

Hang on...

Have you ever asked young children what they think about physical development? *Dr Lala Manners* did – with some interesting results

For the luminaries of 20th century pedagogical thinking, physical development (PD) was central to their overall understanding of young children's development. Inheritors of Plato's 'play leap' and Rousseau's *Emile*, they had a profound belief that a child's ability to move competently played a crucial role in establishing self-hood, values, friendships and life-long dispositions relating to health and well-being.

Without recourse to research data or neurological mapping, but rather through close observation and engagement alone, they recognised and responded to their findings. Critical was their conclusion that movement skills and physical play are of intrinsic value to children themselves.

How have we moved so far from their belief in the high status of PD in children's lives to a point at which it has become an 'issue' that must be tackled, addressed, managed, highlighted by curricular activity guidelines – and often exclusively linked to health and obesity 'initiatives'?

Is it not time to reposition PD not as an answer to perceived 'issues' but as of immense importance to children themselves? In health terms, acquiring movement skills is the best 'primordial prevention' available. However, we must understand the value children place on their own physical competence, how this affects every area of their development, and what learning is afforded by placing PD at the centre of curriculum delivery.

SMALL-SCALE STUDY

In a small-scale study, I aimed to discover what children feel about their physical competencies. Four nurseries were involved and 35 children (20 boys and 15 girls, all aged four) participated. Informal interviews were conducted with one adult from each nursery before and after engagement with the children. With parental

consent, the children were interviewed – and recorded – individually and in small groups during a morning in each nursery.

Adult opinion: before

Before speaking with the children, the four adults involved were asked:

- What role do you think movement skills and physical competence plays in children's lives?
- What difference do you think there is between children's experience of free physical play and more organised PD sessions?

Anna 'These children are not afforded much in the way of PD at home, and we have ongoing issues about their clothing. It's usually not appropriate for physical activity, which massively impacts on their engagement with what we can offer.

'Parents' attitudes have also changed a lot in the past five years. They are constantly fussing about health and safety – it's too hot, too cold, too wet. It's hardly surprising the children will pick up on this. It really affects what they think they can manage physically and what they think they can't do, because their parents have got it into their heads they can't. This really impacts on their self-confidence and what they will engage with in more structured PD sessions.'

Claire 'Physical competence is very important for establishing friendships. The less able will use it as a means to "get in" with the most able; you can see them satellite around attempting to copy them.

'We have a mix of PD opportunities – free physical play, physical play with equipment we have put out, and more organised sessions. We tend to use the structured sessions as a sort of assessment opportunity, to build on observations we have made in their free playtime. We can focus on particular skills and look at specific areas

and anything we are concerned about – not just basic things like strength and balance, but self-confidence and interactions in the group.'

Matt 'I've noticed in their free play that the most physically able children immediately stick together and encourage each other. They tend to exclude those they think aren't good enough to keep up. The younger children definitely look up to them and try to copy them. Being good at physical stuff has a lot of currency. It's not particularly valued by anyone else, but you can see how they sort out their friendship groups.

'The physical confidence of children affects their attitude to everything. They can see and feel themselves developing their physical skills in structured sessions and this has a direct impact on who they play with and what they play.'

Jane 'Physically able children are more confident generally and take the lead in organising what is

MY FAVOURITE THINGS

What do you most enjoy doing at nursery?	Number of replies
Playing with my friends	27
Singing	2
Playing in the sandpit	11
Playing pirates	1
Running	30
Playing in the house	2
What are you good at?	
Playing outside	32
Playing 'it'/'catch'	9
Running	27
Climbing	13
Riding bikes	12
Hiding	8
Sliding	5
Jumping	12
What are your friends good at?	
Playing	31
Making things	11
Tidying up	3
Painting	5
Hiding	8
What are you not good at?	
Concentrating	11
My work	12
Listening	9
Sitting and working	7
Drawing	3



played outside – and who will be in the group. They definitely set the parameters; the less able often get left out. Free play tends to be very interactive – there is a lot of chasing, hiding, catching. Children who are not so competent don't like being outside so much because of this.

'Structured sessions are useful because they can highlight skills we may not have addressed in much depth, and they are more inclusive. Everyone gets a go regardless of how able they are. It also means that the more able can't just do all the things they are good at. They will be faced with tasks they may find difficult and challenging, which is important.

Children: in my view

The children were then asked four questions. The children's answers were surprisingly short and direct; they definitely did not feel any need to elaborate or justify their replies. Even the 'usually chatty' children were quick to give one-word answers. My presence may have been a factor, although none of the adults cited this – rather suggesting that 'maybe that's all that needs to be said' (see table.)

Adult opinion: after

The four adults listened to the recordings with the children and made the following comments.

Anna 'I hadn't expected such a big difference between the boys and girls. I know boys tend to 'take over' and 'own' the space, but I've never seen some of the girls really run, and they said they were good at it!

'If they don't get the chance to use the equipment when and how they want, how will they ever know what they are capable of? A really interesting exercise. We will have to discuss ways to get the girls more involved.'

Claire 'I wasn't that surprised by what they said as they get a lot of opportunities to practise physical play, organised or not. I do think the structured sessions do a good job – they all have to join in and they feel really grown up and responsible for themselves and what they can do.

'It also helps to prepare them for the behaviours expected at school – responding to instructions, waiting a turn, for example. The fact that physical skills obviously matter so much to them makes it a lot easier. We can gently introduce things like lining up and sitting still without it being a big deal. It becomes an enjoyable experience for them.'

Matt 'Their answers were very revealing. It's obviously much more in the forefront of their minds than I realised. They all immediately said they were good at running and jumping, climbing and hiding. All the things they thought they weren't good at related to inside the nursery.

'They obviously value classmates who think they are good at physical activities – even though I know for a fact they aren't really friends at all. Again, it's sort of trying to get in with the "cool" group. I am much more conscious now of how they value their skills and how much it affects how they see themselves and their peer group.'

Practitioners commented that more physically able children tend to be more confident

We must understand the value children place on their own physical competence

Jane 'Their answers were much broader than I expected. Interesting that none of them mentioned books, puzzles, reading or writing, even though some of them are really competent at these activities and enjoy them.

'I think physical skills have a lot of social value. Physically able children have much better social skills because most physical play is interactive by nature. There is a lot of hide-and-seek, catching and running, which no-one does on their own.

'I have a selective mute in my class, and the one way I can encourage verbal communication is to play with a ball. I think the rhythm of throw/catch, the eye contact and spatial awareness has provided a way in to communicate generally.'

Implications for practice

- Recognise the role physical confidence and competence plays in children's lives and the effect that this has on overall development.
- Be aware how physical competence impacts on the establishment of friendships and social skills – who they play with and what they play.
- Use more structured PD sessions effectively. This can be a useful means to highlight any issues and plan accordingly, not just with skills but behaviours and dispositions that may impact on children's overall development.
- Notice children who may avoid physical activity. There might be home-related barriers affecting their engagement in activities, such as health and safety concerns or lack of interest.
- Engage parents and carers in PD projects and initiatives. The importance of physical competence to young children must be stressed to all parties involved in their care and learning.

Why not ask the children you work with the same questions I did? To keep PD as a Prime Area, this evidence is critical. If it matters so much to children, we owe it to them to provide as many opportunities as possible for them to explore and develop their physical lives. ■

My thanks to all those who contributed to this study.

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PHOTO: ISTOCK