

Physical Development in Children

A practical guide for parents and carers

Every child develops at their own pace

Physical development is about much more than height and weight. It includes movement, balance, coordination, body awareness and growing independence. Milestones are useful guides, not deadlines.

Why physical development matters

- Explore their surroundings safely and confidently.
- Take part in play, sport and classroom activities.
- Complete everyday tasks such as dressing, eating and writing.
- Develop independence and self-confidence.
- Build strong bones, muscles, hearts and lungs.
- Support concentration, sleep and emotional wellbeing.
- Learn through movement, practical experiences and sensory exploration.

Remember: regular opportunities to move, play, practise and rest help physical skills develop. Warm encouragement is usually more helpful than comparison or pressure.

The main areas of physical development

GROSS MOTOR

Large-muscle movements such as sitting, walking, running, jumping, climbing, throwing and catching.

BALANCE & COORDINATION

Controlling different parts of the body together, including posture, balance, movement planning and body awareness.

HEALTH & SELF-CARE

Developing independence with eating, dressing, toileting, hygiene, sleep and personal safety.

FINE MOTOR

Small hand and finger movements used for drawing, cutting, fastening, feeding, building and writing.

SENSORY & PERCEPTUAL

Using sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell and movement sensations to understand and respond to the world.

EVERYDAY INDEPENDENCE

Learning to attempt manageable tasks, practise new skills and take part confidently in routines.

Ideas to try at home

Gross motor

Walking, dancing, swimming, climbing, playground games and ball play.

Balance & coordination

Obstacle courses, balancing, hopping, skipping, cycling and action songs.

Fine motor

Playdough, puzzles, construction toys, threading, painting, cooking and using tongs.

Sensory play

Sand, water, natural materials, music and movement. Follow your child's preferences and avoid forcing activities that cause distress.

Typical stages of development

The age ranges below are approximate. Children may develop skills earlier or later, and progress is not always even.

AGE RANGE	COMMON DEVELOPMENTS
Birth–12 months	Gains head and trunk control; reaches and grasps; rolls, sits and may crawl or pull to stand; explores objects with hands and mouth.
1–2 years	Begins walking more confidently; pushes and pulls toys; climbs with help; feeds themselves with increasing independence; makes marks with crayons.
2–3 years	Runs, kicks a ball and begins jumping; climbs stairs with support; turns pages; builds towers; starts managing simple clothing.
3–5 years	Develops better balance and coordination; pedals, hops, climbs and catches larger balls; uses scissors and drawing tools with greater control; manages more self-care tasks.
5–7 years	Runs, jumps, skips and changes direction with more control; improves handwriting and tool use; develops stamina and greater independence in dressing and hygiene.
7–11 years	Gains strength, speed and precision; learns more complex movement sequences; refines handwriting and practical skills; may show growing interest in particular physical activities.
11+ years	Experiences puberty-related changes; increases in height, strength and endurance; develops more specialised physical skills; may become more conscious of appearance and ability.

Milestones are a guide, not a test

Look at your child's overall development and progress over time rather than comparing them with other children.

How parents can support development

- Provide daily opportunities for active play, both indoors and outdoors.
- Offer a variety of activities rather than focusing only on competitive sport.
- Encourage effort, enjoyment and improvement instead of comparing performance.
- Break difficult tasks into small, manageable steps.
- Allow children time to practise everyday skills independently.
- Choose activities that are appropriate for the child's age and abilities.
- Provide safe spaces, suitable equipment and close supervision where needed.
- Include rest, sleep and quieter activities as part of a healthy routine.
- Limit long periods of sitting and build movement into family life.
- Work with the school when a child needs additional support or adaptations.

Building physical skills through everyday life

Gross motor skills

Gross motor skills involve the large muscles of the body. They support mobility, fitness, confidence and participation in playground games and sport. They also provide the stability children need for smaller, more precise movements.

Try: outdoor play, walking, climbing, dancing, swimming and ball games.

Fine motor skills

Fine motor skills use the small muscles in the hands and fingers. They support independence in self-care and many school activities. Strength and control develop gradually through repeated play and practice.

Try: playdough, puzzles, construction toys, threading, painting, cooking and picking up small objects with tongs.

Balance, coordination & body awareness

These skills help children control different parts of their body together and understand where their body is in relation to people and objects. They support safe movement, posture, handwriting, dressing, playground play and sport.

Try: obstacle courses, balancing, hopping, skipping, cycling and action songs.

Sensory & perceptual development

Children use sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell and movement sensations to understand the world. Sensory development supports attention, movement planning, safety and participation in everyday routines.

Try: sand, water, natural materials, music and movement. Children have different sensory preferences, so avoid forcing activities that cause distress.

Physical health & self-care

Physical development also includes healthy routines and increasing independence with eating, dressing, toileting, hygiene, sleep and personal safety. These skills help children care for their bodies and build lifelong habits.

Support with: predictable routines, balanced meals, active play, adequate sleep and opportunities to attempt manageable tasks independently.

When to seek advice

Speak to your child's teacher, health visitor, school nurse, GP or another appropriate professional if your child:

- loses a skill they previously had;
- appears unusually stiff, weak, unsteady or frequently in pain;
- consistently uses one side of the body much more than the other;
- has ongoing difficulty with movement, feeding or everyday self-care;
- regularly avoids physical activities because they find them very difficult;
- is not making progress over time despite support and practice;
- has difficulties that affect learning, independence or participation.

A final reminder for parents and carers

A single difference does not necessarily indicate a problem. Looking at the child's overall development and progress over time is more useful than comparing them with other children. Early discussion can provide reassurance and help families access support if it is needed.

MOVE • PLAY • PRACTISE • REST • GROW