



## SPECIAL REPORT

### The Benefits of Developmental Play from Birth and Beyond

A big part of being a parent is worrying about our children. Will they be healthy, happy, successful, well educated? Unfortunately it is not always possible to control what happens in their lives but you can certainly provide them with the basis for a good education so ensuring that they have the means to achieve their full potential-whatever that may be.

Many people believe that a child's education begins when they start school but it actually begins way before then - in fact right from birth. A study by The University of Chicago's Benjamin Bloom concluded that by 4 years of age most of a child's IQ is in place and there is now an ever-increasing bank of scientific knowledge showing that the neurological development of the young child is linked to later learning and development. To be able to learn effectively each child has to be developmentally ready-they need to have experienced appropriate amounts of sensory experience, play, movement, music and speech. They also need to be able to pay attention, which in turn means having a degree of control over their body. But many schools are finding children have not had these experiences and so are not yet ready to make use of what school has to offer. In fact a recent survey showed that UK-wide an amazing 50% of children begin school lacking the skills that are vital to an effective start to learning. Learning is not just about the 'three R's' (reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic!) but also about the relationship between the brain and the body. For instance the development of language is a whole body skill while balance, posture, coordination and control of eye movements are all essential for reading, academic achievement and optimising intelligence.

So, what are these skills and how do you 'teach' them to a baby or pre school child? The answer is easy-it does not involve 'hot housing', 'cramming' or testing but simply PLAYING. Developmental Play activities are a great, fun way to lay down these simple, basic but vital skills. Developmental Play helps and supports your child's development in two very important areas-The Primitive Reflexes and the Balance system.

All babies are born with a set of what are known as 'Primitive Reflexes' that then need to be 'worked out' and replaced by the adult postural responses or reflexes and this is supposed to happen in the first few months/years of life. But, although this is a naturally occurring process, it can easily be affected by any one of many factors: a difficult birth, a caesarean section or one of the many viral infections that all babies seem to pick up, to name a few. Anyone of these could mean missing the window when a reflex should have finished its job. Despite this many babies still appear to develop normally and everything seems fine until they get to school. For some reason they then fail to reach their potential when they begin formal education: they may find it difficult to pick up reading as easily as other children whilst appearing to be as bright: writing may be hard: buttoning

up shirts, learning to tell the time and to tie shoe laces may all be difficult: they are not able to sit still so cannot listen and learn: they may be uncoordinated in sports and physical activities (a 'clumsy child').

All of these are things that can be linked to either retention of the Primitive Reflexes or an underdeveloped balance system. An immature balance system is often found amongst children who have specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, poor attention span, language impairment and emotional problems. Many distinguished scientists have identified cognitive, behavioural and emotional problems later in life that can be directly linked back to vestibular function. One such study in 2004 found that 48% of 4-5 year olds still had an immature balance system as well as traces of infant reflexes present at time of entry to school. These children did not perform so well on measures of academic performance at the end of the year perhaps showing that children starting school with immature physical skills may be at a disadvantage.

To ensure full optimisation of these skills it is important that they are fostered at the correct age and stage of development- that is the first 2-3 years of life. A baby's brain is almost sponge like in the amount of information it can absorb and lifelong skills are learnt easier in these early days. Although learning can take place at any stage, it is more efficient if it coincides with the time of 'neurological readiness'. A child's first experience of the word begins with its mother who (along with dad) is the child's first and best teacher. So who better to use developmental play to ensure these vital skills are laid down?

For us as adults 'play' is a way to relax and unwind after work but for babies and small children it is their whole world. It is their work! It is the process through which they explore, gather information, learn about and make sense of the world around them. Play in the early months of life begins with the body, with the experience of movement and exercising the senses. Early communication between mother and baby is through play and all forms of play help children to learn about themselves and the world around them-the more experiences the better for the baby's development.

Play should be fun-laughter is a form of release; it frees us to expand and become more of ourselves. It promotes physical and emotional wellbeing, increases muscle tone, respiration and the cardiovascular system. It also has positive effects on the immune system by affecting the activity of natural killer cells. Rough and tumble play is important -it recruits and exercises the brain in many areas and abilities, helps develop physical fitness, control and regulation of strength, sensory awareness and self-control within social settings. Physical play also helps oxygenation of the body so ensuring brain development. It should also be repetitive to ensure stronger neural connections.

So, Developmental Play is simply basic, fun play activities offered at the correct stage of development. A golden rule of parenting is to help your child consolidate what he already knows before moving him onto the next stage. Developmental Play does this by supporting your baby at their current stage of development so allowing them to build the confidence they need to move on to the next stage as and when they are ready. By using Developmental Play with your child everyday not only will you be giving your child the best possible start in life, you also have great fun together and will be building an amazing bond that will last a lifetime.