

Photos by Deb Curtis



Seeing and Supporting Children's Active Bodies (and Minds)

by Deb Curtis

Yveline and her friends hung from the metal poles, kicking balls with their feet as they swung back and forth. Then Yveline had a new idea. With one hand on the pole, she put her foot on a ball and tried to stand upright. She quickly realized that the ball was too wobbly under her foot and she would need to try another way. This time she held on to the pole with both hands, steadied herself with her leg, leaned over and lifted herself up. She was upright for less than a second, landing on her bottom with a big thump. She looked up unfazed, smiled at me, and immediately tried again. This

time she wedged the ball tightly against the wooden planter and tried to stand up. Still no success. Yveline continued her attempts, trying many different ways to approach this tricky balancing feat, each time she was unsatisfied with the results.

Still determined to find a way to balance, Yveline laid down on the ball, using her arms and legs to steady herself, and then lifted them to balance on the ball for several seconds. She did this over and over again, staying balanced for a longer time with each attempt.

As I watched Yveline, I worried a little about her safety. I didn't think she would be able to accomplish this balancing act, and several times she did fall. Yet, her fierce determination and problem-solving skills won me over. If

Photo by Lonnie Bloom



Deb Curtis has worked as an educator of children and adults for over 30 years. She has co-authored several books with Margie Carter, where she feels grateful to have deepened so many ideas through that process.

she was so sure she could do this, I wanted to support her. I stayed close in case she needed me, and marveled at what she understood about her own body and the physics of balancing. She's only two years old, yet with each attempt she tried ideas that made sense for increasing her stability in relationship to the ball, using the structures around her for support.



keeping herself safe. Children regularly show us what they are capable of and what they need and benefit from. If they are constantly moving, and physically challenging themselves in new ways, it must be fundamental to their lives.

Yet as early childhood teachers, in our attempt to keep children safe and help them learn, we spend a huge part of our days stopping children from moving. Think about it. Is this true for you? How often do you find yourself saying things like this?

"Be careful"

"Slow down"

"No running"

"Use walking feet"

Cultivating the ability to really see children has led me to the strong belief that Yveline was doing what she is capable of doing. She was thinking through her actions and



"Not so high"

"Sit on your bottom on the chair"

"That's too dangerous"

"Line up"

"Stay in your place"

"Sit crisscross applesauce"

In recent years, through observation and study, I've come to understand that stopping children from moving may actually be harming them. Angela Hanscom, in her important book *Balanced and Barefoot*, describes the findings of research this way:

"If children are not given enough natural movement play experiences they are more likely to be clumsy, have difficulty paying attention, trouble controlling their emotions, utilize poor problem-solving methods, and demonstrate difficulties with social interactions. We are consistently seeing sensory motor and cognitive issues pop up in later years because of inadequate opportunities to play and move in the early years." — Angela J. Hanscom (*Balanced and Barefoot*, New Harbinger Publications, 2016)

As teachers, we know a lot about active play and believe that we provide for it. Yet the pressure from more requirements in our programs may be limiting active



play in children's daily lives. School readiness agendas that emphasize sitting and listening to learn, environmental rating scales that focus on requiring specific areas and materials for math, science and literacy, and the heightened attention to safety and risk avoidance, have all led to fewer opportunities for children to be active. Teachers most often work to prevent and stop children from indoor active play, rather than plan for it. And the average amount of time children in child care spend outdoors is often less than 30 minutes a day (Hanscom, 2016) and when they are outside, playgrounds are often void of anything challenging to do.

More is going on when children move their bodies than just staying healthy and getting their wiggles out. Active play, which is an integral part of sensory motor development, actually builds neural pathways necessary for children to focus their eyes and attention, regulate their emotions, and develop the ability to plan and carry out a task. It seems that in slowing children down on behalf of helping them stay safe and learn, we are actually harming their capacity for learning now and in the future.

My practices with children have completely shifted as a result of learning about this research. I've become aware of the connection between brain development and the sensory motor systems at work when children move. Instead of stopping children from moving, I'm finding more ways to invite them to get active, both indoors and outdoors. As I watch them closely, I see children seeking these experiences all of the time!

I have learned that the Vestibular Sense is a complex system located in our inner ear and consists of gravity receptors that detect linear movements, such as running straight or swinging back and forth, and rotary or spinning movements. The vestibular system allows us to know where our body is in space. It helps us to keep our balance and make sure that we are safe in our environment. This system plays a very important role in organizing sensory input in order to have an optimal level of focus and attention. I could see in Yveline's determination to balance on the ball, she was innately seeking to build her vestibular system.

The Proprioceptive Sense provides input and feedback that tells us about movement and body position. Its "receptors" are located within our muscles, joints, ligaments, tendons, and connective tissues. If the proprioceptive sense is not receiving or interpreting input correctly it manifests itself as kids who are clumsy, uncoordinated, and have difficulty performing basic childhood tasks and activities. Yveline was receiving this input as she pulled herself up using the metal pole, when she was using her whole body to roll around on

the ball, and even as she fell, receiving strong input as her body hit the ground.

Yveline's natural interest in moving her body in these ways is ensuring that her brain is developing the connections that will be essential for the rest of her life. I am fiercely passionate about making sure I support children in these efforts and avoid harming them by stopping this critical work.

Whenever I can, I open the door so the children can go outside where active play is more readily available. But I've come to understand that children need places to be active **all day**, not just outside at "recess" time. The research shows that children should have at least three to four hours of active play each day (Hanscom, 2016). This isn't easy, especially in our often small rooms, filled with many other experiences we want to offer. If you already have a large enough space for indoor active play, you are lucky. Our space is small, so I have been intentionally observing the children to see how they move in the room to help me invent new ways for active play indoors. Here are some of the things I have discovered.

Open up the space

I have limited the furniture, shelving, tables, and chairs as much as possible to provide more open space for children to spread out and pursue big ideas, both physically and intellectually. I found that when there is space for children to spread out, lay down, and use bigger body movements they are actually calmer and able to get along better. The research shows that moving actually helps children have more focus and ability to cooperate. I have found this is true from my own informal research in many classrooms. I know this sounds counter-intuitive, but try it yourself and see.



Keep the space and equipment flexible

If you can't eliminate furniture, try to find ways to be able to move it around to open up the space. Use the equipment you have in different ways. Turn a table upside down or put fabric over it so children can crawl in and out and under.

I have used the top of my sensory table to create a platform in a small corner of the room. Just getting up and down off of a platform, in and out of a large crate, or moving hollow blocks around offers movement experiences that help children get the input they need.

I've also created a slide; positioning the top of my sensory table using "no slips" on the hollow blocks. ("No slips" is fabric typically used to keep carpet in place; it also helps keep the blocks and slide from slipping as the children climb)



Hang a rope or a trapeze, an enclosed swing or a pulley from your ceiling. You can make it so these things can be put up when not in use. I've seen several versions of these in different classrooms. It makes such a difference to the energy level of the classroom when children have a place to go to be active. It really does reduce the noise and chaotic movement throughout the rest of the room.

One program I visited has what they call "the jumping couch." The children can use this couch to jump on or off to a pile of pillows.



Photos by Deb Curtis

They share the same results — the room is calmer since they created this ongoing jumping possibility.

Offer loose parts that can be used for active play. Children will invent their own physical challenges if you have loose parts that lend themselves to lifting, building, stretching, climbing, and other movement experiences.



These long shoehorns are a popular tool for stretching and reaching high. Can you see the vestibular and proprioceptive benefit of this kind of movement?

Wood floorboards are lightweight, yet satisfying to carry and build with. Children can create their own challenges if you have these in your block area.

Carpet squares, cushions, and blocks can offer a pathway or obstacle course for moving and jumping.

Boxes and crates offer the possibility for moving by getting in and out, carrying them from place to place, alone or coordinating with a friend.

Find equipment for active movement from companies that sell to occupational and physical therapists. These can be used indoors for lots of sensory motor benefit.

These are just a few ideas I have learned by watching children move. If you really see children, they will show you their competence and the critical importance of active play for their lives.

To help you get started, try observing the children and assessing your own environment for opportunities they have for active play using the questions here. Find your own ways to encourage and support children to move, to move with joy and confidence, and to keep moving for long periods of time each day!

Assess Physical/Motor Play Opportunities in Your Environment

Draw a floor plan of your indoor environment. Label the following elements using the identifying number.

- Put a 1 in all the places where children use their active bodies and large muscles to climb, crawl, push, pull, slide, roll, bounce, hide, throw, up/down, over, in/out.
- Put a 2 in all the places where children can spread out, work with an abundance of materials, and pursue big ideas.
- Put a 3 in all the places where children can feel powerful, independent, and competent.
- Describe the places you've seen children engage in physical/motor experiences that have not been planned for these activities.