



Rae Pica

Linking Literacy and Movement

“Movement isn’t part of our curriculum anymore,” a preschool teacher says. “We spend most of our time focusing on emergent literacy.”

“Our principal doesn’t allow movement or play in the classroom,” says a pre-K teacher. “He wants us to spend our time focusing on state literacy and numeracy standards.”

COMMENTS LIKE THESE prompted me to write *Jump into Literacy* (Pica 2007) to demonstrate how young children can acquire literacy skills in developmentally appropriate ways, using a learning tool they enjoy—movement. I am a strong proponent of active learning. Children need to physically participate in the learning process, using as many senses as possible, to truly understand concepts. Much of the recent brain research backs up this approach.

There are many links between literacy and movement. Movement and language are both forms of communication and self-expression. Body language is a distinct method of communication, and it is believed that “ideas and feelings expressed in words actually begin in the body . . . Before you write or speak, there is a physical response” (Minton 2003, 37).

We often hear that our bodies express more than our words during communication with others. (Stand in front of a group of people and say, “Put your hands over your eyes,” while actually placing your hands over your ears.

Most people will mimic your actions and put their hands over their ears.)

Rhythm is an essential component of both language and movement. While we may think of rhythm primarily in musical terms, there is a rhythm to words and sentences as well. We develop an internal rhythm when we read and write. Individuals also have personalized rhythms for thinking and moving. For example, when a teacher asks children to get into small body shapes, the children respond at their own pace, some quickly and some slowly. Moreover, as children acquire and refine their motor skills, they learn subconscious lessons about rhythm. For instance, the rhythm of a gallop matches a 2/4 musical meter, a walk is similar to a 4/4 meter, and a skip has the feel of a 6/8 meter.

According to neuroscience educator Dee Coulter, songs, movement, and musical games are “brilliant neuro-

logical exercises” vital to intellectual development (1995, 22). Combining rhythmic movement with speech and song gives young children an opportunity to further develop their minds. In particular, this combination affects the areas of inner speech and impulse control, which contribute to language development, self-management, and social skills (Coulter 1995, 22).

TO DO MORE

Olds writes that spatial orientation is necessary for letter identification and the orientation of symbols on a page (1994). She explains that a lowercase *b* and a lowercase *d*, for example, are the same, both composed of a line and a circle. The only difference is in their spatial orientation—which side of the line the circle is on. When children mimic the straight and curving lines of letters with their bodies rather than simply attempting to copy them onto paper, their sense of directionality and spatial orientation is greatly enhanced.

Block contends that sequencing movement “accesses many learning modes” (2001, 44). She recommends giving children opportunities to listen to the rhythm of language and to actively participate in physical expressions of its rhythm. For example, tapping to the rhythm of poems and rhymes develops temporal awareness. And that, Block says, creates an awareness of the rhythm of literary works and helps children “internalize the beat when they are being read to” (2001, 44).

Prepositions—those little words so critical to language and life—are very much a part of everyday physical experiences. As children move *over*, *under*, *around*, *through*, *beside*, and *near* objects (for example, *under* the monkey bars, *through* the tunnel, *over* the balance beam), these words take on

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greater significance. Obstacle courses are perfect for promoting understanding of prepositions.

Stringing actions together to form sequences is similar to linking words to form sentences and eventually paragraphs. Both require children to choose components that flow naturally. Both also require breathing room (a pause in the action, or a comma) and an ending (a full stop, or a period). When children learn, create, or dance to songs, they experience flow and phrasing. When the songs have lyrics, children must think about the meaning of the words. And because those words are important to them, they have much more relevance than a vocabulary list or a spelling list.

When children walk *slowly* or skip *lightly*, adjectives and adverbs become more than abstract concepts. Word comprehension is immediate and long-lasting when children physically demonstrate action words such as *stomp*, *pounce*, *stalk*, or *slither*, or descriptive words such as *smooth*, *strong*, *gentle*, or *enormous*. Even suffixes become more relevant when children act out the difference between *scared* and *scary*. (Try it yourself and see the difference!)

In these examples, children have heard the word while both feeling and seeing the meaning, thus employing multiple senses in the learning process. Jensen labels this kind of active learning *implicit*, like learning to ride a bike (2001). At the opposite end of the spectrum is *explicit* learning, like being told the capital of Peru.

Explicit learning may be quicker than learning through physical experience, but the latter has greater meaning for children and stays with them longer. There are many reasons for this, including the fact that implicit learning creates more neural networks in the brain and employs more senses (Jensen 2001). Another reason may be that implicit learning is simply more fun!

TO LEARN MORE

In addition to the resources in the reference list, the books that follow address active learning:

Smart Moves: Why Learning Is Not All in Your Head, by Carla Hannaford (Salt Lake City, UT: Great River Books, 2005).

Brain-Based Learning: The New Paradigm of Teaching, by Eric Jensen (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008).

Learning with the Body in Mind: The Scientific Basis for Energizers, Movement, Play, Games, and Physical Education, by Eric Jensen (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2000).

References

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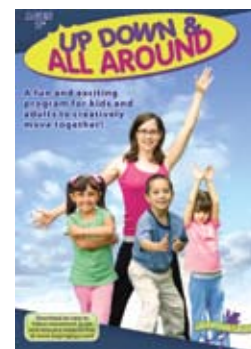


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