

# In the balance

Developing toddlers' balance and co-ordination is a priority at one setting in the US, writes *Claire Martin*

**T**he toddlers at the British International School of Boston have free-flow access to our outside area every day. It is one of the most popular areas of our provision and the children love spending time outside in all weather.

Through the area, we aim to support all aspects of the children's physical development – given its importance to their future learning and healthy global development. Working with such young children (18 months to two years and nine months) has also made us aware of the need to develop children's balance and co-ordination. Both are crucial for good gross and fine motor control, and in recent months we have adapted our outdoor provision to help children build these two vital skills – with many positive effects.

In developing our outside provision we have been inspired by Jan White and her book *Every Child a Mover*. She talks extensively about children's vestibular sensory system, which underpins the development of balance and co-ordination. To develop this system, children need the opportunity to move around in different ways.

Our garden is a large space and needed some development to provide the children with more stimulating resources to promote open-ended learning opportunities, as well as the ability to move in different ways. We already had a slide, small hill and bikes, but were also looking for new and creative ways to get children moving and developing their balance and co-ordination.

## IMPROVING PROVISION Up the hill

We were lucky to be provided with some different-sized wooden pallets,

which have helped to transform our outside area. We dug one of the pallets into the side of our hill, and once a few rock-climbing bricks were added, it provided the children with a way to develop their balance while climbing up our hill.

Our youngest children love the challenge of using the rocks to help them up the hill, while our older children enjoy trying to walk up the pallet without falling between the gaps. This simple idea has helped develop all our children's balance and co-ordination skills.

## Obstacle course

We have also used the pallets to make an obstacle course for the children to complete. What we have learnt is that even young children can make their own challenges in their play. While pallets on the ground are enough to challenge the physical development and balance of our younger children, our older children are able to extend their abilities by adding their own challenges, such as putting balance beams in between pallets or by making the pallets higher, or at an angle.



## MORE INFORMATION

- Jan White (2015) *Every Child a Mover: A practical guide to providing young children with the movement experiences they need*. Early Education
- K Brodie et al (2017) Autumn Summit on Young Children's Physical Development, [www.earlyyearssummit.com](http://www.earlyyearssummit.com)
- [www.tinkergarten.com/activities](http://www.tinkergarten.com/activities)
- BISB Early Years on Twitter: @BISBEarlyYears



The children are continually thinking of different ways to make the obstacle harder for themselves, their friends and their teachers. We also try to update the obstacle course regularly to keep the children excited.

## On the move

We try to limit the number of 'static' toys we have in our outside area. We find that toys that can't be moved or altered by the children often become neglected and go unused. Instead, our children prefer to have access to different materials that can be manipulated in different ways.

We observed that our children loved jumping in muddy puddles. We provided the children with a water tank, which gets filled up with water each time it rains. Putting buckets next to the tank has prompted the children to fill the buckets with water to transport to our sand pit.

Carrying heavy buckets of water has not only helped to develop the children's strength, it has also helped them to work on co-ordination skills, so they don't spill the water.

The children love making their

own muddy puddles in the sand pit to jump in.

## Down the hill

We also try to make the most of the campus grounds that our school is situated on. There is a hill a short walk from our classroom, which the children love to roll down. The first time we visited the hill, the children were reluctant to roll down it, instead being content to walk up and down and scoot on their bottoms.

The more we have visited the hill and the more the children have developed their sense of balance and co-ordination in our garden, the more confident they have become in their ability to move. Now the children feel confident to roll down the hill and will often have races to see who can roll the fastest.

## PRACTITIONERS: CHANGING ATTITUDES

Obviously with a change in practice comes the issue of practitioner confidence. We found sharing the videos from Kathy Brodie's Early Years Autumn Summit on Physical Development

has helped our learning assistants understand the importance of what we do with children outside and why we do it.

A lot of practitioners can be 'risk averse', especially when it comes to very young children and physical, active play outside. We have been working on changing the language

**The slide on the hill has been complemented by a moveable obstacle course (insets and left, overleaf)**

## OUR SCHOOL

The British International School of Boston, part of Nord Anglia Education, aims to provide an inspiring and challenging educational experience, making it a popular choice of school for both international and American families.

The school is an inclusive, vibrant community, with children ranging in age from 18 months to 18 years and representing 80-plus heritages.

Students are inspired to be ambitious, set personalised goals and are taught transferable skills such as critical thinking, collaboration and resilience. As part of its commitment to inspire children, the school enriches its curriculum through collaborations with arts conservatory The Juilliard School, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and UNICEF.

• [www.nordangliaeducation.com/our-schools/boston](http://www.nordangliaeducation.com/our-schools/boston)

## OUR OUTDOOR TIPS

- Try to limit the amount of 'static' toys. Provide the children with lots of loose parts, such as PVC pipes, crates, pallets and boxes.
- Set up temporary obstacle courses using tunnels, balance beams, crates and hoops.
- Provide different-sized buckets, with handles that children can move around.
- Set up a simple pulley system – all you need is a rope, a tree and a bucket.
- Go on walks and encourage the children to explore natural elements, such as trees and hills. Allow them to climb and explore independently.
- Model to the children moving in different ways. Children will be more excited to participate if they see you trying and having fun first.

we use with children when they are participating in risky, active play. We try to speak in more positive tones, which gives children more responsibility for their safety. Instead of saying, 'Don't do that' or 'I don't think that's safe', we would say, 'Watch where you are putting your feet', 'Does that feel secure and safe?' or 'I am here if you need any help'.

Such comments are helping our children become more independent in their play and managing risks. We always ensure an adult is with the children at all times, so they are never in any real danger of hurting themselves, but adapting our language and empowering the children has benefited their confidence and abilities.

## OUTCOMES

Since improving the opportunities for the children to move in different ways, we have noticed an improvement in their speaking skills, as well as their physical abilities.

Parents love dropping their children off in the morning and seeing what resources we have provided the children with to develop their learning, and they too have noted how fast their child's physical abilities have improved. ■

*Claire Martin is toddler teacher at the British International School of Boston*