

Developing Brains- Ideas for Parenting and Education From the New Brain Science

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Movement Activities for the Brain

Recent advances in research on the brain are uncovering a new perspective on how important early experiences are for the very structure of the brain itself. We used to think that the environment merely influenced the general direction of development, like "children need a consistent, nurturing environment to make them feel safe." Today, we know that the impact of the environment and experiences is dramatic and specific, as it affects the actual wiring of the brain.

In an article in Child Care Information Exchange¹ Weikart points out that early childhood teachers today need to enhance children's motor development because children tend to be less active today, due to many factors. **Motor skills** help the brain coordinate the senses, movement, and language which are necessary brain developments for reading and writing. **Learning to move to a beat** is important for learning to pay attention, focus on tasks, and for later math learning.

Weikart says that to enhance motor development we need to do two things: employ "purposeful movement" and "steady beat timing." Purposeful movement is the conscious use of movement and steady beat timing is doing something to a beat.

Some Ideas for Purposeful Movement Activities:

Ask children to "plan" their physical body movements in activities.

"How will you get your body to hang upside down from the bar? What will you do first?"

¹ Weikart. "Facing the Challenge of Motor Development." Child Care Information Exchange. (121) May/June 1998, 60-62.

Combine purposeful movement with thought and language by having children describe their movements.

"How did your arms feel when you used the hammer?"

"Which part gets tired after you've hammered a lot?"

Teach and encourage new types of movement and use repetition.

"Let's walk on tip-toe as we go inside for lunch."

"Let's crawl to the director's office with the lunch count."

"Let's hop outside. Do you want to hop on two feet or on one foot? Spread out so we don't crash into each other!"

Some Ideas for Steady Beat Timing Activities:

- Tap your knees, move, or clap to the beat as you sing songs.
- Learn a simple poem (that has a clear rhythm) by repeating it frequently, in group time or during free play, indoors and out.

Here is a poem I wrote while teaching a mixed-age group of preschoolers, and which can be spoken to a beat:

MY LAP

When I sit, I have a lap;
A lap where I can hold a cat;
A lap where I can set a cup;
But where's my lap, when I stand up?

- Read books that are written with a rhythm to a clapped beat, for example Dr. Seuss books such as Green Eggs and Ham really work with a simple 4/4 beat. One year that I was teaching in Head Start, I had a record of someone reading Green Eggs and Ham, accompanied by a jazz ensemble in the background. Whenever we listened to that record, one little boy in the class would lay back on the story rug, arms behind his head. He would cross one leg over the other and tap his foot to the beat!

- Use a drum and ask the children to move their bodies to the beat or to “do what the drum tells you to do”.
- Teach clapping, counting, and jump-rope games/chants to older children. Have them come into the preschool room and teach these games and chants to the younger children.

If **you** have some activities you use, which employ either purposeful movement or steady beat timing, send them to me by email (kathybobula@yahoo.com), and I'll add them to the list and give you credit!

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