

What happens when we move and play together with our infants?

Movement practitioner, educator, trainer and writer **Jasmine Pasch** describes her approach to working creatively with infants and their families, and the fundamental role of movement in the early years of development

Baby whispering

I was invited to work with babies, toddlers and their families at Rich Mix Cultural Foundation in Shoreditch in 2009, and this gave me the opportunity to think differently about how to do this, to devise my own approach. I noticed how in many groups the babies were passive or moved around whilst being held by adults, and the more active children were restrained by parents who were uncomfortable or embarrassed by their need to escape and move freely.

In early years we talk about the importance of physical development in young children, but for some reason adults feel a need to put a stop to children moving in ways of their choosing. So I set about providing a session where there are no adult-led activities, the movement work is entirely child-initiated and supported by the watchful adults; the environment is uncluttered and safe; and the time unhurried. Into this mix I create “irresistible invitations”(1) to move and play in a variety of ways with minimal open-ended resources to cater for the very young babies through to

the more active toddlers.

The floor is an important workplace for this age group, the “athletic field of the child” according to Arnold Gesell.(2) We are fortunate to have theatre lighting and sound, so the arts centre space has a magical quality and atmosphere. A ‘baby nightclub’ some call it. The floor can be lit with swirls, patterns and colours that move and change. Parts of the floor are covered with thick, soft gym mats for the young infants to practice being on their back, side or front and to roll safely from one position to the other. Thick cushions are placed so that infants can clamber and climb once they are on the move, and benches support the children who are pulling themselves up to stand and cruise along, holding on. There is a space near to the sound system where some of the toddlers and their parents can dance, often with a slow number to finish off the afternoon.

It is a ‘pack away’ setting, which means that everything has to be set up for the session each time from scratch and has to disappear back into the big storage cupboard afterwards. No two sessions are ever set up in exactly the

same way, ensuring variety.

There are no toys, but there are things that children find fascinating: a Treasure Basket; a small library of books for babies put together by one of the parents; a selection of corks, lids, ping pong balls, shakers, sticks; bottles with different things in like shells, buttons, ribbons, bottle tops and bells that all make different sounds; balloon comets; balls of different material from stainless steel to fabric and felt; cardboard tube skittles to knock down and stand up again; and cardboard box ‘cars’ to whizz around in. Parents comment that children love these playthings, and they can easily provide them at home too.

I support parents through one-to-one conversations, and observing and feeding back or voicing over what I see happening in terms of movement and development with their child. ‘Baby whispering’, if you like. We are all learning together ‘in the moment’ as each child is different from any other, and yet there are some well-known universal milestones.

Bonnie Bainbridge-Cohen talks about how in the first year of life: “The relation of the perceptual process (the way one sees) and the motor process (the way one moves or acts in the world) is established. This is the baseline for how you will be processing activity, either in receiving or expressing, throughout your life.”(3)

Early patterns of movement

Movement, play and dance are fundamental. They are crucial for development at the beginning of life, and just as vital for health and wellbeing throughout life. I started dancing at the age of three, and went on to train as a professional dancer. This lifelong engagement with many different kinds of dance, improvisation,



Photo: Foteini Christofilopoulou



Photo: Anni McTavish

somatic movement and play feeds the way I see, think and experience being with these tiny dancers at Rich Mix. Later on, my understanding of infant development was deepened by working with Bette Lamont from the USA, who is a Neurological Reorganisation Therapist. Bette talks about children needing to spend 50 per cent of their time in the loving arms of their parents or caregivers, and 50 per cent of their time playing on the floor. There are connections between body movement and brain development, and some movement patterns are like a 'double click' on the brain, opening up many functions rather like when we double click and open up a programme on a computer.

Two significant early patterns will be described here: belly crawling and creeping on hands and knees.

Belly crawling

The young child placed on the tummy will squirm and wriggle in a seemingly random way, but given the opportunity will find a pattern of organisation that will lead to the belly crawl. They may go through a series of movement patterns: homologous (upper/lower), homolateral (using limbs on the same side) and contralateral (using limbs on the opposite sides of the body).

The belly crawl is a top-to-toe

workout and very hard work. It may be a brief phase but is a critical and distinct phase that puts many specific and necessary pieces into place.

According to Bette Lamont:

"Many people allow, or encourage children to skip it because when they put them down they hear grunting and fussing that sounds like distress. In many cases this is simply the infant trying to sort out breathing from moving, so the grunts are understandable...and necessary."(4)

Babies put on to their backs will wriggle and roll over, finding the prone position by themselves if we give them the freedom to move and get comfortable. Gaining head control is the baby's first and most important task as many other movement abilities are built on this foundation skill.

Parents may be reluctant to put their babies on their tummies following the Back to Sleep campaign warning of the dangers of suffocation, so babies must be supervised at all times when in the prone position. They can hold them in the prone position across their legs, over their arms in the 'Tiger in a tree' position or relaxing on their chests.

There are many good reasons to encourage 'tummy time' and here are some of them:

- It stimulates horizontal eye tracking and helps the eyes to work together

in correct alignment

- Early head movement helps the neck to grow strong and the skull to round out, preventing flat head syndrome (positional plagiocephaly)
- It strengthens the arches in the feet, helps with heel to coccyx alignment and stabilises the hip sockets
- It promotes cervical and lumbar spine stability, and neck strength, so helps the development of the mature S curve from the infant C curve
- It makes the child aware of the genital area through ventral stimulation, and helps with on time toilet training
- It helps with the supination and pronation of the lower arm, and helps the hands to open out from the grasp reflex to eventual cortical control (fine motor skills)
- It creates a feeling of vertical 'throughness', which helps the child to feel grounded
- It is the first self-determined movement
- It seems to be connected with brain stem development and functions that ensure survival: accurate perception of pain, heat, cold and hunger
- It builds a sense of Self and is the basis for development of empathy and compassion.

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Developing practice

Developmental process

Youngsters given good health and opportunity will access these important movement patterns as part of their everyday play, and they will access them in their own time. Each of the patterns is a potential within us but we have to actually do them to realise that potential. It is important not to rush youngsters through the developmental sequence but to allow them to find the movements and the transitions. Tina Bruce talks about hurrying youngsters on to the next stage as being like putting them in a pair of shoes that are the next size, and therefore too big.(5) We must join them as they play on the floor and take pleasure in their discoveries and achievements as these unfold in the moment.

There may be unintended consequences of putting babies in devices that limit their ability to move in an unrestricted way, such as in buggies, bucket-shaped containers, bouncy chairs, bumbos, swinging devices hanging from door frames, baby walkers or comfortable looking baby gyms where the toys move overhead but the baby is immobile apart from their eyes and fingers, and where their spine is only ever in the C curve shape. These devices may be convenient, and appear to keep the baby safe and content, but they waste valuable time and interfere with the baby's development, keeping the baby in a neurologically neutral state.

"The development of neuromotor skills is a dual process, driven primarily by maturation within the nervous system but also entrained in the context of the physical interaction with the environment and social engagement."(6)

Creeping on all fours

Towards the second half of the first year, the baby may push up onto hands and knees and after a bit of rocking back and forth, pushing off and going backwards instead of forwards, the infant begins to creep on all fours.

There are many good reasons to encourage this too, including:

- It stimulates vertical eye tracking, visual convergence, teaches the eyes to cross the midline and practise near and far point vision
- It promotes hand-eye coordination



- Shoulders and hips are further rotated into alignment
- The hands are more fully opened out as they support the weight
- Balance away from the floor is explored through much trial and error, and mastered gradually. This forms the basis of balance throughout life (physical and emotional)
- It involves working through a number of stages that the child must practise and play with, before arriving at the cross pattern crawl
- It supports the development of the corpus callosum, which is the major inter-hemispheric communicator and as such it mediates between the hemispheres to synchronise their particular specialisations(7)
- It fires connections between the two hemispheres of the brain supporting retrieval, filtering, sorting and sifting, and sequencing, and without the connections we may see difficulties knowing right from left, letter, word and number reversals, e.g. b/d, p/q, on/no, patterns of learning and forgetting the same thing several times. In short, difficulties with learning and memory
- It seems to be connected to development of the mid brain, building a bridge between oneself and the world, and making relationships
- It enables the vestibular, proprioceptive and visual systems to connect and operate together for the first time. Without this integration there can be a poorly

developed sense of balance and poor space and depth perception.

Support and attentiveness

It can be difficult to watch babies and toddlers struggling to gain mastery over their body movements as it is hard work and they become frustrated, but with plenty of time and practice they will solve the problems with our support and attentiveness. It is tempting to prop them up or use devices that hold them in an upright position, but if they cannot maintain this position themselves then it is of no benefit. Bette Lamont advises that the fussing and crying we hear borne of frustration is like salt. A little is fine but a lot is harmful, so the youngster needs comforting and reassuring if they get too stressed.

There are useful films available on the internet (easily accessed by smart phone) that demonstrate these important movement patterns in an accessible way (see info).

Bodyfulness

Having described some aspects of physical development, I want to differentiate this from physicality in young children, or what I prefer to call 'bodyfulness'. If the more familiar concept of mindfulness means: 'paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally', then bodyfulness might include:

- sensing: smelling, touching and being touched, tasting, hearing and seeing things from their perspective, and connecting up the hidden



Photos: Foteini Christofilopoulou

senses of balance and proprioception

- getting the body moving and under control with practice and struggle, and working through frustration with support
- being in the body, starting from the inside to discover all about themselves, the world around them and the people in it, including other youngsters
- being active and exploring, following their curiosity and desire
- whole body movement in different planes: up and down, forward and back and rotating around
- finding out what happens when... or if...
- problem solving and making mistakes
- being imaginative and creative
- being loved and bonding with others
- feeling joy, anger, sadness, interest, excitement, fear
- feeling pleasure in the body moving
- resting, relaxing and breathing in those loving arms.

For our infants there is a whole world of sensations, feelings, thoughts and images to explore as their bodies and minds grow and develop under our watchful gaze.

Parent's comment

Here is a comment from a parent on their experience at Rich Mix:

"I moved into the area when W was nine months so it was great to have somewhere social to go but what was most wonderful and felt really unique was Jasmine's radical commitment

to movement development and play. I could sense her knowledge and loved reading the information she sometimes offered about the importance of movement in child development, e.g. I remember well the leaflet on 'tummy time', which I photocopied and passed on numerous times for friends. This is stuff that as mothers we do not generally know. Even as a dancer myself, I realised I was of very limited knowledge about physical and brain development of children, and was grateful to have access to this as support for my instinctive belief in movement. I also just loved the freedom, ease and playfulness of the sessions...I loved being able to lie down and roll around with my baby. This was really great for me and my own body, especially as I was extremely sleep-deprived and suffering from some post-natal depression at the time. To be able to stretch and relax in the company of my child having a lovely time, and with Jasmine's kind attention, was really good for both me and W. The sessions were a highlight of our week. In our generation of exhausted working parents, often disconnected from families and communities, and where both children and carers are increasingly attached to technology, it is potentially seriously damaging to the developmental processes of babies if they don't have enough opportunity to move around and to play physically. I knew this instinctively as a dancer myself but in Jasmine's sessions I was able to properly appreciate and explore this in a place of fun, friendliness and real relaxation." Mother L

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Info

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Films

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