

Early movers  
Helping under-5s live active & healthy lives



## 6 Getting children involved



BHF National Centre  
physical activity+health

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# Getting the balance right



## Your role

**To best support children’s learning, you need to carefully consider the balance of activities you set up, and how – and when – to interact and intervene in the activities.**

When you’re planning activities, you need to find the best approach for each child’s particular stage of development. But, you also have to consider other factors. For example, if a child is at the setting all day, they may need a period of free play for some space and independence. On the other hand, a short, structured session teaching a specific skill can benefit a child who’s been struggling to grasp that skill in a group.

There are lots of techniques you can use to help children progress. One of these is to provide a ‘scaffold’. For example, if you’re helping a child to walk and balance along a plank unaided, they may need a guiding hand to give them the confidence to try it. But over time, the child’s grip may lessen until they simply need you to be close by to support them if necessary.

In England, Ofsted state that when they assess the quality of teaching in the Early Years Foundation Stage, they’re looking for ‘a good balance between children making purposeful choices about their activities (child-initiated) that consolidate learning and adults directing (adult led) what they do/teaching specific skills.’  
Ofsted (2012)



Although it's not always easy to get the balance right, we know the best outcomes for children's learning happen when most of the activity in their day is a mixture of:

- child-initiated learning, actively supported by adults
- focused learning, with adults guiding the learning.<sup>2</sup>

As children grow older, shifting the balance towards more adult-led activities will help children prepare for more formal learning as they approach Year One.<sup>3</sup>

**'Often early years practitioners can feel uncertain about how much support to offer and have concerns about providing an appropriate combination of child-initiated and adult-led activities and how best to balance free play and direct teaching in adult-led activities.'**

Department for Children, Schools and families (2009)<sup>2</sup>



## The different types of play

### Unstructured play

Play without adult support.

### Child-initiated play

Adult support for an enabling environment, and sensitive interaction.

### Focused learning

Adult-guided or adult-led, playful experiential activities.

### Highly structured play

Adult-directed, little or no play.

Although either extreme of this range can lead to too little learning, short sessions of structured physical activity can help to improve children's motor skills, and increase the amount and intensity of physical activity that they take part in.

Adapted from 'Learning, Playing and Interacting – Good practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage', DCSF, 2009.

# Developing your skills for encouraging different types of play



## Unstructured play

**This is sometimes called free play and is creative and spontaneous.**

It gives children the freedom to move at their own pace and decide how they'll play, what they'll do and where they'll do it. There are many benefits, but if they're left to their own devices for too long, some children may lose interest in, or find themselves being excluded from, group activities. Also, activities can sometimes quickly break down and lose any positive benefits for them. In these situations, you'll need to get involved to 're-engage' them.

Examples of unstructured physically active play can include:

- free play in playgrounds or other designated areas
- dancing to music, sounds or rhymes
- imaginative play such as role play involving dressing up and/or using props
- rough and tumble play
- children being given access to large and small equipment.



## Child-initiated play

**This is where a child leads their own play with minimal interruption from you, but with you close by, ready to get involved and support them if necessary.**

Child-initiated or child-led play is often spontaneous – and often unpredictable. If a child appears to be getting frustrated, you may need to intervene and demonstrate something, eg, doing up a button, or learning to skip. You may also need to get involved to settle a dispute or challenge a child by prompting them to practise or attempt a skill or activity in a different way. It doesn't make the session 'structured' or 'adult-led' – this type of adult-child interaction is central to how children learn.

For lots of ideas on how to encourage learning through your interaction, you can download Learning, Playing and Interacting. Good practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage at [www.foundationyears.org.uk](http://www.foundationyears.org.uk)



## Focused learning

Here, you start and guide an activity, and then the child takes over. Throughout these activities there'll be lots of interactions between you and the child to help them learn. These can include:

### Prompting or questioning

Regularly 'prompting' children to move in different ways can help to challenge them to try new skills. Prompts or questions could include asking how a child how they could change:

- how their body can move (eg, spin, run, roll)
- where their body can move (eg, different levels
  - reaching up high and getting down low on the floor)
- what their body can do (eg, balance, stretch)
- who they can move with (eg, alone, with a partner, or in a group).

Giving verbal prompts and feedback will help young children improve and learn new skills. Try giving two positives, followed by something to work on, eg, for learning how to balance on one leg – "Wow, what great balance! I love your aeroplane arms! Have another go and see if you can keep your eyes looking ahead as well."



### Demonstrating

One of the ways in which children learn is through observing and copying or imitating actions. So, it's sometimes useful to demonstrate how to use an item of equipment correctly or how to perform a skill, eg, throwing a ball in different ways (underarm, overarm, overhead). If a child appears to be getting frustrated with an activity, you or another child can help by demonstrating it.

### Modelling

Children learn through role modelling, so it's important that children see you participating in activities that they're being encouraged to do. This gives them a 'model' in terms of language, behaviours, skills and/or attitudes to imitate.

When children see you joining in and having fun in the different activities, it'll encourage them to be active too. By getting enthusiastically involved, you'll not only show them how it's played, but that it's enjoyable, and that you value being active. It also shows them how to interact with others in the game and play fairly etc.



### Guided discovery

Children need to explore their own ideas and challenge themselves, and you can help them achieve this through guided discovery.

For example, a guided discovery session for developing movement could cover:

### Different ways of travelling

Ask the children if they can:

- move around a space in any way they like
- change the speed they move at
- find another way of moving
- find a way of moving keeping close to the floor
- use their whole body to move.

### Discovering rolling

Ask the children:

- How many different ways can you make your body roll?
- Can you pick a piece of equipment and practise rolling it? (Items could include: balls, quoits, balloons, hoops, tubes, plastic bottles). Which is your favourite for rolling?
- Can you roll your object, chase it and collect it?
- How do you make it roll faster? Or more slowly?
- Can you roll your object to another child?  
Can you stop it and return it?

### 'I can do' challenges

For lots of ideas for guided discovery sessions, see the 'I can do' challenges in Section 5, on pages 78–79.

### Facilitating

Encourage a child's willingness to learn by creating a positive and caring learning environment. You can do this by:

- gently encouraging a shy, reluctant child to get involved in certain activities
- ensuring boys and girls have equal access to all equipment and activities
- extending children's play by adding props or resources to a game or role play
- guiding children who are dominating a game to include others and share equipment with them.



## Highly structured physical activities

**These generally involve more planning and are led by you. They may take place at set times, have certain rules or need special equipment.**

Structured activities can be useful for teaching young children specific skills. But, it's a good idea to avoid creating an environment that's too highly structured, with too much adult direction and little opportunity for self-discovery.



For more information on developing your skills, you can refer to the various UK Early Years curriculum guidance documents in Section 1, pages 23–24.



## Top tips

- Create environments that support children's exploration and help them to find their own solutions. Setting up open-ended tasks is good for this, eg, building a den out of available materials.
- Recognise the links between a child's physical, cognitive, emotional and social development and organise activities, which cover development across all areas.
- Actively supervise children by paying close attention, anticipating risk and knowing when you need to intervene.
- Plan activities that take account of children's stage of development and meet the requirement of the UK early years curriculums.
- Observe children's responses and interests, to adapt and modify activities to meet individual needs and encourage learning.
- Encourage children to play cooperatively – taking turns, sharing equipment, considering others' feelings.
- Develop children's language by using appropriate movement language when you're demonstrating actions (see Section 5, Appendix ii, pages 99–100).
- Use clear, concise instructions to explain activities, and demonstrate them. Keep eye contact with the children when you're explaining and break activities down into smaller parts to practise first where necessary.
- Encourage independence by letting children select their own equipment and be responsible for returning it to the correct storage place.
- Leave children alone to play when they are fully engaged in an activity.
- Build in repetition, because although you may find repeating the same activity boring, young children love it. It's important to give them time to practise the same activities time and again – it's the way they build up their confidence to move on and try more challenging tasks.
- Be an active role model by joining in and showing children that the activity is fun – children will be encouraged to join in if they see you enjoying it too.
- Praise effort and achievement, encourage and give positive feedback to children on how they're doing.
- Prompt children to try out activities in new and different ways, eg, "You're rolling that ball forwards brilliantly...can you roll it backwards towards you as well?" or "You're riding that trike brilliantly... how about trying to ride it between those lines? I bet you can't ride it around the corner!"





# Including everyone



## The STEP model

**Whether you're working in a baby, toddler or pre-school room, there's likely to be a wide range of abilities and rates of development.**

To ensure that all the children are included and engaged in the activities, it's usually necessary to adjust, adapt and modify the way you set them up. This is a key principle of inclusion and means the focus is on what a young child can do rather than on what they can't.

You can use the STEP model below as a guide to adapt and modify activities to make it easier for children who are having difficulties, and harder to extend and challenge children who are finding them too easy.

When you're setting up activities it may be useful to have more than one person observing. People see different things and may spot where a slight modification can help a particular child that others may not have seen. If this isn't possible, video the activity (with parental consent) and play it back with others to reflect and plan for future activities.

**STEP stands for:**

**Space**

**Task**

**Equipment**

**People**



Space (adjust the space)	Task (make changes to the task/activity)
<p><b>Play area</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Reduce or increase the size of the playing area.</li> <li>– Mark the boundaries of the play area clearly with brightly coloured cones or tape.</li> <li>– Encourage older children to control the play area and devise their own boundaries if they're making up a game.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Distance and/or height</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Increase or decrease the distance a child has to travel during an activity, eg, to collect objects and return.</li> <li>– Increase or decrease the height a child has to stretch to retrieve an object, eg, step/chair or table height.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Spatial awareness</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Use hoops, poly spots or cones as floor markers for children who have difficulty maintaining personal space.</li> <li>– Children can 'wear' a hoop at waist level during travelling games to help define their personal space if they regularly bump into others or objects.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Time</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Lengthen the time allowed to do an activity or remove time limits altogether.</li> </ul>



Equipment (change or modify the equipment)	People (children) (be flexible about the way the children interact with each other)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Raise or lower targets, and move them nearer or further away.</li> <li>– Allow options to send and receive equipment in different ways, eg, a hitting tee, sending chute or catching mitt.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Alter the way children interact in a group activity depending on how it's evolving, eg, allow a game to be child-led but then intervene to encourage a shy child to have a go – "Shall we let Jill see if she can kick the ball too?"</li> </ul>
<p><b>Speed</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Slow down or speed up the pace an object moves through the air by changing the objects or equipment, eg, to slow down throwing and catching activities, use a balloon, then a beanbag before moving onto a ball.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Props or cues to aid understanding</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Using visual or audio cues such as pictures, photos or music can help some children understand an activity better if explaining verbally doesn't work.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Equipment</b></p> <p>Important considerations when you're selecting age-appropriate equipment for children under five years are: size, weight, colour and texture.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <b>Size:</b> Large targets and large striking implements are helpful. Some young children find very large balls difficult to handle (size 4) and smaller balls can be better for small hands. Let children experiment with lots of different sizes and types.</li> <li>– <b>Weight:</b> Lightweight equipment such as plastic bats, lollipop racquets, and nerf balls are easier for young children to handle.</li> <li>– <b>Colour:</b> Brightly coloured equipment promotes visual tracking skills. Selecting colours that contrast with the play environment can be helpful.</li> <li>– <b>Texture:</b> Using equipment with a variety of textures encourages young children to grasp, experiment and play with objects, eg, balls (foam, koosh, beach), balloons, streamers and ribbons, in new ways.</li> </ul>	

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## Including young children with disabilities

**All young children should be encouraged to be physically active to a level that suits their ability.**

Some children may have a disability that affects the development of their large and/or fine motor skills. Regular discussions with the child's parents or carers about your activities can help you modify and organise the ones that are more inclusive for the child.



The Youth Sport Trust's Start to Play inclusive cards can give you lots more ideas. See Section 1, page 21.

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## References

- 1 Ofsted (2012) Subsidiary guidance. Supporting the inspection of maintained schools and academies from January 2012. [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)
- 2 Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009). Learning, Playing and Interacting. Nottingham, DCSF Publications. [www.foundationyears.org.uk](http://www.foundationyears.org.uk)
- 3 Department for Education (2012). Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage. Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five. Department for Education. [www.education.gov.uk](http://www.education.gov.uk)

### Illustrations

Cover – Greg Abbott  
Page 9 – Marta Cerdà Alimbau  
Page 14 – Steven Bonner

### Photography

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### Design and art direction

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