R.I. Nelson, Ph.D.

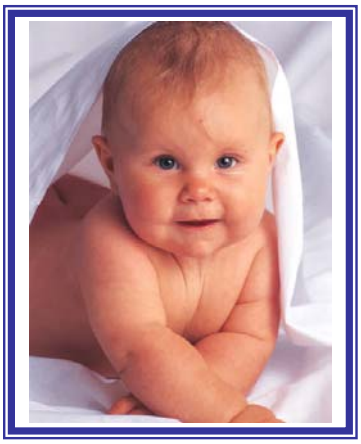
Activities to Facilitate Mental, Motor and Language Development in Young Children Adopted from Abroad

Upon arrival to the U.S. most internationally adopted children exhibit delays in one or more areas. While your nurturing home will assist your child in overcoming initial delays, we may not recognize how everyday activities and routines facilitate development and can be enjoyed by both child and parent(s). The more playful activities are made the more your child will want to engage in them over and over again, thereby also enhancing your parent-child relationship. In some cases, a child may not progress at an expected rate. Always check with your child's pediatrician if you feel your child is not making adequate progress, seems to have lost previously acquired developmental skills, or you sense something is not right. To schedule a developmental evaluation of your child, please contact Dr. Rebecca Nelson.

MOTOR ACTIVITIES

Infants

An infant may never have been place prone (on the stomach) while being cared for in an institution. With *supervision* the prone position facilitates better motoric organization and muscle development in young infants. Periodically place your awake and alert child in a prone position and verbally encourage raising of the head and use of arms and legs. Placing a favored or colorful toy just out of reach is a good motivator as long as your child is rewarded by obtaining the toy after brief periods of exertion. Gradually your child will be able to sustain and enjoy antigravity postures for longer periods of time.



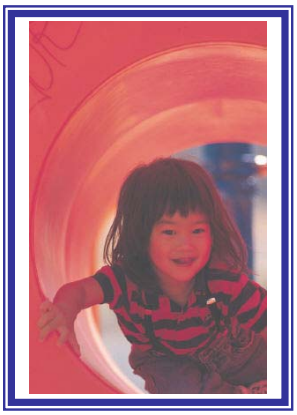
◆ ◆ ◆

Walkers and similar equipment are attractive to parents and infants as they provide your child with an increased level of independence, and the parent with momentary supervision relief. Occasionally, you may want to place your child in a *stationary* walker when you need to be away for a moment or two. However, besides being a widely known safety hazard, walkers do not encourage appropriate or natural muscle development. It is better for your child and s/he will learn to walk sooner without the use of walkers or similar aids. Additionally, It is best for infants and children learning to walk to be barefoot. This provides the most support, traction, and sensory awareness. Generally, motor movements should be coordinated and symmetrical. If you notice that your child is using one

side of the body notably more or less than the other, such as dragging one side of the body when crawling, notify your child's pediatrician who can assist you further.

Whole Body

Climbing



Climbing is an excellent exercise that utilizes both upper and lower extremities (arms and legs) and reinforces the use of bilateral (both sides of the body) coordinated movements. Because climbing requires effort against gravity, a child may tire easily in the beginning. Gradually increase climbing challenges as appropriate and ensuring a reward after a good climb (slide) will help make this an enjoyable exercise.

Swimming

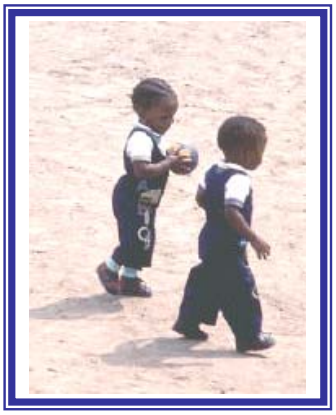
Swimming offers children a host of opportunities for whole body exertion and coordination and is a good way for children to learn about relaxation, thereby teaching self-control and self-regulation. Learning to relax and float on one's back is great exercise not only in muscle relaxation but in trust as well. For children hesitant towards full-body water play, formal lessons with a patient instructor may be the best approach. For children who do not know yet know how to swim water fun can include learning how to kick, blow bubbles, and splashing with appropriate supervision and safety equipment.

Tumbling

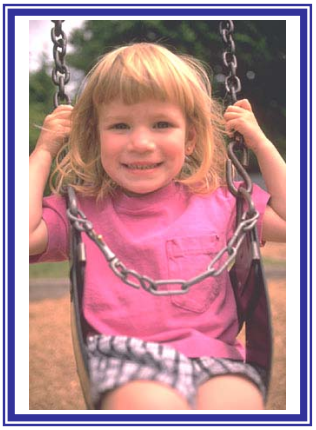
There are many ways a child can tumble either alone or with a parent. Gentle wrestling, a game of cat & mouse on all fours, rolling down a hill all offer opportunities for a child to gain a sense of themselves moving through space. At the park tumbling on the grass is great fun or can be done in a gym with mats. For the physically active child, structured group tumbling classes offer a much needed outlet for energy while facilitating self-control and social skills.

Lower Extremity

Walking



Infants & children from institutions tend to have poor lower extremity strength due to the lack of opportunity to move around independently. Frequent walks which are brief in the beginning and include a reward (e.g., park) are a great way to have kids learn to exercise and enjoy the function of their legs. Gradually increase the duration of the walks and add some variability in destination and pace. Try incorporating a walk into your daily routine.



Swinging

Most children enjoy swinging. Children who have sensitive vestibular systems can learn to enjoy gentle swinging while others may ask for more rigorous swinging. Teach your child how to pump their legs to encourage muscle tone and coordination. The easiest way to teach this is to sit on a swing next to your child and have s/he imitate your leg movements. Once they've learned how to pump stand in front of your child just our of reach and invite them to touch you with their toes. This will keep them enjoying this exercise.

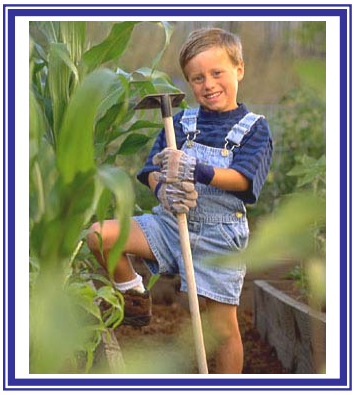
Balls

Balls used for kicking, throwing, and catching provide valuable use of targeted muscle groups and can be used to teach self-control. Through informal soccer, a child can learn to inhibit using their arms and hands and focus on their legs and knees. Many children will have more strength or dominance on one side of the body. To encourage strength and coordination on the weaker side, using kicking, throwing, and catching activities toward the less dominant side. For instance, ask a child to put their dominant hand behind their back as they try to catch a ball or beanbag.

Jumping & Hopping

While jumping and hopping may not seem as important motor activity compared to some, they assist in balance and coordination. The best way for a child to learn to jump and hop is to watch someone else engage in the activity. Developmentally, a child's balance capacity from standing independently proceeds to walking → standing on one foot with help → standing on

one foot alone → jumping with two feet off the floor → hopping on one foot. Asking your child to engage in activities s/he cannot possibly do will be frustrating for the both of you so observe your child to see when to appropriately encourage the next motor challenge. Various activities that encourage jumping and hopping include: hopscotch, jump rope, leap frog, jumping balls, and variations of Simon Says.



Household Routines

Most household chores and routines can be safely adapted for a child and most will provide some form of motor and mental exercise. Some activities to try could include: washing cars, gardening (kids size shovels & rakes make it fun) sweeping and mopping, dusting, cleaning sinks & bathtubs with baking soda & a sponge, wiping toys clean with baby wipes, laundry (sorting and matching colors can be used as a mental exercise), carrying weight-appropriate groceries, etc.

Mental/Cognitive Activities

Our ability to meaningfully organize input from our senses requires us to analyze (breaking down) and synthesize (integrate). Moreover, there are multiple abilities that contribute to problem solving. For children, learning through play is the ideal stimulating environment as the experience is naturally rewarding thereby encouraging repetition and retention. Listed below are just a few of activities that will facilitate your child's problem solving skills. Additionally, language is considered one form of cognitive ability and many activities focused on motor activity also provide mental stimulation. Please see those sections as well for more ideas.

Memory

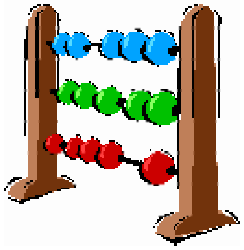
Infants and young children learn best through repetition, which facilitates retention. Although it is amusing at best and headache producing at worst, when children ask to have a book read repeatedly, it is not only because familiarity breeds comfort, it is also because they are actively increasing their memory competence. You might notice that the hundredth time a child engages in a particular activity s/he suddenly loses interest. Once mastery has been acquired new memory challenges are waiting to be tackled. For young infants peek-a-boo is a particularly stimulating game as they are acquiring the first of many levels of object permanence (knowledge that an object still exists when out of sight). Peek-a-boo is also a great interaction for facilitating bonding between parent and child. Once the novelty of peek-a-boo wanes, try using objects (cups and small toys) to create appearance and disappearance and gradually increase the complexity of hidden objects appropriate for the child. Card games like "Old Maid" or other

matching activities provide active practice of memory skills. Use objects that your child is interested in (e.g, animals, numbers, etc.) Memory for words can be made into an interactive game by singing songs and leaving out particular words, which your child can sing until s/he can recite independently.

Puzzles

Puzzles require effective coordination of visual input and fine motor skills, which can be facilitated with practice. On a broader level, puzzles incorporate both analysis and synthesis skills and can be a very engaging task given the challenge level is appropriate for the child. Begin with a few simple geometric shapes and eventually progress to asymmetrical shapes and familiar objects. Once a child has had opportunity to play with jigsaw puzzles and to try his/her own problem solving strategies, s/he can be shown appreciation for contour and more effective problem solving by finding corner pieces first followed by straight edges. This provides organization and structure. Such methodical problem solving techniques can be applied to other situations as well and encourages good habits followed by consistent rewards.

Counting



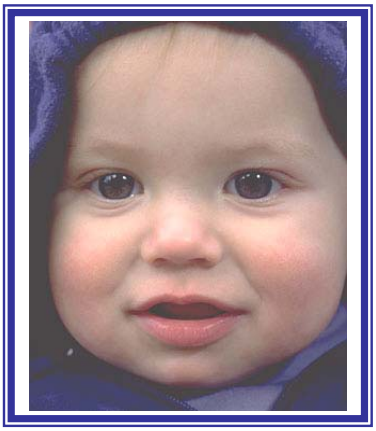
Math can be an area that children quickly dislike or find boring if not presented in a useful way. Likewise, math concepts can be particularly frustrating for children without solid basic quantitative skills. Young children can enjoy preprimary quantitative concepts through counting and matching games. Almost any activity can be turned into a game. During laundry time, besides matching socks, unmatched socks can be counted as well. Car games such as "*I Spy*" could include the number of particular objects spotted. When gender becomes of particular interest counting men, women, girls, and boys at a table when dining out is also a good conversation starter. A classic counting game has been well received by children and can involve up to four persons is "*Hi Ho! Cherry-O*." Size and weight comparison activities can be enjoyed during cooking or helping a parent with cleaning the garage or basement. Similarly, primary quantitative concepts, such as addition and subtraction are best understood using real-life examples. Edibles like slices of fruit or baby carrots are ideal for subtraction games while marbles and jacks can make addition activities rewarding.

Language Activities

Strengthen Facial Muscles

Lack of facial muscle tone can make a child appear as if s/he has a flat or affectless expression. Infants from institutions may have never sucked during feedings as bottle nipples are frequently enlarged for bottle propping. Similarly, children may have lacked opportunity to

chew solid food. In turn, lack of facial muscle tone can make it difficult for a child to form sounds with proper enunciation, thereby hindering expressive (spoken) language development. Slack facial muscle tone also inhibits effective nonverbal communications as others will not be able to accurately read the child's mood due to the lack of subtle facial clues.



Straws

A variety of exercises can be used with straws. Initially start with a straw with a wide opening using thin drinks (water, milk, juice) and gradually progress to thicker drinks (fruitshakes). The opening of the straw can be varied to provide challenge as well, though if a child is particularly hungry or thirsty sucking should not be a challenge or frustration and anger will result. Initially your child may not have strength to suck on a narrow straw like their parent or home-reared sibling. Straws need not be limited to food. Blowing bubbles, blowing a cotton ball across a table, or picking up small nonhazardous items with a sucking motion can be great fun.

Imitate Vocalizations

Research has shown that vocal imitation of infants enhances language development. While face-to-face with your child imitate cooing by responding in kind with animation. Children benefit from imitation of their silly sounds and attempts at meaningful words. Stay one step ahead of your child level to challenge them. Show how you can vary your pitch and rhythm. While it can be cute when children mispronunciate words or talk in "baby talk", it does not help the child acquire appropriate language skills, especially when they have likely been exposed to a different language previously. Slightly exaggerate your mouth and enunciate when teaching vowels or consonants and repeat the word or phrase several times.

Object Naming

Consistent and frequent object naming will greatly increase a child's vocabulary making it easier for your child to communicate needs and wants. As much as you can, routinely name objects that the child comes to interact. Once a child knows the name of an object include the function of such objects and involve your child to increase their learning and enhance retention. Use of repetition also reinforces learning. Picture cards and books geared toward object naming are fun way children to express what they know. Sometimes parents can become too ambitious with trying to increase their young child's vocabulary and the child will tire. Take cues from your child when to stop or when something else is more important than object naming.

Combine Verbal & Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication (body language, facial expression, and gestures) can be just as important (sometimes

more) as spoken words. Using gestures with verbalizations reinforces a child's understanding. More importantly, a child with an institutional background likely experienced very little direct nonverbal communication. S/he will greatly benefit in the socioemotional domain from learning the meaning of subtle displays of affect or mood and body posture. There are many available books emphasizing what body cues mean and how a child can convey his/her thoughts and feelings as well as being attuned to others nonverbal communications. While children are often well aware of positive feelings (happiness and excitement) and how to express them, more complex negative feelings (disappointment, sadness, worry/anxiousness, and resentment) may be more difficult for a child to recognize and communicate.

Reading

Our society heavily emphasizes reading as a main factor of school competency. Future reading success will be facilitated by exposure to a wide vocabulary, parent modeling, and regular story time. While story time right before bed is a nice way to snuggle with your child, often a child is entering a tired or nonattentive state. Setting time for reading when your child is alert but calm and attentive will maximize retention. Additionally, a child will be more motivated to learn to read if s/he can choose among selected material and the activity is made to be interactive (e.g., parent and child take turns reading lines).

Verbal Problem Solving

Spoken language skill and general problem solving can be enhanced by learning to problem solve aloud or subvocally ("verbal mediation.") Some of us may recognize this helpful habit (e.g, when we are assembling new toys or are working on a complex problem). For children who approach problem solving in a somewhat disorganized manner, verbal mediation (problem solving out loud) can help provide needed structure using methodical strategies (e.g, "first", "second", "third", etc.) and also helps to keep a child focused.