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The Power  
of Movement  
in Your Child's  
First Three Years

# on the Move

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# on the Move

**Y**oung children are on the move! And it's a good thing, because movement is not just important for helping children grow **physically strong and healthy**. It is also a key factor in their overall development. Through movement, children develop **good thinking and communication skills** as they explore and interact with their world. Movement also **builds self-confidence**. Children feel competent, physically and emotionally, when they use their bodies to communicate and solve problems.

Most importantly, children **develop a close bond with you through movement**. In fact, your child's desire to be close to and connect with you is what motivates her to move.

*A 4-month-old excitedly kicks her arms and legs in response to the funny face dad makes, so he does it again. An 18-month-old toddles over to the shelf and brings you his favorite book to read. A 3-year-old dances across the room on tiptoes while fluttering her arms, then "lands" in mom's lap, pretending to be a baby bird snuggling into the mommy bird's nest.*

When you make physical activity part of your everyday routine with your child, you are helping him take pleasure in and learn through movement. Whether you take a daily walk in the neighborhood or dance to music on the radio, your caring responses tell your child that you understand him and enjoy being with him.



## **Active Bodies, Healthy Children**

It's not just school-age kids sitting in front of TVs who aren't getting enough exercise. A British medical study<sup>1</sup> found that although the average 3-year-old is consuming more calories a day than 25 years ago, physical activity has decreased, resulting in 200 extra "unburned" calories per day. This has raised scientists' concern about children's weight, future health problems, psychological well-being, behavior, and learning ability.

In fact, a Kaiser Family Foundation study found that "according to their parents, children age 6 and under spend an average of about 2 hours a day with screen media (TV, DVDs/videos, computers, video games)—about the same amount of time they spend playing outside." (See [www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org).) Other factors that may account for young children's decreasing levels of activity include driving instead of walking and the use of "bouncy seats" and "exersaucers," in which babies sit in one position to play instead of moving their whole bodies freely.

<sup>1</sup>Ebbeling, C. B., Pawlak, D. B., & Ludwig, D. S. (2002, August 10). Childhood obesity: Public-health crisis, common sense cure. *The Lancet* 360(9331), 473–482. [Electronic version.] Retrieved April 2, 2004, at [www.thelancet.com](http://www.thelancet.com)



**M**ovement, dance, and active play can support your baby's growing physical awareness and excitement about the world. Physical activity of all kinds stimulates young children's development in the following ways:

### ■ **Physical Development:**

**I learn about my body and grow strong by moving.**

Using their bodies to explore and communicate provides the exercise babies need to grow strong, healthy bodies. Every time your baby swings her arms, kicks her legs, or turns her head, she is discovering how different parts of her body work, individually and together. *Five-month-old Casey excitedly reaches as far as she can to grab the toy her mom is holding. While rocking and stretching her whole body, she suddenly finds that she's rolled onto her belly and can now grab the toy.* Children develop their large muscles through reaching, rolling, pushing, sitting, crawling, climbing, and walking, which leads to the later development of small muscle movements like holding a spoon, turning a doorknob, or using a crayon.

### ■ **Intellectual Development:**

**I move, I learn.**

Physical activities stimulate the connection between mind and body. Children learn problem-solving skills as they try different actions—climbing up, over, in, or through. *Nine-month-old Alexa learns about object permanence—the fact that things still exist even though she can't see them—when dad encourages her to look for the ball they were playing with that rolled behind the couch.*

Movement is also essential for helping children put their ideas into action to accomplish a goal. For example, an 8-month-old wants his bottle. In order to get it, he has to have a plan and then make it happen. He crawls over to his dad and pulls on his leg. He then looks over to the bottle and starts to whine. Dad picks him up and gives him his bottle. Mission accomplished.



## ■ **Communication:**

**Watch me, and you will know how I feel and what I think.**

Movement is an essential means of communication and is one of the earliest ways in which children express their thoughts and feelings. *Sixteen-month-old Abraham takes mom's hand, leads her to the kitchen, and points to the sippy cup he wants her to get for him.* Your responses to your child's movements help him learn about the back and forth of communication. This also makes him feel loved and important. Copying his facial expressions, rhythms, and body movements will encourage him to communicate more and more.

## ■ **Building Strong Relationships:**

**I move with you, I know you, I feel close to you.**

Relationships with the people we love are nurtured through our experiences with them. Movement is an important way that we connect with others. *"Daddy, look at me! I'm an airplane high in the sky." Following 3-year-old Shawna, Dad spreads his arms and "flies" toward her. Shawna turns around and shouts, "Vroom!" She playfully rolls into her father, and together they have a good laugh.*

Active play helps you learn important details about the unique way your child moves and prefers to be touched. Your child also learns about how you feel, sound, and move. Sharing in your child's joy of movement helps you build a close bond.

## ■ **Self-confidence:**

**I can do it!**

As young children use their bodies to discover their world, they gain knowledge, strength, and skills. *Thirty-month-old Leland figures out he can climb on a stool to reach up and turn the light switch on and off.* Through practice, babies develop more and more control of their actions. An important way you can boost your child's confidence is by helping him to figure it out rather than doing it for him. For example, give your child a boost up onto the couch rather than picking him up and placing him there. With each new physical accomplishment, your child's sense of mastery grows, giving him the self-confidence he needs to tackle more complex challenges.



# Rocking and Rolling

## Birth – 12 months

**F**rom the moment your baby is born, she connects with you and begins to learn about the world through her body and her movements. As a newborn, she will turn her head when she hears your voice. By 4 months, she will be reaching and grasping to explore and learn how objects work. She will also “talk” to you with her body as she wiggles, bends, and reaches. For example, she’ll kick her arms and legs to tell you that she wants you to keep singing to her.

By the end of this first year, your baby will learn to roll, sit up, crawl, pull himself to stand, “cruise” around holding onto objects for support, and perhaps even start to walk. As he experiences his body moving, he will be strengthening his muscles. His new physical abilities will also allow him to master important concepts like *cause and effect*. “If I shake this rattle, it will make a noise.” “If I push up onto my hands and knees, I can crawl to Grandma.” By watching your child, you can learn what kinds of movement he likes and how you can best support his development through movement.



**Q.** My 10-month-old is like a little sitting Buddha! He’s the only kid in our playgroup who doesn’t move around. He just likes to sit and watch. How can I get him moving more?

**A.** There is wide variation in young children’s activity levels. Some crawl and walk early; others do so much later, preferring to explore with their eyes and hands instead of their bodies. It is important to understand and respect your child’s ability and interest in movement. The key to getting your child to enjoy moving is to engage him in more action-oriented activities, and to connect these activities with something he already enjoys. For example, if he likes to look at books, read books that encourage movement. You can pretend to move like a dog or swim like a duck. Get on the floor with your child; he will want to move if it means he can play with and be close to you. Place a favorite toy at the end of the room and have a “race” to see who can get to it first. If you continue to be concerned about your baby’s ability to move, talk with his doctor.



## Movement activities for you and your baby

- **Tummy Time:** Spending time on her belly helps your baby develop coordination between her upper and lower body. This supports her muscle and motor development. Lie down with your baby face-to-face and play “peek-a-boo,” pushing your hands against the floor as you lift your head. You can support your baby’s chest to encourage her to push up, too. As she gets more comfortable on her stomach, she’ll begin to enjoy playing with toys from this position.
- **Follow the Leader:** Watch how your baby moves and listen to the sounds he makes. Use your head, hands, or voice to follow his movements. Speed up and slow down, make your actions stronger or softer, as he does. Babies love to see you imitate them. It makes them feel important.
- **Dance Together:** Put on different types of music and move to the beat with your baby in your arms. Change your actions to match the mood and beat of the music. Many babies like going from being on the floor to way up high. They also like to sway, roll, bounce, clap, stretch, waltz, glide, or turn!
- **Group Dance:** Gather a group of friends together and make a circle. With babies in your arms, step into the middle and back out, gallop around in a circle and back again. Finish by gently swinging babies up high so they can see each other. Babies will love to see the expressions on other children’s faces and hear their squeals of delight.

# Ready, Set, Go!

## 12 – 24 months

**T**oddlers' sense of independence and self-confidence grow as they progress from standing to walking and running. The more they move, the more they learn.

Watching your toddler's actions will help you know what she is discovering. She learns about *size* and *shape* as she sees that she can fit her body into one cardboard box but not another. She learns about *up* and *down* on the swing. Movement helps toddlers' budding imaginations blossom. By imitating activities they see going on around them, toddlers expand their understanding of the world. For example, they may march around banging a drum like the musicians in a parade.

Toddlers also use their bodies as a tool for communicating with and relating to you. They start with simple gestures, like pointing. By 15 to 18 months, their movements will become more complex. For example, your child may take your hand, walk you to the family room, and point to the shelf where his favorite book sits. By the time your child is 24 months old, he will be a great communicator, learning many new words and phrases to add to his gestures. When you join your toddler's adventures and engage in lively discussions with him, you are building a strong bond with him and nurturing his self-esteem.



**Q** My toddler seems to need to be in constant motion. I, on other hand, prefer quiet activities like reading and doing art projects. What can I do to keep both of us happy?

**A** You've taken the most important first step, which is to acknowledge the difference and to appreciate that neither your way nor hers is right or wrong, just different. There are several things you can do to respect both your styles. Support what she prefers by, for example, letting her stand for a diaper change or getting down from her highchair when she's finished eating. Create a safe place in the house where you don't have to constantly chase after her. Invite other active toddlers over to play.

You can also join in your daughter's play without being so active yourself! Clap out a beat as she runs around the yard. Make a cape out of an old sheet and color it in together. Then tie it around her and watch her prance like a flying horse, flutter like a butterfly princess, or leap around like a superhero.



## Movement activities for you and your young toddler

- **Move & Groove:** Encourage your toddler to use her body and move freely to any type of music. Watch how your child moves and what types of music she prefers. Children this age often do not change their movements to match the music, but rather will respond to their own internal rhythm.
- **Describe your Child's Actions:** Describe the details of your child's actions as he dances to the music. *"Look how you are bouncing your body to the beat. I see how you like to bob your head up and down when you dance."* This not only helps him learn new words but also instills a sense of pride that his actions are noticed!
- **Set Up an Obstacle Course:** Create a course that encourages your toddler to use a variety of skills. Set up boxes that she can crawl through, pillows that she can climb on, and blocks that she can run around. Young children enjoy using their bodies in different ways. Place yourself somewhere near or partially hidden within the course to add an element of surprise and fun. Doing the course over and over again also helps your child learn to organize her actions to reach a goal.
- **Engage in Finger Play:** Songs like *The Itsy Bitsy Spider* and *The Wheels on the Bus* can help develop the use of fingers and hands (fine motor skills). As she grows, these skills will help her learn to write, button a shirt, and tie a shoelace.



# Look at Me Now!

## 24 – 36 months

**B**etween ages 2 and 3, children begin to gain more and more control of their bodies. Climbing, swinging, crawling, spinning, sliding, bouncing, and jumping are endless sources of fun that help children build strong bodies and develop an understanding about what they can do by putting their bodies to work. Through their explorations, they continue to learn all sorts of concepts—*up* and *down*, *in* and *out*, *over* and *under*.

Toddler play becomes filled with complex stories. Young children include real and imaginary friends in their play, turn ordinary objects into make-believe treasures, and act out familiar scenes. Two pillows leaning together can become a triangle bridge to push the toy train up, over, and down on the way to the station. By acting out tales with their favorite adults and friends, 2-year-olds develop new ideas and learn how the world works. By adding their own imaginative details, they show what they are enjoying about their world. Activities at this age should provide children with experiences that tap into their natural curiosity and encourage creative self-expression.

**Q.** My daughter has always been very physically active, but since she turned 2, she seems to be more aggressive. She sometimes pushes and hits other children on the playground. What can I do?

**A.** This is a tough issue for many parents of 2-year-olds. It is important to remember that older toddlers are still more likely to use actions, instead of words, to express their feelings. Your daughter may know what she wants, but may not know the words to say it. Or she may have the words but may not yet be able to explain her feelings. Aggressive actions such as biting and hitting may be her way of expressing her frustration.

You can help your child by creating safe places for physical play and for redirecting those strong feelings. Teach her the words for these feelings. “You feel angry! Show me how angry you are in a way that isn’t hurtful.” Then build a pile of pillows together to roll on and punch. Kick a ball hard outside in the yard. Remember, children repeat behaviors as a way to test the results. A consistent response from you will help her learn what is not allowed and what is okay.





## Movement activities for you and your older toddler

- **Take Me Out to the Playground:** The playground is a rich learning opportunity for children. In the sandbox, offer your child different size pails and shovels to help her practice using her fingers and hands. Crawling through tunnels will teach her about *in* and *out*. She'll learn about *up* and *down* on the slide. Play with balls of all sizes. Figure out together which ones are best to kick, throw, play catch with and roll on.
- **Put It All Together:** Play a game with your 2-year-old where he has to plan a series of actions to accomplish a goal. For example, "Can you find your blue shoes?" He has to go to his room, open the closet door, find the shoes, and bring them back to you. This helps your child learn how to put his ideas into action, which also builds his self-confidence.
- **Act It Out:** Act out stories using movement and dance. Good themes include: animal stories; marching bands and instruments; everyday activities like taking a walk or cleaning house; nature scenes (for example, wind and rain); and fantasy images such as fairies and superheroes. Once the story is finished, select music that fits the theme and have your child create her own dance. Watch to see what parts of the story she remembers and likes best.
- **Name That Movement:** Clap out the rhythm of your child's name as you sing hello to her. Then have her dance as you sing her name, following the flow of the sounds; or stomp her name as you clap out the rhythm.

For more information visit: [www.zerotothree.org/motion](http://www.zerotothree.org/motion).

Dear Parents:

Young children delight us when they sit up on their own, reach out to be held or take their first steps. These accomplishments are not just important for their physical development, but also help build their intellectual skills, communication and self-confidence. Through movement, children also connect with others and form strong relationships.

MetLife Foundation is proud to partner with ZERO TO THREE in developing this booklet about the powerful influence of movement on children's overall development. We hope it will provide insight into how you can support your child's development through movement.

Please enjoy the booklet and consider putting its suggestions into practice in daily life with your child.

Sincerely,



Sibyl Jacobson  
President  
MetLife Foundation

## MetLife Foundation

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