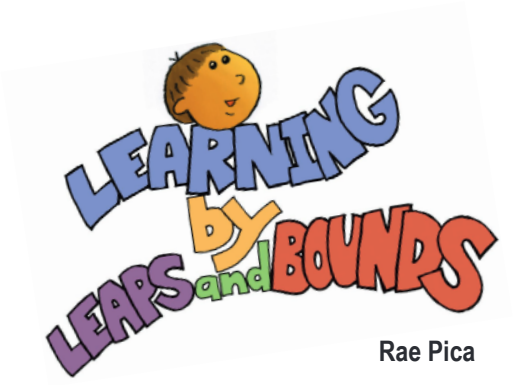
Young Children is pleased to introduce **Learning by Leaps and Bounds,** a new regular column by Rae Pica about young children's movement and learning. The column will offer practical ideas for teachers in the July, November, and March issues of the journal and Beyond the Journal.



Rae Pica

Why Motor Skills Matter

THE SPEAKER TELLS A GROUP of early childhood professionals that just as reading and other skills must be taught in early childhood, so too must motor skills be taught. Nobody comments, but the speaker imagines she can hear their thoughts:

"I've already got so much to do! Now I have to worry about motor skills too?"

"It's not as though we're talking about something important, like language skills."

"But teaching motor skills wasn't part of my preservice training."

THOSE OF US who work to make movement a bigger part of children's lives and education have heard similar comments—out loud—for years. They're not surprising given our society's false notion that the mind and body are separate and the functions of the mind are superior to those of the body.

I'm delighted by all the research pointing to the body's role in cognitive development, but, as a children's physical activity specialist, I feel strongly that the body matters too. Physical development and physical fitness deserve equal respect and attention! As such, I've chosen to focus this, my first *Young Children* column, on the role of teachers in helping young children learn motor skills.

Many people believe children automatically acquire and perfect motor skills, such as running, jumping, and throwing, as their bodies develop, that it's a natural process that occurs along with physical maturation. It is true that one day the infant rolls over by herself, eventually starts to crawl, and then suddenly rises up onto hands and knees and begins creeping. Sometime around her first birthday, with only a little assistance and a lot of enthusiastic encouragement from adults, she takes her first steps. And then it seems, almost before you know it, she's off and running!

But maturation takes care of only part of the process—the part that allows a child to execute most movement skills at an immature or beginning level. At this level something about the child's form or technique in performing a physical skill isn't fully developed. This can happen even with such basic motor skills as walking and running. (If you've ever observed a child who hasn't quite mastered the ability to move his limbs in perfect opposition [right arm and left leg, left arm and right leg] or whose feet roll in, pinky toes lifting off the ground, you know this is true.) When children don't get the help they need to learn physical skills, many never fully master gross (large muscle) motor skills.

The ability to perform gross motor skills is related directly to physical fitness. A *competent* mover will gladly keep moving; he or she will engage in such activities as dancing, jumping rope, and hanging and swinging on

Rae Pica is a children's physical activity specialist, the author of numerous books on movement in early childhood, and the cocreator and host of a radio program called "Body Mind and Child" (www.bodymindandchild.com). You can contact her at raepica@movingandlearning.com.

naeyc® 2, 3, 5

the playground equipment. A child who feels physically awkward and uncoordinated is going to avoid movement. Such a child isn't likely to take part in an after-school game of tag or hopscotch or to climb the monkey bars during recess. Since poor movement habits tend to remain from childhood into adulthood, a physically inactive child is likely to grow up to be an inactive adult. Considering the health hazards for the unfit—obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and other risks—teaching children motor skills is indeed just as important as teaching language skills.

To do more

The most important thing you can do is to give children the time, space, and opportunity to move. It's also critical to observe closely. Based on what you know about motor skills, are you seeing anything that requires attention? For example, does a child land properly from a jump, with her heels coming all the way down and knees bent? If not, you'll want to work with her to master the correct movements. It can be a simple matter of demonstrating the proper technique or of offering a few simple words of encouragement. For instance, if a child is landing with straight legs, you could simply suggest she make her legs "bendy" when she lands. If she's landing on her toes only, tickle her heels so she feels the part of the foot and then ask her to make sure that part touches the floor when she comes down.

Fortunately, serious motor control problems are fairly rare. But motor skill delays, unlike language delays, can be difficult to detect, and they will not simply disappear on their own. If a child is a bit awkward and uncoordinated in his movements in comparison to others his age, it could be due to slight motor delays *or* to limited opportunities for active play. The child may just be clumsy, a trait that can be inherited. Similarly, what you assume to be a problem may be due to lack of maturity rather than poor motor coordination. For example, if a preschooler regularly drops a ball when you toss it to her, you shouldn't rush to the conclusion that she's experiencing delays. Catching a ball is a skill many preschoolers are still learning. Books like *Experiences in Movement*, listed below, include information on milestones in motor development, which can help you know what to expect at certain ages.

If you suspect a child has a problem with certain skills, the first thing to do is ensure he gets more practice. For instance, if he's having trouble with alternating movements, like climbing or descending stairs, play games with repetitive movement patterns, like hopscotch. If he's always walking on tiptoe, play a game in which you walk on heels only, or stick bottle caps on the heels of his sneakers, inviting him to make noise with them as he walks. If he doesn't swing his arms while he walks or runs, put a streamer in each hand, inviting him to make them move back and forth; or attach Velcro strips with bells to his wrists, inviting him to make "music" with his arms. If a problem persists (especially after other children have moved to more advanced skills), speak with the child's parents about consulting a pediatrician, occupational therapist, or physical therapist for an evaluation.

To learn more

Following are resources you can use to familiarize yourself with both the importance and the fundamentals of motor skills. You don't have to be a motor development specialist or study movement in depth to help children build motor skills.

Landy, J.M., & K. Burridge. 2000. Ready to use fundamental motor skills & movement activities for young children. West Nyack, NY: Center for Applied Research in Education.

Little, T.L., & L. Yorke. 2003. Why motor skills matter. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Pica, R. 2004. Experiences in movement: Birth to age eight. Clifton Park, NY: Delmar Learning.

Sanders, S.W. 2002. Active for life: Developmentally appropriate movement programs for young children. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Also, visit www.pecentral.org. Click on the Lessons tab, then choose the appropriate age range.