

# Why Movement, Dance and Outdoor Exploration Matter So Much in Early Childhood

As parents, we all want our children to grow up happy, healthy, confident and ready for school. One of the most powerful – and sometimes underestimated – ways to support this is through movement.

Movement is not just “exercise.”  
Movement is learning.

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## What Does the Government Recommend?

Government guidance for children under five recommends **at least 180 minutes (3 hours) of physical activity every day**, spread throughout the day. This should include a variety of movements, with some of it being moderate-to-vigorous activity.

The guidance also emphasises:

- Minimising long periods of sitting
- Encouraging floor-based play for babies
- Making the most of outdoor environments
- Providing opportunities to develop gross motor skills

This reflects what we see every day in early years education: Active play underpins healthy development.

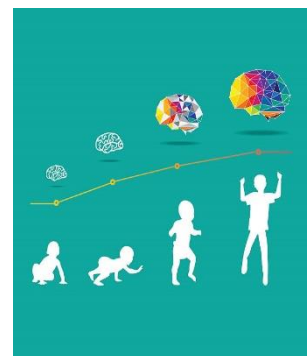
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## Why Is Movement So Important?

Physical Development is a *prime area of learning* in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) because it supports all other areas of development.

When children move, they are not just strengthening muscles — they are building the foundations for:

- Core strength and stability
- Balance and coordination
- Spatial awareness
- Agility
- Confidence
- Social and emotional wellbeing
- Cognitive development



Gross motor skills (large body movements) provide the base for a healthy body and a healthy mind. Before a child can hold a pencil comfortably, they must first develop strength and stability through whole-body movement.

As researcher Adolph (2008) explains:

“Muscle development for writing is a comprehensive process that begins with movements of the whole arm and progresses toward very detailed fine motor control at the fingertips.”

In simple terms: **Big movements come before small movements.**

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## Movement and the Developing Brain

Modern research supports what educators like Maria Montessori recognised over 150 years ago — the body and mind develop together.

Scientists now refer to this as embodied cognition:

The idea that the body influences the mind, and that thinking grows out of physical experience.

Montessori wrote:

“It is high time that movement came to be regarded from a new point of view in educational theory... But this is to overlook its close connection with the developing mind.”

When children move:

- They improve attention and concentration
- They develop body awareness
- They strengthen memory pathways
- They refine coordination and control
- They build problem-solving skills



A virtuous circle begins:

The more I move, the more I explore.

The more I explore, the more I understand.

The more I understand, the more confident I become.

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## Fundamental Movement Skills: The Building Blocks for Life

In early childhood, children develop and refine essential movement patterns such as:

- Rolling
- Crawling
- Walking
- Running
- Jumping
- Hopping
- Skipping
- Climbing

As they grow, they:

- Combine movements with fluency
- Develop grace and control



- Strengthen balance and agility
- Learn to use equipment safely
- Refine ball skills (throwing, catching, kicking, aiming, batting, passing)

These are not just “sports skills.”  
They are life skills.

They build confidence, precision, coordination and resilience — preparing children for future PE lessons, dance, gymnastics, swimming and team sports.

## The Role of Dance and Creative Movement

Dance adds another powerful layer to physical development. Through dance children:



- Express emotions
- Develop rhythm and timing
- Improve coordination and balance
- Strengthen listening skills
- Build confidence in their bodies
- Enhance creativity

Dance combines physical control with imagination — supporting both physical and cognitive development.

**Yoga: A Simple Solution for Healthier,** In a world filled with screens, school pressure, and constant distractions, yoga offers children a powerful way to stay healthy, focused, and balanced. It combines physical movement with mental calmness and emotional stability—helping each child to thrive both in nursery and at home.

### Physical Benefits

Yoga strengthens growing bodies by building core and back muscles, improving posture, increasing flexibility, and enhancing balance and coordination. Its low-impact, non-competitive nature makes it accessible to children of all abilities, allowing them to progress at their own pace in a safe and supportive environment.

### Mental and Emotional Benefits

Yoga teaches children how to slow down, breathe, and manage stress. Regular practice improves concentration, reduces anxiety, builds confidence, and supports emotional regulation. It develops not only physical flexibility, but mental flexibility—helping kids stay calm and resilient in challenging situations.

### Why Yoga Matters Now

With busy schedules and increasing mental demands, children need tools to recharge and refocus. Yoga promotes better sleep, boosts energy levels, sharpens attention, and supports emotional well-being. More than just exercise, it is a lifelong skill that encourages self-awareness and inner balance.

## Engaging and Enjoyable

Yoga is also fun and imaginative. Through creative poses and movement, children build strength and confidence while enjoying an active, positive experience.



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## Why Outdoor Exploration Is Essential

Outdoor play provides experiences that cannot be replicated indoors. Climbing, balancing on uneven surfaces, running freely, lifting, digging and exploring nature all support:

- Core strength
- Risk assessment skills
- Vestibular (balance) development
- Spatial awareness
- Sensory integration
- Emotional regulation

Research also highlights concerning trends:



- One third of the global population aged 15+ engages in insufficient physical activity.
- Sedentary lifestyles are linked to long-term health risks including type 2 diabetes, obesity and certain cancers.
- One in three children under six are now being diagnosed with myopia (short-sightedness), strongly linked to increased screen time and reduced time outdoors.

Children today are spending more time indoors and on screens than ever before. If this continues, early health concerns may become long-term health challenges.

Outdoor exploration is not optional — it is essential.

## It's Time to Bust This Myth!

Let's talk about a persistent myth: "Playing outside in cold or wet weather makes our children sick." It's a belief that keeps so many children cooped up indoors during some of the most exciting, sensory-rich weather. But here's the truth: Cold or wet conditions doesn't cause illness. So, let's grab our Wellies and raincoats and dive into why getting outside—rain or shine—is essential for your child's health and development.

First, let's debunk the myth. Colds and illnesses are caused by viruses, not chilly air or raindrops. According to Dr. David Fisman, an epidemiologist, people tend to get sick more often in colder months because they

spend more time indoors, in close quarters, where viruses spread more easily. Outdoors, where the air circulates freely, is actually a less likely place for children to catch a bug.

Playing outside, no matter the weather, is fantastic for children. Here's why:

### 1. Boosted Immunity

Outdoor play exposes children to diverse microbes, which helps strengthen their immune systems. Research published in *Frontiers in Immunology* highlights that exposure to natural environments improves microbial diversity in children, which may reduce allergies and other immune-related issues.

### 2. Improved Mood and Focus

Rainy or cool weather offers a unique sensory experience—splashing in puddles, squelching through mud, and feeling raindrops on their skin. These activities aren't just fun; they help children release pent-up energy, improve focus, and regulate their emotions.

### 3. Enhanced Creativity and Problem-Solving

Unstructured outdoor play fosters creativity. Children might invent games with muddy leaves or use twigs to build dams in a running stream. Repeated exposure to varying weather teaches adaptability and builds resilience.

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### What About Safety?

Of course, there's a difference between "wet weather" and "dangerous weather." Heavy rain, strong winds, and thunderstorms are no-go zones. But a gentle drizzle, a bit of rain or muddy terrain? That's the sweet spot for discovery and play. If we Equip our Children with waterproof clothing and sturdy boots, and you're all set. Dress for Success: Layer up with waterproof jackets and trousers, Wellies, and quick-dry clothes and plenty of spares for changes to keep warm and dry.



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## Movement Builds the Foundations for Writing and School Readiness

Before a child can write their name, they must develop:

- Postural stability
- Muscle tone
- Bilateral coordination
- Hand-eye coordination
- Dexterity
- Grip strength
- Visual discrimination
- Body awareness

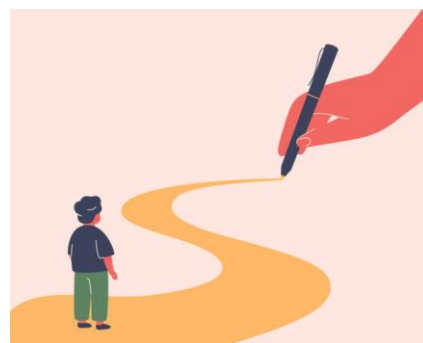
- Attention control
- Balance (vestibular system)
- Tactile discrimination
- Force control (grading movement)

All of these skills begin with gross motor movement and sensory exploration.

Play-based movement activities develop:

- Fine motor manipulation
- Coordination
- Auditory discrimination
- Visualisation
- Confidence
- Creativity
- Social interaction

Writing is not just about holding a pencil — it is the final stage of a whole-body developmental process.




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## A Movement-Rich Childhood

At nursery, we see children happiest when they are active — sometimes sitting, sometimes standing, always moving. Movement is woven into their learning because it is integral to how they understand the world.

A movement-rich lifestyle benefits every child physically, cognitively, socially and emotionally. It allows them to form a deep relationship with their environment and with others.

As adults, we can support this by:

- Encouraging active play every day
  - Limiting prolonged screen time
  - Valuing outdoor exploration
  - Being active role models
  - Allowing safe risk-taking
  - Recognising that movement is not a break from learning — it *is* learning
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## The Key Message

Movement is not an “extra.”

Dance is not a luxury.

Outdoor play is not simply recreation.

They are the foundation upon which healthy bodies, confident minds and capable learners are built.

When we prioritise movement in early childhood, we are not just helping children burn energy — we are giving them the strongest possible start in life.

