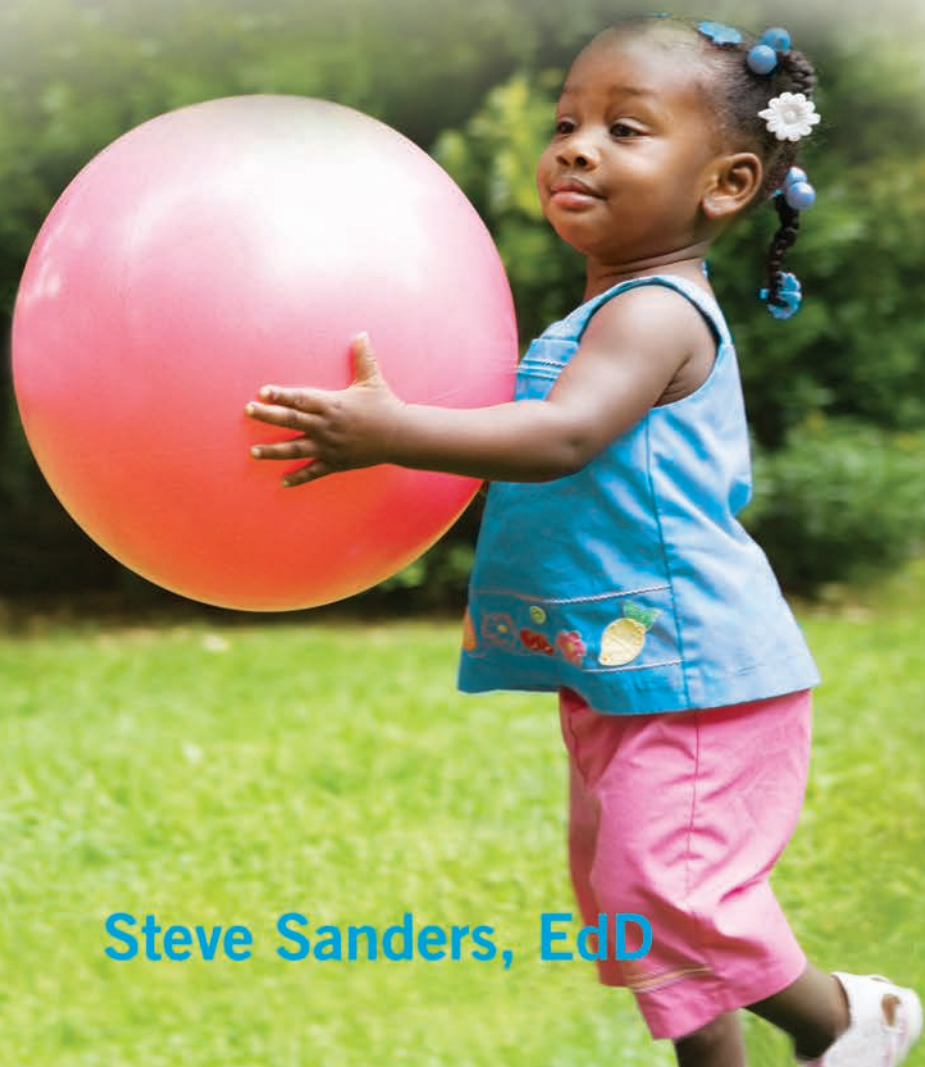


Encouraging Physical Activity in **Toddlers**



Steve Sanders, EdD

Encouraging Physical Activity in Toddlers

Moving Matters Series

Steve Sanders, EdD

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Published by Gryphon House, Inc.
P. O. Box 10, Lewisville, NC 27023
800.638.0928; 877.638.7576 (fax)
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sanders, Steve (Steve W.)

Encouraging physical activity in toddlers / by Steve Sanders, EdD.
pages cm. -- (Moving matters series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

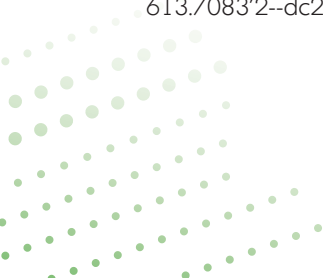
ISBN 978-0-87659-050-8

1. Physical education for children--Study and teaching (Early childhood) 2. Movement, Aesthetics of--Study and teaching (Higher). 3. Early childhood education--Activity programs. 4. Toddlers--Development. I. Title.

GV443.S194 2015

613.7083'2--dc23

2015009506



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The Importance of Physical Activity for Toddlers

CHAPTER

1

You are taking a big step to help the toddler in your care by learning about motor skills and ways to support physical activity. Being physically active every day is important for the healthy growth and development of toddlers. In

fact, by doing so, you will help provide the movement foundation for the toddler to stay physically active and healthy throughout life.

Our discussion of toddler physical development will include information on the types of motor skills that should be practiced, setting up the activity environment, and providing appropriate skill-development equipment. This book includes ideas for activities that caregivers and parents can participate in with the toddler. Simple and presented in a straightforward way, the activities do not require a lot of equipment.





However, if you do need a toy or equipment item, the discussion will clarify what you need to have on hand. Activities included in this book are fun—you and the toddler are going to have a great time!

As a caregiver or parent, you have an important role in the physical-skill development process. Please keep in mind that the process for toddlers is different because at no time in a child's life will her physical skills change as rapidly as during the toddler years.

Remember that when the toddler begins walking, she has learned only a few other physical skills. She cannot throw a ball and hit a target. She does not know how to jump and land on two feet or kick a ball into a net. She cannot yet walk across a balance beam or dribble a ball. All these skills must be learned. To eventually master these physical skills, the first steps are exposure to what the skills are and exploring and experimenting with what the body can do. These skills will be learned if the toddler has lots of opportunities to have fun with movement.

The toddler will master very few skills during this time. She will not become efficient at jumping, throwing, kicking a ball, striking a ball with a bat, catching, galloping, or skipping. Sometimes the toddler will scream with excitement at her accomplishments; other times she will be frustrated because she is unable to hit the target or kick the ball. The toddler will appear awkward and unable to repeat movements, and every attempt at a skill will look different. When the toddler is playing with a ball, the ball will appear to control the toddler. This is part of the normal process of toddler skill development.

However, the time between learning to walk and becoming a preschooler is extremely important to prepare the toddler for eventually becoming efficient and competent at a variety of physical skills. Don't think of yourself in the traditional role of a teacher trying to make sure the child learns a specific skill to do well on a test—there is no test. The immediate goal is not to help the toddler refine skills so she can throw or jump better. Her physical skills are just emerging—she is learning the basics. Your role is to guide her as you provide the safe environment, appropriate equipment, and time for the toddler to experiment with all the new movements that she can do with her body. Learning as a toddler is all about exploration and understanding how the world (including the toddler's body) works.

Adults do not have to be athletes or have high levels of physical skills to help the toddler acquire a foundation of basic motor skills. Your role is to be involved, to play with the toddler every day, to be a model, and to provide opportunities for discovery and practice. These opportunities help connect a toddler's muscles and brain and move her toward becoming



efficient and competent in her physical skills through the preschool and elementary years. Experience and research show that toddlers who lack appropriate practice and miss exploring and experimenting with what their bodies can do will later struggle to be competent in physical skills.

Toddlers Are on the Move

Parents and caregivers must understand that learning basic physical skills such as jumping, kicking, throwing, rolling, and balancing takes a lot of effort for toddlers. Their love for physical activity will help them learn many new movements. As their skills improve, they will begin to throw and kick balls, strike balls into the air, walk up and down stairs, run, and even pedal tricycles. They may attempt to do forward rolls and stand on their heads. Practically every item in the cabinet or center—from pots and pans to wooden blocks—will become a musical instrument that the toddler will want to drum and bang.

Physical skills during the toddler years are mostly acquired through unstructured play. To promote this type of practice, you can provide a safe environment with appropriate activities and equipment and then supervise, by being available in the background when needed.



Structured play is also important. That is when you can introduce a toddler to a new piece of equipment, modeling what the item can be used for and then practicing the activity a few times before standing back to let the child explore or to jointly play with the item. For example, roll a ball back and forth between you and the toddler.

Because toddlers' attention spans are short, two to three minutes will be long enough for most activities, unless the toddler is really fascinated. During structured play, reduce the number of distractions and put everything away so you have an uncluttered space for moving around. With unstructured play, you can get out several items and let the child move back and forth between activities as he desires.

When you spend time with toddlers, you will see that there is not much of a line between structured and unstructured play. For instance, the toddler might be climbing freely on a playground structure at the park, and then get stuck and be unable to climb down. In a situation like that, play can quickly become structured as you move closer and guide the placement of his hands and feet so he can climb down to safety.



As you provide structure for a toddler's physical activity, keep in mind that children this age require only small amounts of information to get them moving. Sometimes just rolling a ball to the child will be enough to get him started. Or you might send a beach ball into the air with your hands and say, "Hit it this way." That could be all the structured guidance necessary to get the exploration and learning under way. Too much information can overload even the most interested toddler. At this stage in physical development, it may be better to provide too little information than to provide too much.

Physical-Activity Guidelines

So, you wonder, how much physical activity does a toddler need each day? If the child is going to be physically active throughout life, she must develop a foundation of the necessary skills. Children who do not develop a solid foundation tend to be the ones sitting on the sidelines. Think of it like learning to read: Successful readers are those children who learn the alphabet, how letters can be placed together into words, and how words form sentences. Those who do not master these basic skills may have difficulty learning to read and may not enjoy it as much. Enjoyment of physical activity depends on establishing a base of skills.

If a toddler's home and care environments promote activity and skill development, then she will more likely become competent in a variety of physical activities. In 2009, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE)—now called Shape America—published guidelines advising that toddlers should do the following:

- Engage in a total of at least thirty minutes of structured physical activity daily.
- Spend at least sixty minutes—and up to several hours—per day engaged in unstructured physical activity and not be sedentary for more than sixty minutes at a time, except when sleeping.
- Have plenty of opportunities to develop movement skills that will serve as the building blocks for future physical activity.

TODDLERS AND PHYSICAL DISABILITIES

If you think a toddler may have a physical disability, certainly check with her doctor for advice. Be aware, however, that children with disabilities will go through the same developmental progression—although some may be slower—as children without disabilities. The activities discussed in this book show caregivers and parents how to make play time and physical activity a constructive experience for all toddlers.

- Have access to indoor and outdoor areas that meet or exceed recommended safety standards for performing large-muscle activities.
- Have the support of caregivers who promote movement skills by providing opportunities for structured and unstructured physical activity and movement experiences.

As you introduce children to new activities, make sure the equipment you use is always safe and age appropriate.

Guidelines tend to provide minimums, and ideally you will go beyond those minimums. Strive for having toddlers accumulate at least three hours of physical activity at any intensity, spread throughout the day. So have the child participate in short spurts from five minutes to thirty minutes several times each day. Some activity periods may be very physical with lots of running and movement. Other times could involve calmer activities, such as walking on a beam, rolling a ball




back and forth, or stacking blocks and knocking them down. Activities can involve a playgroup or family members; opportunities can be found at child care, at the park, or out in the community. The more daily physical play time the toddler gets, the greater the benefits.

What might thirty minutes of structured play look like for you and the toddler? Structured physical activity includes the times when you guide or direct toddlers to learn something new about a physical skill or about a piece of equipment—whenever adults are playing directly with the toddlers. Activities might include modeling how the toddler can lift her feet to climb stairs, swing her arms forward when jumping, play a musical instrument such as a drum or shaker, strike a foam ball with a paddle, walk on a balance beam, or kick a ball.

What might sixty minutes and up to several hours of daily unstructured physical activity look like for a toddler? Unstructured physical activity occurs any time a toddler is playing and exploring her environment on her own. This does not mean that caregivers and parents are not included; adults certainly need to be close by and available for support or playing alongside the toddlers. But unstructured play requires that the toddler is in charge, initiates and leads the activities, and makes all the decisions. Unstructured play might include playing and climbing on the playground, digging in the sandbox, building with blocks, pushing and pulling toys,





MUSCLE STRENGTH—DID YOU KNOW?

The human body has more than 600 muscles, and during the next several years, a toddler will learn to use all of them. By the end of the toddler years, a child will have increased his muscular strength and endurance. Strong muscles assist in controlling posture and balance, learning new physical skills, and reaching developmental milestones.

running and chasing, jumping, or playing with balls. It also gives toddlers a chance to practice skills introduced during structured time.

Motor-Skill Development

A toddler's body is growing fast, and you will often see daily changes in growth and physical skills. Toddlers are different sizes and shapes, and some develop motor skills more quickly than others, but all have the potential to develop a solid foundation of physical skills.

Much of the toddler's day will be spent exploring his environment and learning what his body can do. Toddlers experiment with balancing, throwing, kicking, and striking objects. They climb on everything—including learning to climb stairs—and marvel that they can jump and propel themselves off the ground. Although toddlers will not demonstrate the mature form of any of these skills, they are building their foundation. Exploring and manipulating the environment and learning new physical skills will consume a majority of the toddler's time.

Motor development can be divided into a discussion about fine motor skills and gross motor skills. Children develop fine motor skills to control the movement of the small muscles of the body, specifically in their hands and fingers. Fine motor skills for toddlers include drawing—such as on paper with crayons or on a chalkboard with chalk—putting together jigsaw puzzles, stacking blocks, and using spoons and forks at mealtime. A toddler's developing vision is directly related to learning fine motor skills.

We will discuss fine motor skills in more detail in the section on tracking skills.

Gross motor skills are the movements a toddler learns to control the large muscles of the body, including those in the arms, legs, and feet.



These help toddlers begin to control their bodies and manipulate their environment and include walking, running, climbing, jumping, rolling, kicking, throwing, catching, striking, and learning to ride a tricycle. The toddler years are an introduction to physical skills; children will work on refining their motor skills for many years. Most experts agree that the foundation of gross motor skills in children typically is learned by about age six. After that, children are refining their motor-skill patterns to be more efficient.

To get a sense of the fast growth children undergo from starting to walk to age three, look at the average one-year-old, who weighs about 22 pounds and stands 29 inches tall. By age two, the average toddler weighs 27 pounds and is about 33 inches tall. By age three, he is 30 pounds and 37 inches tall. The development of physical skills occurs rapidly at this time mostly because toddlers now have increased mobility.

To add to this growth, a toddler's teeth begin to appear, which allows him to eat more complex food requiring more chewing to digest. The addition of meat and other proteins into a toddler's diet comes at a time when muscles are getting stronger because of increased physical activity.

Fine motor skills also develop at a fast pace, and toddlers begin to do more detailed tasks using the muscles in their hands and fingers. Caregivers and parents should be aware of the safety concerns that fine motor development brings. Toddlers can now pick up unsafe items from the floor and place them in their mouths; therefore, any small item becomes a potential choking hazard.

HEALTHY EATING— DID YOU KNOW?



Make the toddler's food count. The recommended number of daily calories for a toddler is 1,000 to 1,300. This is not a lot of food but is enough calories for the physical growth and increased physical activity of toddlers. Calories taken into the body must equal calories that are used up during physical activity and normal growth; otherwise, the toddler will gain unwanted weight. Make these calories count by providing as much healthy food as possible. Don't add unneeded calories with foods that are high in sugar. Eating a variety of healthy foods as a toddler is the best way to establish good eating habits that will continue throughout life.

Increased fine motor control enables toddlers to do fun and interesting things such as drawing, stacking blocks, and manipulating a variety of toys. During this time, increased fine motor development lets a toddler to learn to turn pages in a book, begin to feed himself with a spoon, undress himself, and eventually drink from a cup. The toddler will also experiment with a lot of things that can get him into trouble, such as opening cabinets, turning knobs, flipping switches, and generally getting into everything. If you have not already done so, toddler-proof every room. It is important to stay aware of where the toddler is in the environment and what he is doing.



WHAT IS A DEVELOPMENTAL MILESTONE?

A developmental milestone is a skill toddlers acquire within a specific time frame. For example, developmental milestones for toddlers include walking up and down steps, kicking a ball, throwing a ball overhand, walking backward, and fine motor skills such as threading large beads onto a string and drawing a straight line on a piece of paper.

Developmental Milestones

Toddlers develop physical skills in a specific and predictable sequence, but the rate at which one toddler reaches developmental milestones likely will differ from others her age. There is a range of factors, from genetics to the physical-activity environment, that affects when a toddler will perform certain skills. Toddlers who are more physically active and have an activity-rich environment tend to reach developmental milestones before less active children.

Here are a few physical milestones to watch for with toddlers.

At eighteen months, most toddlers can demonstrate the following gross motor skills:

- Walking alone
- Crawling up steps or possibly walking up steps with help
- Performing an awkward run
- Pulling a toy behind the body while walking
- Standing on one leg with help



If a toddler is not walking by eighteen months, do not be alarmed. This may be normal development for the child, but concerns should be discussed with the child's health-care provider.

At twenty-four months, most toddlers can demonstrate the following gross motor skills:

- Running and then stopping and changing directions without falling
- Kicking a ball forward
- Walking backward
- Leaning over to pick up something without falling
- Pulling and pushing toys
- Sitting down in a small chair
- Walking up and down stairs while holding an adult's hand or railing for support
- Dancing (moving) to music
- Showing interest in jumping by squatting in place as if getting ready to jump



At thirty months, most toddlers can demonstrate the following gross motor skills:

- Jumping in place and frequently falling over when landing
- Galloping
- Throwing a ball overhand
- Threading large beads onto a string
- Copying a horizontal line
- Walking on tiptoes



At thirty-six months, most toddlers can demonstrate the following gross motor skills:

- Riding a tricycle
- Standing briefly on one foot
- Walking up stairs using alternating feet
- Walking down stairs alone, placing both feet on each step
- Jumping with both feet together
- Using tracking skills (although not fully developed, much improved)
- Scribbling with crayons
- Cutting with scissors
- Climbing up and down ladders



Fundamental Movement Skills and Concepts

Physical or motor development, the process by which a child acquires movement patterns and skills, gives children abilities they need to explore and interact with the world of physical activity. Many factors can influence a toddler's motor development, including genetics, body size and build, nutrition, and skill practice.

The research is clear that children develop motor skills during the early childhood years and that those who are not exposed to or instructed in skill-development activities may have slower physical development. A study by Jacqueline Goodway and colleagues found that prekindergarten children with instruction improved their locomotor and object-control skills (for example, running and catching) over children without skill instruction.

Physical Skills

When you help toddlers learn physical skills, you help them fully understand what their bodies can do. Physical-activity skills can be divided

into locomotor or traveling skills, balance skills, and manipulative skills. Traveling skills include walking, skipping, galloping, jumping, running, leaping, climbing, hopping, and marching—the skills that help the child get from one place to another. They develop naturally in most children, and by about age eight, most children will have developed the mature forms of hopping, galloping, leaping, and skipping. Demonstrating a mature jumping pattern may take longer to develop for some children.

Unlike traveling skills, balance and manipulative skills, which initially help the toddler move through his environment in a safe way, require much more practice before a child develops a mature form of the skills. Toddlers who can't remain upright and maintain balance when moving tend to get many bumps and bruises. Balance skills include standing, balancing, swinging, stretching, rolling, turning, and bending.

Manipulative skills are related to manipulation of a ball, and the toddler will use them in playing sports or simply playing games for fitness and fun. Manipulative skills include throwing, catching, kicking, striking with body parts as in dribbling a ball, and striking with implements. The toddler will begin practicing all the manipulative skills at about the same time and will continue to refine these skills throughout life, but there is a developmental progression. Children typically develop kicking skills first, then throwing and

FUNDAMENTAL PHYSICAL SKILLS FOR TODDLERS

Although there are other skills that the toddler will be exposed to as he moves through the preschool and adolescent years, the following are basic skills toddlers should explore and practice to provide a foundation of physical development to benefit them for the rest of their lives.

- **Traveling skills:** walking, skipping, galloping, running, leaping, climbing, hopping, and marching
- **Balance skills:** standing, balancing, swinging, stretching, jumping, rolling, turning, and bending
- **Manipulative skills:** throwing, catching, kicking, striking with body parts, and striking with implements



catching skills. Striking with body parts and striking with implements (such as paddles and bats) are normally the last physical skills to develop.

Movement Concepts

In addition to learning basic skills, children should also understand *movement concepts*. These provide specific cognitive information about performing a skill and help children move to higher levels of learning basic skills. Movement concepts enable the child to understand how and where the body can move and the relationships the body has when it is in motion. These concepts also relate to the quality of the movement, describing how a skill should be performed. These are typically not emphasized when working with toddlers. Developmentally, the toddler is not ready to learn about abstract concepts related to space, effort, and relationships. It is appropriate, however, for caregivers and parents to be aware of these concepts so you can present information appropriately when working with the toddler. Concepts are divided into three categories:

- *Space awareness* refers to where the body can move and includes general space, self-space, direction (forward, backward, sideways, diagonally, up, down), pathways (straight, curved, zigzag), and levels (high, middle, low).

- *Effort awareness* includes information on how the body can move and includes the elements of time and force. Consider whether the movement is fast or slow. Is the movement done with force, as when the child strikes a drum hard with a drumstick so it makes a loud noise, or softly, as when the child moves lightly on tiptoes across a room?
- *Relationship awareness* asks the question, “With what or whom can the body move?” This first focuses on the relationship of one body part to another. The child will begin to learn all the parts of the body so he can balance and make body shapes, such as round, narrow, wide, and twisted. It also relates to the interactions with objects (over, under, on, off, near, far, in front of, behind) and other people (leading, following, working with a partner or a group) that the child will have while participating in physical activity.

As you explore the activities in this book, you will see numerous examples of how movement concepts can be used to design practice activities for the child. Using space awareness, for example, you might ask the toddler to strike a ball *high* into the air, walk in a *straight* line, or climb *up* or *down* the stairs. By using these concept words when the child is moving, you will help the toddler begin to understand the meaning of these movement concepts. With toddlers, do not place a lot of emphasis on learning concepts. But there will be a time during the preschool years when knowledge about concepts will help the child refine her physical skills.



PARTS OF THE BODY—DID YOU KNOW?

A toddler begins learning body parts at about fourteen months of age and will have fun pointing to both your nose and his. (The nose is typically the first body part the toddler can identify.) By the

time most toddlers are two, they can point out about ten different body parts. Repeating the names of body parts as the toddler points them out helps him become more aware of his body and what the different parts can do. Just think, learning body parts is the toddler's first anatomy lesson.

Take a few body parts at a time, beginning with the face (nose, mouth, ears, eyes, chin) and then the arms (hands, fingers, elbows) and legs (feet, toes, knees, ankles). Interior body parts (chest, stomach, hips, shoulders, back) are usually the last to be learned. Make learning about body parts fun! Playing body-part games also improves a toddler's verbal development and adds to the number of words he knows. Here are a few body-part activities to try with the toddler:

- Ask the toddler to show you different body parts: "Show me your toes. Now point to my toes."
- Add music and sing a song as you point out different parts. "My head, my shoulders, my knees, my toes . . ."
- Trace the toddler's feet or hands on a piece of paper. Write the names of the body parts on the paper, and draw arrows to the different parts.
- Draw an outline of the toddler's face, and label the parts.
- Ask an older toddler to move different body parts. "Can you wiggle your fingers?" "Can you touch your head with your hand?" "Can you touch your elbow to your knee?"
- Ask an older toddler about body parts. "Which parts help you kick? Which ones help you throw?" Let him show you the part and then do the movement.



Observable Characteristics of Learning Skills

As you play with a toddler and help her develop physical skills, what will you be able to observe about her movement? Children move through similar progressions or levels in learning new skills, and there are observable characteristics at the beginning stages of skill development. Some children travel through the progressions faster than others, and some may not develop their skills to reach the highest level. Development of physical skills is a long process, and it is only natural for children to remain at different levels until practice has improved.

Toddlers begin at the *precontrol stage* of physical development. Remember that toddlers are just learning about physical skills and will lack the ability to control or replicate a movement. For example, if the toddler attempts to kick a ball it may go straight or it may go off to the side. She may kick it with her left foot or with her right. She may attempt to kick and then miss the ball completely when she swings her foot forward to contact the ball. One attempt at kicking the ball will not look like the next. All these actions are normal and to be expected. Parents and caregivers should not expect a toddler to do a skill correctly when she is in the precontrol stage of developing skills.

You may find that the advanced levels (control, utilization, and proficiency) do not apply at this age, as few toddlers will move past the precontrol level. At the *control level*, the child's movements are more consistent and look similar. The child begins to correctly perform the skill more frequently. At the *utilization level*, the child begins using skills in game situations or combining one skill with another (catching a ball and then throwing it, or running to kick a ball into a net with a defender trying to take the ball away). At the last stage, *proficiency*, the skill has become almost automatic. Adolescents and adults who regularly play tennis, compete on a swim team, golf, or play recreational softball have reached the proficient skill level. Of course, professional athletes also have demonstrated proficiency.

Developmentally, toddlers need lots of time to explore, experiment, practice, and repeat movements to move to the control level. Many six-, eight-, and even twelve-year-olds are still at the precontrol level with some skills. Without a good skill foundation and lots of practice and repetition, it is difficult to advance, refine, and improve skills. Age does not determine what level a person has reached. For example, a six-year-old who received lots of practice opportunities to develop balance skills may be at a control or utilization level in balancing. However, because she did not develop a foundation of throwing and catching skills when she was younger, she may still be at the precontrol level at throwing and catching. Many adults are at a precontrol level at several different skills.

Children tend to go through the same observable levels of physical development in learning new skills. Some travel through the stages faster than others, and some advance to higher levels when they have more instruction and practice opportunities. Toddler physical activity is all about establishing a good foundation so that children will have the opportunity to continue to develop and refine their physical skills throughout life.

Toddlers are on the move all day long!

Even though encouraging physical activity is not a problem with toddlers, you can model new movements and skills and lay the foundation for enjoying physical activity as they grow.

Toddlers need lots of time to master the basics, such as jumping, rolling, and balancing. As they become more comfortable with their bodies and confident in their ability to be physically active, their desire to participate will increase. They'll enjoy kicking and throwing different types of balls, walking up and down stairs, running outside, and pedaling tricycles.

Most of their physical activity involves unstructured play, and rightly so. However, you can also introduce them to new equipment with structured play and then let them explore on their own or with playmates.

If you help toddlers understand how to develop physical skills, you will help them build confidence and have fun being active. What a gift for a lifetime!



As a professor and early childhood consultant for more than 30 years, **Steve Sanders, EdD**, focuses on preparing the next generation of teachers to help children become physically active and healthy for life. He is the recipient of the Margie

Hanson National Association for Sport and Physical Education Distinguished Service Award.


Gryphon House
www.gryphonhouse.com

GH10056

U.S. \$19.95

ISBN: 978-0-87659-050-8

5 1995



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