them try to form the letters with their whole bodies or jump on the shape of the humongous letters you have written in chalk on the black-top.
- If your children enjoy pre-writing workbook activities, adapt the task from the page to the playground. Then, rather than moving their crayons to connect the dots, have them move their whole bodies by marching or rolling from spot to spot.
- Instead of using bake sale funds for a computer for the classroom, buy one for yourself, and let your students play in the box that it came in.
- When children need a dose of something and you don't know what, give them something to push, pull, lift or carry. Each one of these vigorous actions develops and enhances sensory-motor, perceptual-motor, and visual-motor skills. And it feels good and is child-directed, all-purpose fun.

Remember that every time you bounce a child on your knee, let a child walk in your shoes, encourage a child to roll down a hill, or let a child push his friend on a swing or pull someone in a wagon, you are giving her the chance to become a great learner, a confident child, and a participant in the three-dimensional world.

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