

SCHOOL READINESS SERIES  
FOR  
PRESCHOOL  
PARENTS

# Building Motor Skills



THE  
**PARENT**  
INSTITUTE®

One of a Series of Booklets for Parents



## Why Is Building Motor Skills So Important?

Every parent knows how active young children can be. So it's hard to believe that they actually need to work on motor skills. But they do! The preschool years are a crucial time in children's development. Children this age are eager to use their bodies—and their bodies are ready to master certain skills. But without your help, your child may not develop the abilities he\* needs.

The motor skills your child learns as a preschooler can affect him for life. A four-year-old who learns how to toss a ball, for example, may have an easier time learning more complicated throwing skills later.

Strong motor skills also help children in many nonathletic areas, such as writing, drawing, tying shoes and getting dressed.

Helping your child develop motor skills isn't complicated. Children already love to move, so the most important thing is to encourage exercises that will help your child learn. This booklet is full of ideas for activities that will encourage learning—and fun!



*\*Every child is unique, so we often use the singular pronoun.*

*We'll alternate using "he/him" and "she/her" throughout this booklet.*

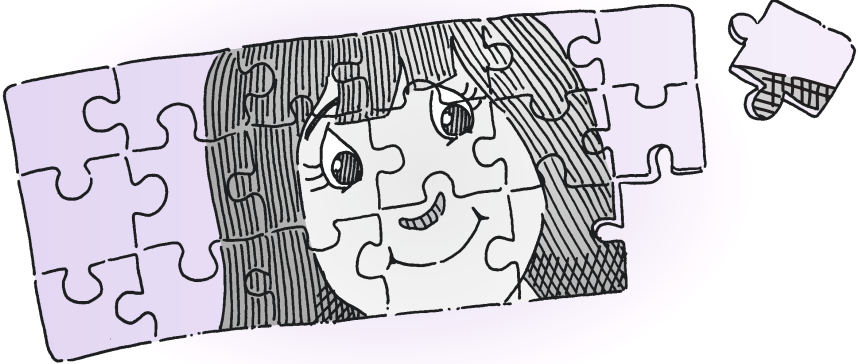
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## How Do Motor Skills Develop?

**M**otor skills are generally separated into two categories—*gross* and *fine*. Gross motor skills require using large muscles, like those in legs and arms. Fine motor skills involve small muscles, like those in fingers. Children usually develop these skills in the same order (most children crawl before they walk, for example), but at different rates. Here are the approximate ages at which a child develops various motor skills:

- **Gross motor skills**

- 3 months - begins to hold head up, grasps for objects.
- 6 months - sits without help, rolls over.
- 1 year - crawls and begins to walk.
- 2 years - walks up stairs without help, begins to jump.
- 3 years - pedals, kicks and throws a ball.
- 4 years - turns a somersault, catches a ball.
- 5 years - runs easily, skips.



- **Fine motor skills**

- 3 months - brings objects to mouth.
- 6 months - picks up cereal and other small objects.
- 1 year - takes objects out of containers.
- 2 years - builds with blocks, holds a pencil or crayon.
- 3 years - assembles simple puzzles.
- 4 years - uses silverware, prints some letters.
- 5 years - uses safety scissors, does 10- to 15-piece puzzles.

## Tips for Teaching About Motor Skills

The ideas in this booklet will work best if you keep the following tips in mind:

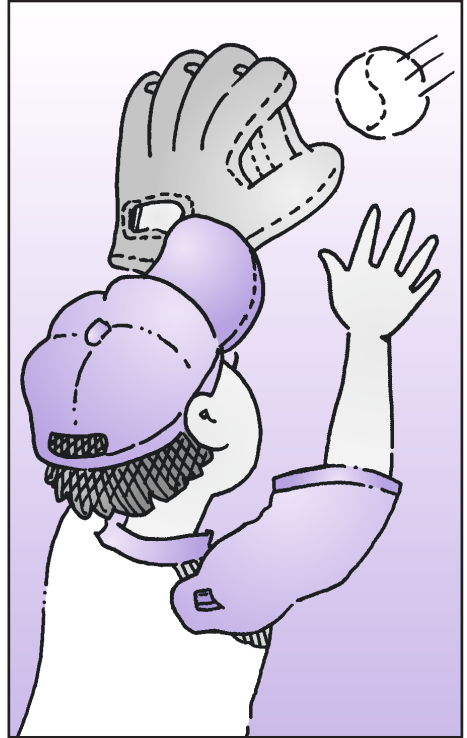
**1. Set goals.** Before beginning an activity, choose a specific goal. For instance, "Today I'm going to help my child learn to throw underhand."

**2. Give brief instructions.** Children have short attention spans, so it's best to keep advice simple. For example, "Watch the ball."

**3. Practice.** Give your child repeated and varied opportunities to practice the same skill. To practice throwing, for example, you might have a bean bag toss one day and play catch the next. This helps prevent boredom.

**4. Take breaks.** Activities that involve motor skills can be tiring. Be sure to keep intense activities short and always make time for rest.

**5. Enjoy yourselves.** Building motor skills should feel like fun, not work, for children. Try to choose activities that match your child's interests. Also, balance structured games with time for free play.



6. **Emphasize self-improvement.** Keep track of how your child's skills improve, not how they compare with other children's abilities. Tell your child that trying counts more than succeeding, winning or losing.
7. **Combine skills.** Find ways to teach your child more than one thing at a time. For instance, she can work on problem solving and motor skills while using an obstacle course. Or she might learn the term "home run" while batting a ball.
8. **Provide freedom.** Make surroundings as safe as possible for your child to explore. The more she can move around without being told "no," the better.
9. **Help your child succeed.** For example, use slow, consistent pitches when throwing to your child.



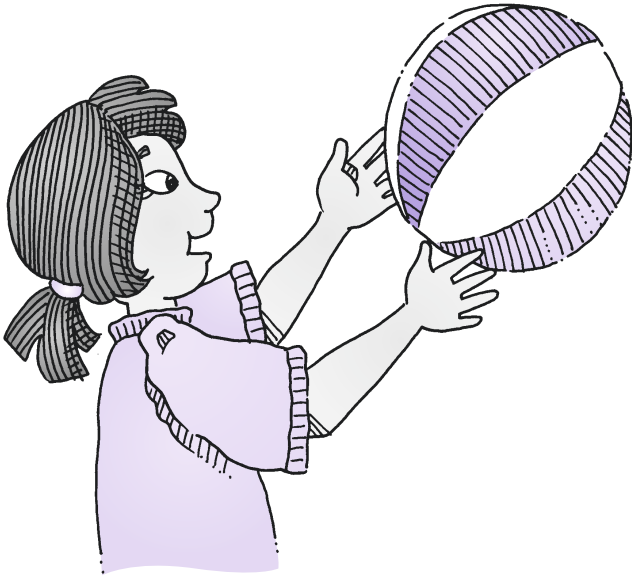
10. **Be positive.** Instead of criticizing mistakes, provide guidance. For example, "Good try! This time see if you can kick the ball a little harder." Remember to praise your child's progress.

# Play Ball!

Playing ball is a good way to build gross motor skills because it involves so many large muscles. It's also helpful because balls can be used with children of all ages and skill levels. Here are some ways to practice ball-related skills:

- **Roll.** Rolling helps babies and toddlers prepare for throwing and catching. Sit on the floor and gently roll a large ball to your child. He'll quickly learn to "catch" it and roll it back to you.
- **Bounce.** After your child masters rolling, have him try bouncing a ball. Show him how and let him practice bouncing to himself or to you.
- **Throw.** Teach your child that the best way to throw is to step forward with the opposite foot. If he throws with his right hand, for example, he should step forward with his left foot. Practice underhand, overhand and sidearm throws. Your child can throw to you, throw into a basket or try to hit a target.





- **Catch.** Bright, colorful objects are easiest for children to see and catch. When tossing to your child, throw the ball gently and in a large arc. Have her catch first while standing still, then while walking or running.
- **Kick.** Tell your child that it helps to keep her eye on the ball until she kicks it. She can practice kicking toes first, or soccer-style, with the inside of her foot. Try using plastic soda bottles as kicking targets.
- **Dribble.** Your child may have gotten the hang of dribbling if she's practiced bouncing. You can help by explaining that dribbling involves tapping, not catching, the ball. Get your child started by helping her dribble with both hands.
- **Hit.** Children can use paddles, rackets and fat plastic bats for hitting balls. Young children should start by hitting large, slow objects, such as balloons or beach balls. As your child's skills improve, she can use a batting tee and smaller balls. You can also toss, bounce or roll balls to her.



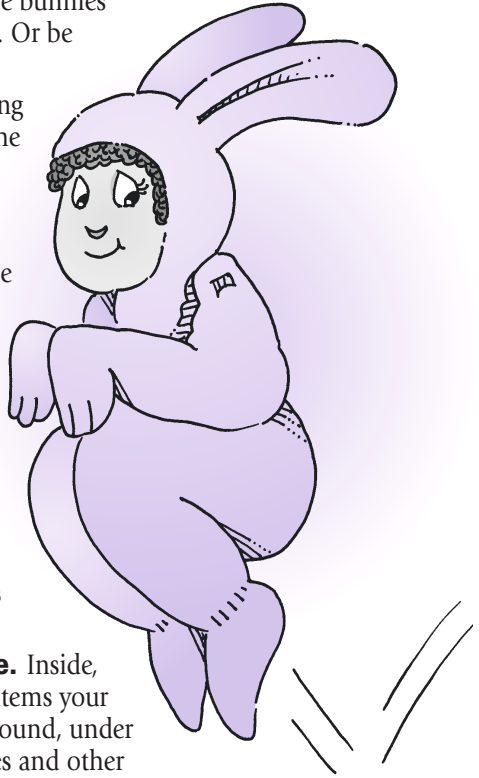
## Children Like Using Large Muscles

There are many other fun ways to practice gross motor skills. In fact, every time your child runs on the playground, goes for a walk or dances to a song, he's using his large muscles. The following activities will also encourage large muscle development:

- **Move** your baby's arms and legs gently while changing him. Once he can crawl, give him plenty of room to move and explore.
- **Help your baby** learn about walking by holding his hands while he balances on his feet. As he gets older, he'll walk while holding on to you or furniture. (Make sure he doesn't lean on unstable objects!)
- **Play traditional games.** Tag, Simon Says, Mother May I and hide-and-seek all build large muscle skills.



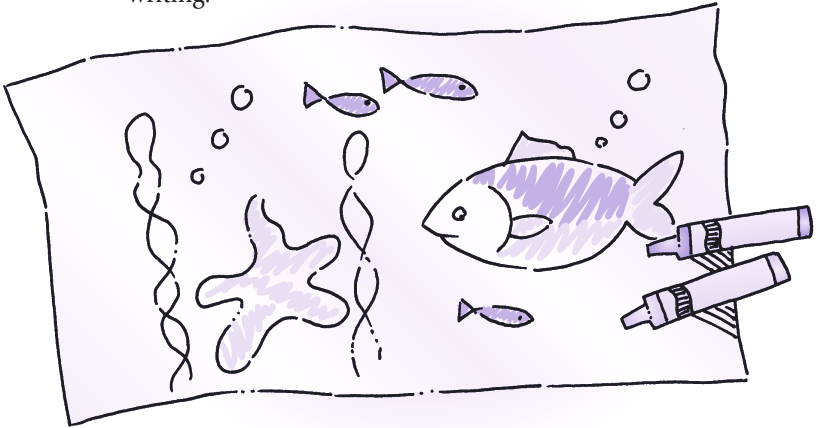
- **Pretend to be animals.** Be bunnies or frogs and practice jumping. Or be birds and flap your “wings.”
- **Practice hopping** by playing hopscotch. Show your child the difference between hopping (on one foot) and jumping (on both feet).
- **Build balance.** Large muscle activities are easier if a child can balance well. Practice this skill by placing a long piece of tape on the floor. Have your child walk on it, placing one foot in front of the other. Or have her balance on her tiptoes or one foot. If that’s too easy, have her switch arm positions while balancing.
- **Make an obstacle course.** Inside, use pillows, chairs and other items your child can safely climb over, around, under and through. Outside, use tires and other playground equipment.
- **Move in different ways to music.** For instance, skip, gallop or move slowly or quickly.
- **Use toys that require movement.** Good examples are large building blocks and tricycles.



## Focus On Fine Motor Skills

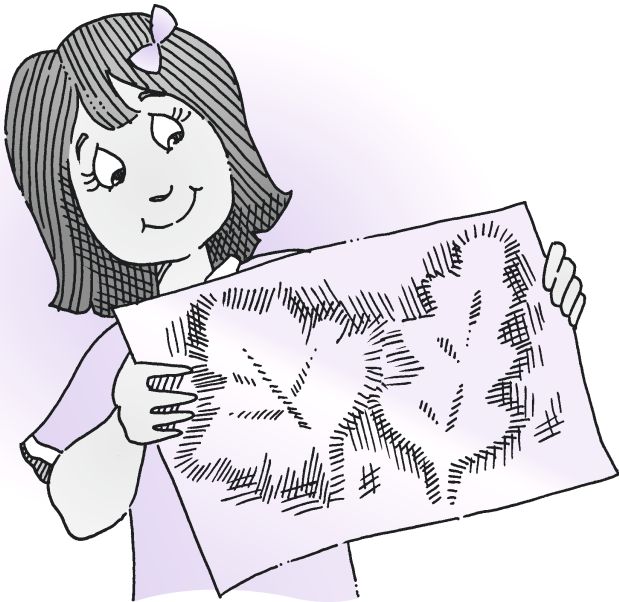
**M**any activities involve both gross and fine motor skills. For example, when you catch a ball, you use large muscles to reach for it and small muscles to grasp it. But small muscles are also used for separate tasks, such as writing and working on art projects. These activities require precision, which develops with practice. Help your child by encouraging him to:

- **Scribble.** Support your child's efforts to scribble and invent letters and words. These are all early forms of writing.



- **Draw.** Give your child plenty of paper, crayons and markers to use. You can suggest themes such as "Let's draw an ocean picture."
- **Copy.** A child who has experience scribbling and drawing may be able to copy various shapes. Have him practice copying lines, circles, squares and triangles. When he's ready, he can copy letters.
- **Sculpt.** Working with clay and play dough is a wonderful way to build finger muscles. You can make your own play dough with three parts flour and one part salt. Add water until the mixture reaches play dough consistency.

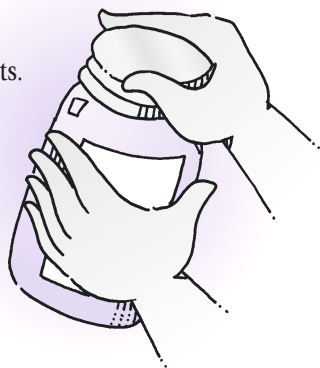
- **Paint.** Your child can experiment with different kinds of painting tools—brushes, sponges, spray bottles and fingers. Here’s another fun way to paint: Draw on a piece of paper with a white candle. Paint over it with colored paint and watch the image made with the candle emerge.
- **Cut.** Draw circles, squares and triangles for your child to cut out with safety scissors. Or let her look through magazines and cut out pictures she likes. She can also cut fabric, string and other materials.
- **Paste.** Suggest that your child glue the things she’s cut onto poster board to make a collage. Pick collage themes, such as “soft things” or “the beach.”
- **String.** Make necklaces or decorations by stringing beads or macaroni on yarn. Tie the ends or stiffen them with glue or nail polish. (You’ll need to help with this.)
- **Rub.** Place a piece of paper over something interesting (a leaf or coin, for example), and help your child rub over the paper with the side of a crayon. Let your child think of other items to rub over.

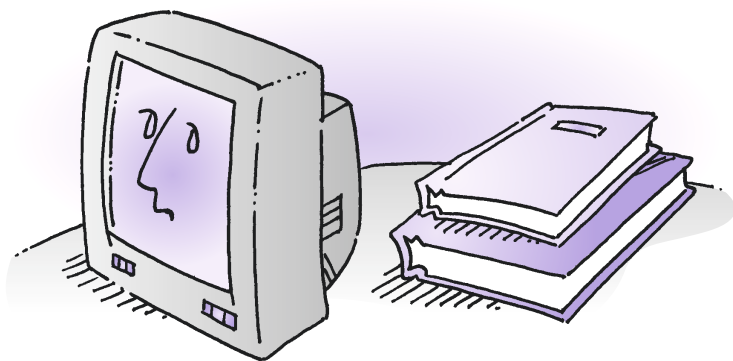


## More Ways to Use Small Muscles

Important everyday skills such as getting dressed and tying shoes also involve small muscles. To prepare your child for these tasks, try these activities:

- **Play “dress up.”** Give your child plenty of clothes and shoes to try on. Include items that will help him practice zipping, buttoning, tying and snapping.
- **Read.** Ask your child to hold the book or help you turn pages.
- **Do puzzles.** Jigsaw puzzles and peg boards help children practice using fine motor skills. At first, use puzzles with only a few pieces. Progress to more complicated puzzles as your child’s skills improve.
- **Play with small toys.** Toy cars and interlocking blocks, for instance, help children learn to manipulate small objects.
- **Do housework.** Gardening, sorting clothes and other household tasks all involve using small muscles. Make chores fun by listening to music while you work or by seeing how quickly you can finish a job together.
- **These activities also build small muscles:**
  - Setting the table.
  - Pouring drinks.
  - Fixing a toy.
  - Making and using finger puppets.
  - Playing cards.
  - Braiding and weaving.
  - Eating finger foods.
  - Twisting the top on or off a jar.
  - Washing hands.





## Less Screen Time Can Mean More Activity

When children watch TV and other screens, they aren't being active. And studies show that too much screen time can hurt a child's performance in school. Use the following ideas to reduce use of electronic devices in your home—and replace screen time with productive mental and physical activities:

- **Avoid using TV as a babysitter.** Instead of letting your child watch when it's convenient for you, plan ahead of time which programs your child will watch. Talk with her about what she'd like to see, and then decide which shows are appropriate.
- **Pass out "TV tickets."** Each should be good for about 30 minutes of parent-approved shows. When the tickets are gone, the TV is turned off for the week. In some families, children can redeem unused tickets for rewards.
- **Put electronics in an out-of-the-way spot.** Convenience is a big reason children use them so much. Experts say a child's room is a bad place for electronics.
- **Talk about screen time.** When your child does watch TV or a tablet, try to watch with her. Discuss what you see and answer her questions. You can also follow shows with active games, such as making up stories about characters and acting them out.

## Questions and Answers

**Q. My child never crawled, but now she's walking by holding on to furniture. Is this normal?**

**A.** Some children skip the crawling stage altogether. Often, the reason is simple: Being upright is just more fun. If you're concerned, talk to your doctor. But don't worry about teaching your child to crawl. Simply encourage the methods she's using to move independently—and marvel at her creativity!


**Q. I'm not very athletic. How can I set a good example for my child?**

**A.** Your child needs to see you enjoying and doing your best at physical activities—not necessarily succeeding. Be sure to include large and small motor exercises in your personal routine (such as walking and writing), and let your child join you when possible.

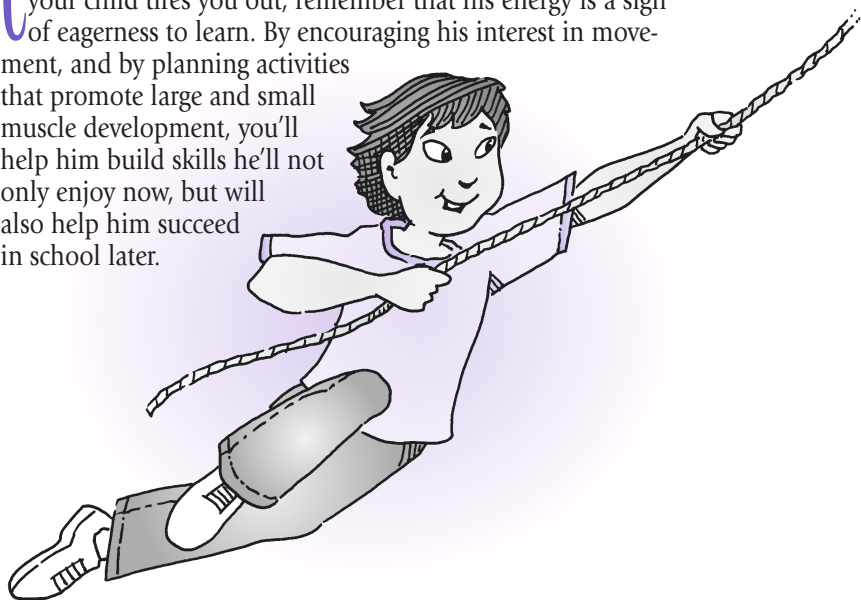
**Q. What motor skills should my child have before entering kindergarten?**

**A.** Here's a checklist of some key motor skills your child should master before kindergarten.

Does your child:	Yes	Not Yet
1. Cut with safety scissors?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Trace basic shapes?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Button shirts, pants, coats and zip up zippers?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Hold a pencil or crayon correctly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Put together a small puzzle?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Run, jump and skip?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Bounce and catch a ball?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



Children are always on the go, and this is good! Next time your child tires you out, remember that his energy is a sign of eagerness to learn. By encouraging his interest in movement, and by planning activities that promote large and small muscle development, you'll help him build skills he'll not only enjoy now, but will also help him succeed in school later.



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