

## Physical Development in the Early Years - what is it, why is it important and what does it look like at Nursery School?

Early Movers describes PD as ‘The growth and development of both brain and body and involves developing control of muscles and physical coordination. This control is used in a whole range of skills of daily functioning and encompasses children’s ability to do a range of different tasks, such as speaking, making friends and understanding the world around them.’



The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), which provides a framework for the development of children from birth to the end of the Reception year, made Physical Development a ‘Prime Area’ in 2012, placing more emphasis on it’s importance and reflecting the fact that it is crucial to optimal growth and development. It lays a foundation for future health and well-being and at no other point in their lives will children learn as many physical skills as they do in the first 5 years!



As adults, we’re probably more aware than ever of the well-being benefits that getting active can bring, but being active can significantly affect how children are feeling too. Concentration, sense of calm and ability to relax can all be influenced through physical activity.



### What is recommended for children under 5?

NHS guidance is that babies under 1 should be active throughout the day. If they’re not yet crawling, this activity will be reaching, grasping, pulling and pushing, moving their head, body and limbs during daily routines and supervised floor play. Half an hour of ‘tummy time’ is recommended. As children get older, (aged 1-5) should have at least 3 hours of physical activity throughout the day. For pre-schoolers, at least an hour of this should be moderate to vigorous intense physical activity.



### What we do

At Nursery School, particularly in The Nest, we have recently been looking more closely at the work of Emmi Pikler (born 1902 in Vienna; died 1984 in Budapest) Pikler was a Hungarian paediatrician who introduced new theories of infant education, and put them into practice at the orphanage she ran.

A Pikler approach is 'based on a kind and respectful relationship between an adult and infant, through tender care moments, a naturally paced motor development, free movement and uninterrupted play.' ([www.thepiklercollection.weebly.com](http://www.thepiklercollection.weebly.com)) Of particular



note for this blog post is the 'naturally paced motor development' and 'free movement'.

Pikler noticed that children moved through different stages of rolling over, crawling and sitting without the need for these to be supported physically by an adult, that is, babies didn't need to be sat up, or 'walked' before they were ready as they would naturally learn to do this themselves.

Using this at Nursery, we are focusing on giving the children freedom and space to explore what their bodies are capable of, without restricting them in designed specific 'baby apparatus'. We are extremely lucky to have the space we do in Laughton for The Nest which is dedicated just to our youngest age group, meaning that the environment can be tailored to their specific physical needs at this age. The tables and chairs are low; the chairs have a wide base allowing babies to pull themselves up on them and sit in them without the fear of them topping over. There is space to cruise the furniture, pull toys along and spaces to crawl into for quieter time. The floor is of different textures, with wooden boards, thin mats and rugs with soft pile, providing different physical experiences for crawling and toddling on. Pikler would advocate not putting babies into positions that they cannot get into themselves and we bear this in mind, providing attention and support for the children but not putting them into positions they are not ready for.



Of course there will be times that items like bumbos are really helpful for families, perhaps when a baby is having a taste of their first solid food, but an extended period of time in this position would not be recommended.



We apply this thinking as we look at the physical development of our older children. Often there is a rush to get children holding a pencil correctly and writing, but there are so many physical stages of development that need to be in place first. Young children start off with lots of gross motor physical movement, that is, the large scale, whole body movements, and gradually, with practise, refinement and growth, that gross motor movement becomes more controlled fine motor movement. They are then able to use the joints within their arms and fingers and the hand muscles and tendons to be able to grip a pencil and move it with dexterity, but this takes development over time. Even everyday activities such as pouring a drink from a jug or opening a packet help with this development.



We've listed some of our favourite activities which support the development of gross and fine motor skills, but we'd love to know if you have favourites of your own at home! There are some other ideas here too: <https://www.ncsem-em.org.uk/2020/03/24/practical-ideas-for-helping-children-and-babies-with-their-physical-development-at-home/>

### Gross motor activities

Bikes

Slides

Climbing Frame

Going over stiles

Rolling big cable reels

Playing with hoola hoops

Climbing trees

Running

Skipping

Jumping/hopping

Music and Movement - even for our very youngest children, swaying along helps balance, coordination and control

Dancing, dancing with ribbons

Scooting

Swimming

Splashing in the bath

Balancing on beams/planks

Stepping stones

Chalking/painting/drawing on large pieces of paper

Pushing toys in buggies and prams

Digging in the mud/sand

Being an animal - moving on all fours or crawling



### Fine motor activities

Play dough

Lego

Cutting and sticking using scissors and glue

Threading beads

Holding different finger foods, and getting them out of containers/packets

Posting and sorting toys

Playing with small shiny or interesting objects such as glass beads, pine cones, shells etc

Planting seeds

Pegging up washing

Filling and emptying containers

Sewing

Drawing/colouring/painting

Making marks in 'messy play' such as shaving foam or cornflour

Picking blackberries/strawberries etc

Using 'tools' for gardening, cooking, Forest school etc

## Some things to bear in mind for promoting physical activity and development...

- children will need space for free movement and exploration, either indoors or outside
- for babies, placing simple play objects near them on the floor will encourage them to reach out (sitting a child in front of a toy before they find the sitting position themselves might cause 'stuckness' and passivity);
- a hard, carpeted, not-slippery floor is easier for learning to walk
- Cushions on the floor and cardboard boxes can provide interest for babies and encourage crawling over and under
- clothes need to allow free movement; skinny jeans over a nappy can be quite restricting!
- as the adult, you can support and encourage the play and depending on the age of the child, help them to face challenges and take risks so that the child discovers what their body is capable of



### References and further info...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAT5NiWHFIU> (Yoga for children)

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/physical-activity-guidelines-children-under-five-years/>

<https://www.earlymovers.org.uk/about-pd>

<https://www.teachearlyyears.com/under-2s/view/the-pikler-approach-part-2>

<https://thepiklercollection.weebly.com/>

[history.html](#)

<https://family.co/blog/the-child/parent-guide-physical-development-early-years/>

<https://www.ncsem-em.org.uk/2020/03/24/practical-ideas-for-helping-children-and-babies-with-their-physical-development-at-home/>

