

Move on!

New Zealand-based child development expert Gill Connell speaks to *Anne O'Connor* about the importance of a healthy 'movement diet' in young children's development and warns against its apparent neglect



MORE INFORMATION

- *A Moving Child is a Learning Child* by G Connell and C McCarthy (2014), Free Spirit Publishing
- Active Matters provides training and access to the latest information on PD in the early years from a network of practitioners, researchers and policy makers, www.activematters.org
- *Smart Moves: why learning is not all in your head*, by C Hannaford (2005), Great River Books
- Te Whariki, www.educate.ece.govt.nz/learning/curriculumandlearning/tewhariki.aspx;
- *www.movingsmart.co.nz*; <http://pikler.org/PiklerPractices.html>
- *The Well-Balanced Child: movement and early learning* by S Goddard Blythe (2004), Hawthorn Press
- *Two-Year-Olds in England: an exploratory study*, by J Georgeson et al (2014), TACTYC, http://tactyc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/TACTYC_2_year_Olds_Report_2014.pdf

development of the brain, without which there wouldn't be anything else going on.

As Carla Hannaford writes, 'Learning, thought, creativity and intelligence are not processes of the brain alone but of the whole body' (2005), and yet our curriculum guidance does not provide us with much information about movement and physical development beyond using tools appropriately, being hygienic and eating healthily. Nor does it play a critical role in any of the proposed baseline assessments. No wonder the sector seems unclear about the importance of physical development.

A NEW ZEALAND PERSPECTIVE

So, I was very interested, on a recent trip to New Zealand, to find out how physical development and movement play are viewed by practitioners there. In Christchurch, I met Gill Connell, co-author of *A Moving Child is a Learning Child: How the body teaches the brain to think*, and we talked about the contrasts (and similarities) in approach on our different sides of the world.

An internationally renowned authority on child development, Gill specialises in learning through movement and play and provides training to parents, pre-schools, schools and companies across New Zealand and beyond. She believes that 'just as kids' bodies need specific nutrients for good health, they also need a balanced diet of physical activity to help them grow and reach their potential' (Connell and McCarthy 2014).

So, why should PD be central to the under-threes curriculum? Before they can crawl and sit independently, babies need to spend a lot of their time lying flat with their arms and legs free to move. Not only does this build and develop muscles, core strength, bones and joints, but these self-initiated movements also help inhibit primitive reflexes that can get in the way of postural development later. Freedom to move in the kinds of self-initiated ways that we see when babies and children are not propped up or strapped in is vital in the early years of life.

As Gill says, 'The brain and physical development are intrinsically linked – all learning begins with the body, not the other way around. So, if children are not given the space to move, it can have an effect on physical development and learning ➤'

One of the many interesting findings of the TACTYC report 'Two Year Olds in England: an exploratory study' (Georgeson *et al*, 2014) is that of the 195 responses, only 19 per cent selected the prime area of movement and physical development as a key dimension of quality. This is despite widespread acknowledgement of the importance of physical play (both indoor and out) and a growing concern that children's motor development when they arrive at school is underdeveloped.

As an early years consultant and trainer with a particular interest in all three prime areas, I continue to be

surprised and concerned that physical development (PD) seems to be the Cinderella of the prime areas. There has been much debate as to which is the more 'prime of the primes' – is Communication and Language (CL) more fundamental to the human condition (and learning) than Personal Social and Emotional Development (PSED)? However, you do have to wonder where we would be without a body in which to house all this talking, thinking and feeling.

Moreover, there is enough evidence (provided by Goddard Blythe and others) that the moving body isn't just a container for all this higher-order activity. The body is actually fundamental to the shaping and

later. The brain is plastic and can grow and develop in many different ways, with one proviso – that the child is given the freedom to move.’

However, shifts in child-rearing practice have led to a variety of changes that do not support freedom of movement. Just as in the UK, babies and young children in New Zealand are spending increasing amounts of their day propped up in or strapped into physical containers – buggies, bouncers, child seats, high-chairs and, of course, car seats, in which small babies can spend long periods, even when not travelling.

In the past, the opportunities for self-initiated movement were greater and, as children grew, they were free to take more responsibility for their own physical development, in the sense that they had greater freedom to play outside and away from well-meaning adult interference.

Gill also voices concern about the impact of unrealistic safety standards on our attitude to children’s physical activity and how the increased amount of time children are spending in childcare is leaving the sector with more responsibility than ever for understanding and promoting the importance of movement play and physical development.

ATTITUDES AND PRESSURES

In Te Whariki, practitioners in New Zealand have what Gill refers to as a ‘very respectful curriculum’. It puts the child at the centre, allowing the teacher to enhance the children’s learning by following their lead and promoting the importance of friendship, family and community to ensure a child’s feelings of safety and empowerment.

Child development training in New Zealand includes the Pikler approach. This focuses on the crucial nature of self-initiated movement – for example, babies should be allowed to follow their natural urge to move and not be encouraged to sit up or stand, until they can do so readily by themselves. This means that children are assessed according to a natural developmental progression rather than by whether or not they have met milestones at a certain chronological age.

This is embedded in the training that early years teachers receive; however, Gill acknowledges that it is not always evident in every setting, nor is it understood or appreciated by the policy-makers.



Te Whariki continues to guide pedagogy, but with the arrival of the National Standards recently introduced by the New Zealand government, children are being regularly measured from the age of six to ensure they meet desired levels. Not too surprisingly, this has led to ‘teachers teaching to the standard and not the child’. Despite protests by the teaching profession, they do not expect the situation to change in the near future.

This all sounds very familiar to those of us in England (and perhaps across the UK). Gill also comments on other pressures that we would recognise: parental anxiety and pressure to prepare children ever earlier for academic achievement; the increasing prevalence of technology and screens in children’s lives, leading to sedentary activities; the lack of appreciation and time for play, as children’s free time is structured around adult-directed activities both in and out of school; and, of course, a lack of awareness among policy-makers about the importance of a healthy ‘movement diet’, despite all the scientific evidence (and empirical knowledge of practitioners and early years

We know physical development is important, yet it is still sidelined by some settings and policymakers

specialists) to support its importance in young children’s development.

MOVING SMART

Despite this, Gill continues to devote her energies to providing training and materials to support practitioners in building their awareness of physical development as a continuum; understanding the neurological information that supports it and acknowledging the need for every child to have a well-balanced and personalised physical ‘diet’ of different movement activities every day. This includes a recognition of:

- the importance of language in movement development
- the role of the practitioner as playmate and provider of an enabling ‘movement’ environment – that doesn’t depend on huge amounts of space or expensive equipment but utilises existing resources and the outdoors in imaginative and innovative ways
- the importance of ‘movement messaging’ – understanding that pretty much everything children do involves movement and that everything they do has a reason; for example, that they hang upside down on the sofa or spin round and round endlessly not to annoy you, but to develop their vestibular system and sense of balance, which ultimately will enable them to sit still and concentrate.

To this end, Gill has designed a developmentally based programme to optimise children’s natural need for movement together with the Kinetic Scale – a tool or guiding principle to help practitioners and parents visualise the dynamic relationships between all the basic elements of movement and physicality, including reflexes; the sensory ‘tools’ of balance (vestibular), intuition (proprioception) and the five other senses; the motor ‘tools’ of power, coordination and control; and, of course, language in all its forms, which translates physical and tangible experience into conceptual, abstract thinking and enriches the learning power of movement (Connell and McCarthy, 2014:)

So, it would seem that there is still a lot of work to be done on both sides of the globe if we are to ensure that physical development gets the attention it deserves – and, indeed, needs – in order to make sure that our children get the best possible start in their early life. ■