

The ABC's of Movement

Activities for building agility, balance, and coordination

By Jane Hammerslough

WHETHER IT'S A WELL-EXECUTED PIROQUETTE OF some particularly nifty soccer dribbling, witnessing unexpected grace or athleticism in your child is a small gift of parenthood. But while some kids excel naturally at everything from dancing to dodgeball, others require a bit more help developing their agility, balance, and coordination.

So how do you help your kids excel at the ABC's of movement? For many parents, the best place to start is with fun and spontaneous activities that challenge gross motor skills. "From a race along a crack in the sidewalk to a competition over who can balance the longest in one position," says Christopher Judge, a youth sports coach in Croton-on-Hudson, New York, and a father of four, "if it's fun, kids won't even know they're practicing skills."

Game Time Turning a workout into a game is in fact the premise behind a pack of specialty cards created by dad and former Navy SEAL instructor Philip Black of San Diego. The pack, called "FitDeck Jr." (ages 5 to 16; www.fitdeck.com, \$15), depicts 45

SUCCESS STRATEGY

An Exercise in Mirroring Movement

Looking for a fun way to help your child (and yourself) develop more balance and flexibility? Try dance instructor Stacey Bisconti's mirror exercise (see "Family Affair," page 56).



challenges, most of which require a certain amount of coordination, and comes with a booklet describing 90 games kids can play with the deck. On a card called "Tightrope," for instance, kids are asked to balance on one leg, bend over, and touch their toes with the opposite hand. "Allowing kids to take supervised risks so they can feel their own center of gravity helps them develop confidence in their bodies," says Black.

For some families, heading outdoors can offer even more opportunities to challenge balance and agility. Valerie Schmidt of Portland, Connecticut, sets up a backyard obstacle course for her kids that features a seesawlike board across a log — the

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kids walk up one side and, after the board tips, down the other. The obstacles also include a 2 by 4 set as a balance beam across overturned buckets, a pool noodle transformed into a low arch under which her kids must crawl, and lawn chairs supporting a limbo stick.

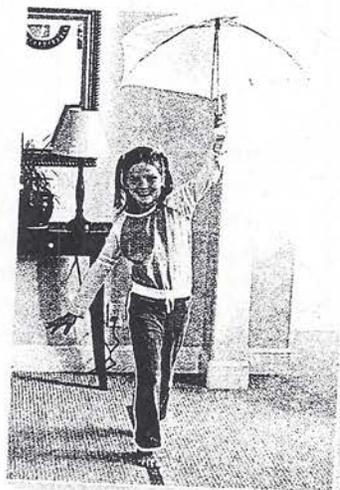
But activities that let your child practice gross motor skills need not be a big production. When Gene Biscontini's 12-year-old son wants to hang out at home with friends, the high-school football coach from Honesdale, Pennsylvania, might suggest, for example, that the kids lie on their backs and compete to see who can toss a ball into the air and catch it in the same hand the most times. Or, to make it more of a challenge, that they touch their noses or clap between throws, or use

Feats That Challenge Gross Motor Skills

Bring the magic of the big top to your home with this series of circus-inspired routines that test agility, balance, and coordination.



The Ringleader Have your kids take turns twirling a hula hoop on one arm. Then have them try spinning hula hoops on both arms. The ultimate challenge: spinning them in opposite directions on both arms at the same time.



Tightrope Walker Use painters' tape to create a tightrope on the floor. Have your kids walk along the tightrope, without stepping off the line, adding an arabesque or even a pirouette to make it more challenging.



Balancing Act Set 2 stacks of 5 or so paperback books at opposite ends of a room. Have your kids take turns walking from one stack to the other, bending down to place a book on their head each time they reach a stack. See who can balance the most books.



Through-the-hoop Rolls If your child can do a forward roll, she can give this variation a try: have her pass through a hula hoop held over carpet or a good-size rug, leading with her hands and completing the roll in a standing position.

• STEALTH HEALTH •

Practice Agility With the Dot Drill

their nondominant hand to do the throwing and catching. "If kids start doing this at a young age," says Biscontini, "it can help them build muscle memory for skills later." (For a fast-stepping agility challenge, see Biscontini's Dot Drill, at right.)

Family Affair But let's face it: kids often need a bit more motivation to get active. For Biscontini's wife, Stacey, a dance instructor, that means looking in the mirror — or more precisely, looking into her "mirror exercise." In a routine adapted from her dance classes, she and her son face each other, arms out, and take turns trying to follow each other's moves. The exercise, which can also be done while sitting, stresses bending and stretching, which encourage balance and flexibility — "the foundation for good motor skills," she says.

For other families, it's role reversal



The Dot Drill is a game high-school football coach Gene Biscontini uses to develop the agility of his players (and his son at home). Participants challenge each other to match step routines. Here's how to play:

Set up the game using painters' tape to mark 4 dots on the floor in the shape of a square, about 2 feet across. Make a fifth dot in the center of the square.

To start, have one person complete a 3-step routine, landing on any of the 5 dots with either foot (or with both feet, on separate dots). The next player must match the routine exactly. If he missteps, he earns a letter (*d*, *o*, or *t*), and his opponent creates another routine. But if he completes the original steps correctly, he gets to create a new routine that's one step longer than before. When a player spells *dot*, he's out. The winner is the last player in the game.

that motivates kids to exercise. Donna Haupt, a physician's associate from Westport, Connecticut, and her husband learn Tae Kwon Do-inspired routines from their 10- and 16-year-old sons. Beyond being fun, playing the role of teacher gives the kids added opportunities to work on their flexibility. Executing Tae Kwon Do moves stretches their muscles and helps their coordination, Haupt says.

In the end, helping kids to see that such exercises can be fun may be as beneficial as helping them become more graceful and coordinated. Because if they enjoy it, chances are they'll want to do it again. Says Philip Black, "Developing skills can become a positive daily habit for lifelong fitness."

Jane Hammerslough, whose upcoming book, Dino Poop (Scholastic), is due out this fall, lives in Westport, Connecticut.

• YOU CAN MAKE IT •

A Homemade Toy That Teaches Coordination

FamilyFun founder and former preschool director Ellen Jovanovich of Loveland, Colorado, created this nifty toy called "bounce board" as a play device for her kids because it's just plain fun, but it's also an excellent way to encourage your hand coordination. Here's how to make your own:

Get a 1 1/2" x 12" x 1/2" wooden board about 1 foot long. Use 3 screws to attach a length of 3/4" x 1/2" x 1/2" wood across the bottom of the board, about a third of the way from one end, as shown. Using a hammer and nail, insert a hole through a large, clean tuna can. Then screw the can to the opposite end of the plank, as shown.

To use the bounce board, put a foam ball in the can. Have your child jump on the opposite end and try to catch the ball as it flies into the air.

