

NEW WRITING

Opinion

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Physical interaction and social engagement – essential ingredients for later learning success

In 2006, UNICEF published a report on the state of child wellbeing in rich countries. Across 6 dimensions assessed in the report (material, educational, health and safety, family and peer relationships, behaviour and risks and subjective wellbeing), the United Kingdom and the USA – two of the wealthiest nations at the time – were in the bottom third of the ranking for 5 out of 6 of the dimensions assessed. Health and Safety was the only dimension on which the UK was ranked in the top third. These findings suggest that neither national wealth nor national health are guarantees of child wellbeing.

The future of every society dwells within its children. When a society ceases to value the role of motherhood and the physical, social and emotional needs of children in

pursuit of materialistic gain, fiscal survival, status or personal gratification, it mortgages not only its own economy but also its own future as a cohesive and caring society.

In the early years a child's social and emotional development is intrinsically bound up with physical experience. Children learn with their bodies before they learn with their minds and the innate process of maturation is dependent on physical interaction with the environment and social engagement with a primary source of love to unfold in healthy ways. A baby's first love is for its mother, expressed in a physical way through symbiosis before birth, the hormones involved in the process of physical separation at birth and long-term physical dependence for many years. Rather than seeking to nurture this vital early relationship, modern child caring, early years' practices and education and taxation policies actively encourage the handing over of child care to secondary care-givers from an early age. In this respect, humans are the only species of mammal that deliberately separate their young from its mother.¹ This has implications for long term emotional and social development (Goddard Blythe, 2008).

Physical development in the early years is also crucial to support higher aspects of cognitive learning in the future. A report released in 2004 and a study published in 2005 showed that in a sample of 672 children in mainstream schools, 48% of 5 – 6 year-olds and 35% of 7 – 9 year-olds still had traces of infant reflexes, which are normally inhibited by the developing brain in the first year of life, together with immature balance, co-ordination and hand-eye co-ordination. There was also a link between immature physical skills and lower performance on measures of educational performance (North Eastern Education and Library Board, Northern Ireland report, 2004, Goddard Blythe, 2005). These findings confirmed in a pilot project carried out in a group of schools in Northumberland last year, showed that in a sample of 55 children in mainstream schools, infant reflexes were still active, and that there was a correlation between retention of infant reflexes and lower reading age compared to chronological age (Marlee R, 2008). Current projects under way in reception classes in North Tyneside suggest that an alarmingly high percentage of children start school in England without the necessary physical skills being in place.

Reflex integration in the first year of life takes place as a result of neurological maturation in combination with physical interaction with the environment. For example, time spent playing on the tummy when awake is important to develop strong neck muscles and head control – a precursor to control of posture, balance and co-ordination later on – and to encourage the development of crawling. Crawling is an important developmental stage because it helps to train balance, proprioception (feedback received from the muscles, tendon and joints) and eye movements to work together at the same visual distance the child will use to read and write a few years later. Free movement (unrestricted by the confines of a baby seat) is important for an infant to develop upper body strength, reaching activities, hand-to-eye and hand-to-foot co-ordination and the ability to roll over. Movement is the primary medium through which sensory integration takes place and proprioceptive experience helps to build an internal map of the body into the brain, so that the child knows where different parts of his body are, even when the eyes are closed. This helps to improve co-ordination, spatial awareness and self-confidence as a direct result of physical operations in space.

Children also need continuous social engagement and conversation throughout the childhood years. Observation of mother and baby interactions in the early weeks carried out by researchers at the University of Edinburgh showed that babies have an innate desire to communicate from a very early age and will copy the facial expressions, rhythms and intonations of speech *if* their attempts at conversation have a receptive audience who listens and responds to them (Trevarthen, 2006). This is one reason why electronic media cannot and should not replace 1:1 interaction with another person. Electronic devices can provide stimulation and entertainment but responses are pre-programmed and stereotyped, they do not adapt to the needs of the child or take an interest in what the child has to say. Increasingly, there is a danger that simple physical play is by-passed as modern equipment and technology makes life easier for busy parents while ignoring the child's need to practise physical skills every day in order to train the brain

INPP, set up in 1975 to research into the effects of immaturity in the central nervous system on learning and behaviour, has developed a physical programme for use in schools (The INPP Test Battery and Developmental Exercise Programme for use in Schools*), which takes children back in time to practise the movements they should have made in the first year(s) of life. This programme has been shown to be effective in improving children's reflex status, physical readiness for learning, behaviour, including consideration towards others, and hand-eye coordination skills.

How much better it would be if children had the opportunity to develop these skills in the pre-school years at the developmentally appropriate time within the context of a nurturing family environment.

¹ Ball, C, 2008. Chairman's introduction to the The Open EYE Policy Seminar, 4th October 2008 BAECE, 136 Cavell Street, London. E1 2JA

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Marlee R, 2008. Interim report on neurological developmental delay research in primary schools in Northumberland. Personal Communication.

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***The INPP Test Battery and Developmental Exercise Programme for use in Schools** – a programme of daily exercises designed to be used in schools with a whole class of children over one academic year – this programme has been the subject of published research (Ref. 3) involving 810 children across schools in the UK. The aim of the programme has been to provide teachers with a method to help them identify physical readiness for learning and a programme of exercises designed to encourage physical readiness in children with problems.

INPP Chester is the international training centre for professionals wishing to use The INPP Method.

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