

Early Childhood Brain Development

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Up until age 2, babies' and toddlers' brains are growing by leaps and bounds every day. They develop language and motor skills faster than they ever will. But between 3 to 5 years, that growth slows. Instead, the brain is making countless connections within its different regions. Preschoolers focus more on absorbing the world around them. Their minds are developing problem-solving skills and using language to negotiate. They're also learning how to coordinate their bodies to do things like aim and kick a ball. Ideally, young kids should get at least 30 minutes a day to run and play outside.



John Ratey MD, author of *Spark*, calls exercise "Miracle-Gro for the brain" because it elevates neurotransmitters and stimulates neuron growth. Swings, rocking toys, and spinning equipment are developmentally productive by stimulating different parts of the brain at the same time; building new pathways; and enhancing learning potential, spatial awareness, and rhythm. Full-body sports like soccer, swimming, yoga, gymnastics and dance are also valuable brain-building exercises. And even simple movement songs and games in the classroom help with brain development. A good preschool teacher, that is a teacher of toddlers through age five, looks for ways to incorporate simple movement activities, songs and stories into the daily routines and curriculum to enhance learning and brain development. Basically, anything preschoolers can learn sitting still, they can learn even better with movement. If you don't always want them on their feet, they can lean back on their elbows and move those feet in the air. What if those "Itsy Bitsy Spiders" jumped onto the children's feet to travel up and down that water spout?

Movements that cross the mid-line of the body are excellent brain builders. Reciting the ABC's is good; but reciting them while alternately touching the elbows to the opposite knees is even better!

As a teacher, I'm sure you have noticed that right after active motor play such as a group game, ten minutes of indoor exercise on a cold wet day or a spirited group game, your children are better able to pay attention than when they have been sitting for long periods of time. They nap better, too. Most of us believe that this is because they have been able to get rid of pent up energy, or "get the wiggles out," and that is partially true. But what is also true is that during motor play, children learn to better regulate their thinking and behavior. They must control their own body movements and inhibit impulses on the playground, and these skills transfer to the classroom to help them better focus on learning tasks.

Educator Dave Burgess says, "Lessons are quickly forgotten; experiences are remembered forever." Infusing classroom activities with movement, songs, and stories turns potentially dry academic lessons into engaging, multi-modal experiences that kids will remember and talk about with their family and friends.

Additionally, educator Jeff Haebig explains that emotions drive attention and attention drives learning. We all learn better when the concept is attached to a story. Activities that include movement, songs, and stories resonate with children on an emotional level, engage them deeply, and enable them to make a personal connection with the concepts you are trying to teach. As a result, they pay closer attention and remember more. One of my favorite examples is using the story of "The Three Bears" presented in storybook form, as a flannelboard story and with props in the Home/Living Center to teach a unit about manners; or the story of "Little Red Riding Hood" to open a discussion about Stranger Danger!

Children who are have difficulty sitting still during lecture type lessons will experience more success if they clap, dance and sing along to songs about colors or numbers or vocabulary words instead of engaging in flash card activities.

Learning games, movement activities, singing and dancing help children feel closer to one another and help individuals learn how to be "part of the group" as well. As they begin to engage with one another during these activities they cross that first threshold to making friends.

Playing active games, singing songs, and sharing stories puts smiles on children's faces, enriches their days with excitement and joy, and helps make school a happy place for them. These activities can also break up the monotony of day-to-day attendance. The kids will love it when you wear tiger ears and a tail as you lead them in dancing to "Roar!" by Katy Perry. They'll also be much more attentive and retain more of the follow-up discussion about proper ways to take up for themselves, using their words instead of hitting or having a tantrum to solve problems, and even develop empathy and concern for others.

Partially adapted from 7 Reasons to Incorporate Movement, Songs & Stories into Your Teaching, Corkboard Connections www.lauracandler.com