

Preschool

Selling the Benefits of Movement Classes

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In the movie *Baby Boom*, J.C. Wiatt (played by Diane Keaton) is learning how to be a parent to a suddenly-inherited toddler. When she attends a “Mommy and Me,” seminar, she discovers, much to her dismay, that baby Elizabeth has already fallen considerably behind other children her age, all of whom are attending classes in gymnastics, French, and bale—at the very least!

Of course, the movie is a comedy and not meant to be taken with *complete* seriousness. But in this age of accelerated learning and accountability, we can’t dismiss the inclination of parents to want their children to learn as much as they can—and to expect to see evidence of what’s been learned. Along those lines, “Show Mommy your cartwheel” is certainly more impressive than, “Show Mommy how round you can be!”

How, then, does the preschool instructor who believes in offering movement education prior to dance technique convince parents of its value? How can she help parents understand that body and spatial awareness are of critical importance—and that exploration and discovery are developmentally appropriate means of learning—during early childhood.

Following are just a few of the benefits children derive from participating in movement education activities. Use them to promote your program and to help educate your young students’ parents.

Cognitive Development

Probably nothing offers parents more comfort than the suggestion that something will help make their children smarter. You’ll be telling them the truth when you say that creative movement and movement exploration promote learning.

Studies of how young children learn have proven that they especially acquire knowledge experientially—through play, experimentation, exploration, and discovery.

Within the last 10 years, there has been a great deal of research done on the topic that children acquire knowledge using different “modalities” (or senses). The four modalities are visual (information is obtained through the sense of sight); auditory (learning takes place primarily through what is heard); tactile (the greatest amount of information is provided through the sense of touch); and kinesthetic (learning is stimulated through doing and moving). Although some students have strengths and weaknesses in certain modalities, most students learn by using all their modalities.

The work of Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner, published in his 1983 book, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York, Basic Books), has helped us to recognize the variety of intelligences each individual possesses: Linguistic, logical/mathematical, musical, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and bodily/kinesthetic.

The latter, involving movement, is the intelligence that allows our bodies—or parts of our

bodies—to solve problems, create, and discover. Though a developmentally appropriate movement program, preschool instructors can help nurture the bodily/kinesthetic intelligence possessed in varying degrees, by all children. Though our society has tended to grant greater value to other of the intelligences, children who use and continue to use their bodies in innovative ways often become successful actors, athletes, crafts people, dancers, or surgeons.

For the past three years, Dr. Marjorie Corso, a physical education specialist, has conducted research on the ways in which body and space awareness transfers to paper space awareness. In her article, “Is developmentally appropriate physical education the answer to children’s school readiness?” published in the winter 1993 issue of the *Colorado Journal of Health, Physical Education, recreation and Dance*, for example, that if you ask three to 8-year-old children to touch their shoulders, some touch only one shoulder. Similarly, some children, when asked to jump and touch the ceiling, will reach only one hand. Upon requesting samples of the children’s papers, Corso discovered that the quadrant of paper not used in writhing and coloring is the same quadrant of body space not used. Among her other findings:

- Children who cannot cross mid-line (the imaginary vertical and horizontal lines that divide the left/right and top/bottom of the body) tend to focus on the vertical of the paper, sometimes writing or drawing down the vertical center of the page and sometimes changing the pencil to the other hand at midpoint of the paper.
- Children who have trouble finding a personal space or who line up too closely to the person in front or back of them usually write their letters in a similar pattern.
- Children who do not cross mid-line tend to stop reading at the middle of the page.

Omission of gross motor instruction as part of the child’s education may be especially devastating to children who are predominately kinesthetic learners.

All of this points toward a definite connection between body and mind—between moving and learning. However, movement is much less likely to stimulate learning of it is “taught” in the way other subjects are though verbal instruction and demonstration and imitation exclusively. Rather, teachers must also offer children opportunities to solve problems, invent their own solutions to challenges, and make the abstract “concrete.” It’s harder for the teacher to set up a situation in which a student may discover rather than “be taught,” but this is the key to learning for the young child.

A Well-rounded Introduction to Music

Why is music important to young children? Besides the fact that musical intelligence is one of the seven identified by Gardner, it is believed that children exposed to music have a greater motivation to communicate with the world. Perhaps that’s because music provides their first exposure to the existence and richness of their own culture, as well as the heritage and cultures of other people and regions. Perhaps it’s because music is a nonverbal form of communication and therefore can bridge the gaps among people of differing backgrounds (that languages accentuate).

Music is also vital to the development of the language and listening skills. Music and the language arts (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) both consist of symbols and, when used in combination, abstract ideas are made more concrete. Further, music activities can help improve attention span and memory and expand vocabulary.

Perhaps the most important role of music in the child's early education is what it offers aesthetically. By helping children develop their aesthetic sense (an appreciation of beauty in its many forms), we can heighten their sensitivities and help enrich their lives significantly.

Unfortunately, it is still too often true that a child's musical ability is judged by her or his ability to sing or play an instrument. Even if a child possesses such talent, if her exposure to music is limited to one of these two avenues, she is not experiencing music to the fullest. What of the child who shows no interest in or aptitude for singing or playing an instrument?

If all children are to fully experience music, they should have many and varied experiences that include listening, singing, playing, creating, and moving. The gymnastics club offers unique opportunities for children to encounter music in these ways. But rather than simply using music for complementing movement, instructors should also think in terms of using movement as a tool for exploring music. For example, when a child tiptoes to soft music, stamps his feet to loud music, moves in slow motion to Bach's *Air on the G String* and then rapidly to Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumblebee*, always to a 3/4 meter and skips to a piece in 6/8, he is experiencing the music on a variety of levels. Not only is he listening, but he's using his body, mind, and spirit to express and create responses that are uniquely his own. And, because he is using a variety of senses, what he learns will make a lasting impression.

Promotion of Creativity and Self-Expression

The experts agree that creative potential exists to varying degrees in all young children on their way to adulthood.

Why does this happen? Where does creativity go?

One researcher followed a group of children from first through sixth grades and found that creativity begins to "dry out" at just five years of age! It then suffers drastic reductions at about age nine (in grade four) and again at age twelve (in seventh grade). Sadly, school—with its structured classroom environments, insistence upon conformity, academic accountability, and emphasis on competition—is often blamed for the squelching of creative potential.

Though in the minds of many people creativity is the domain of only "artists" (painters, writers, choreographers, composers, etc.) the world also benefits from creativity in business and industry, science, education, and daily life. Creative people are those who can *imagine*. Therefore, they can imagine solutions to problems and challenges faced. They can imagine what it's like to be someone or something else (empathy). They can imagine answers to the question *What if?* They can plan futures that are full and satisfying.

Because each child is born with creative potential, and the ages between three and five are the thought to be the critical years for the development of creativity, the role of those who work with young children is especially important. In the gym, preschool instructors can promote creativity by offering their young students chances to express themselves in their individual ways, explore and discover movement possibilities, and solve movement problems—and by valuing process over product.

These are just a few of the ways movement education exploration serves to benefit toddlers and preschoolers. Movement education is also extremely valuable for children in their first

years of school and for adolescents trying to figure out who they are. For now, you can use this information to “sell” creative movement to parents in your communities—and to validate your belief in the vital role your program plays in children’s lives.

Reading References

Corso, M. (1993). Is developmentally appropriate physical education the answer to children’s school readiness? *Colorado Journal of Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance*, 19(2), 6-7.

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SAMPLE ACTIVITIES

Cognitive Development

The place to begin with young children is with identification of parts of the body and exploration of both personal and general space. “Simon Says” is an excellent body awareness game, but it must be played without the elimination process if it’s to promote feelings of success and self-confidence for all of the players. You can use hula hoops or carpet squares for an activity called “Islands,” that develops an awareness of personal space. Ask each child to stand on a square or inside a hoop and imagine they’re on an island. You then challenge the children to discover all the ways they can stretch, curl, and move without “falling into the water.”

A more advanced activity requires presenting challenges like the following to children:

- Place an elbow on the floor; then move it as far away from the floor as possible.
- Put a shoulder (then the other shoulder; both shoulders) on the floor.
- Touch an elbow to a knee; take it as far away from that knee as possible.
- Touch an elbow to a foot.
- Come up from the floor with your head leading and the rest of your body following.
- Go back to the floor with your nose leading the way. Come back with an elbow leading.

To explore general space, ask the children to step inside a hoop and to hold it around their waists. They must then walk around the room without coming into contact with another hoop (you can ask them to imagine the hoops are electrically charged and will create sparks if touched together). You then act as a wall and gradually reduce the space by taking steps toward the children. (If hoops aren’t available, the children can move their arms outstretched

and pretend that their hands are sticky or covered with wet paint).

Movement educators are also in a unique position to help make certain abstract more concrete—like *up*, *down*, *high*, *low*, *big*, *small*, *forward*, *backward*, *right* and *left*. Instructors can design activities intended to familiarize preschoolers with such prepositions as *around*, *over*, *under*, *through*, *beside*, and *between*.

A well-rounded Introduction to Music

Contrast extremes when introducing certain musical elements to young children. “Tempo” is the speed at which a piece of music is performed, which means this musical element is related to the movement element of time. Once the children can recognize and move to both fast and slow music, begin introducing the more challenging continuum from very slow to very fast, and the reverse. “Accelerando” is the term for music that begins slowly and gradually increases in tempo. “Ritardando” (abbreviated rit. or ritard.) indicates a gradual slackening in speed.

The musical element of “volume” refers to the loudness or softness of sounds and, again, the best way to introduce it is to contrast extremes. Once the children can move well in relation to both loud and soft music, begin introducing the continuum from one to the other. “Crescendo” is the term of music that begins softly and gradually gets louder. “Decrescendo” refers to a gradually decreasing loudness. Because loud music tends to inspire strong movements and soft music gentle movements, exploring volume also offers children practice with the movement element of force.

“Statues” is an excellent game for developing listening skills, helping children differentiate between sound and silence, and for inspiring movement improvisation. In this activity, instruct the children to move in any way they like while the music is playing. When the music stops (you press the pause button on the tape player or lift the needle off the record), they must freeze into “statues” and stay that way until the music begins again. Take children by surprise by varying the length of time you allow them to move before stopping the music—and don’t always stop it at the end of a musical phrase.

Promotion of Creativity and Self-expression

Movement exploration automatically promotes creativity and self-expression by offering children opportunities for divergent problem solving. In other words, challenges have many possible responses, and the children are free to discover them without fear of failure. Exploring “Shapes” and “Make-believe Walks” are two examples of divergent problem-solving activities.

For the former, make sure the children have enough room to respond without touching one another and then ask questions like the following:

- How round can you be?
- How flat can you be? Wide? Narrow? Long? Short? Crooked? Straight?
- Can you make your body look like a table?
- Can you look like a ball? A pencil with a point at the end?
- A flower? A teapot? A rug?

“Make believe walking” incorporates imagery into the locomotor skill of walking. Challenge the children to walk as though they’re the following:

- Big and strong
- Fat and jolly
- Really angry
- Really sad (tired; scared; proud, etc.)
- In a parade
- On hot sand that’s burning their feet
- Trying to get through sticky mud

This article appears in the April 1995 issue of *Technique*, Vol. 15, No. 4, p.41-44.