

Getting ready for school

Workshop by Gill Connell

Contrary to what you may think when reading the title to this workshop, there was no mention of pens, paper or reading books. It was all about fundamental movement skills and thinking about ways in which to encourage these in our children so that they have the foundation skills that will enable them to acquire higher learning skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic, as well as adjust well to a structured social environment.

Foundation skills

Gill outlined six foundation skills:

- Movement or motor development
- Memory
- Social skills
- Visual perception (seeing and understanding)
- Auditory development (hearing and understanding)
- Language (knowledge of words).

Key competencies that are important for our children to be able to do are: thinking; using language (including symbols and text); managing self; relating to others; and being able to contribute to a group. The area that Gill concentrated on in her workshop was the area of movement or motor development.

Motor development underpins more complex learning tasks. There are gross motor skills such as climbing trees, walking on curbs/cracks, skipping, ball play and riding a bike or scooter. Then there are fine motor skills which are needed for a child to be able to cut and paste, do jigsaws, use play dough, tie shoe laces and bake. Children need to develop and build on their gross and fine motor skills. They also need to be able to isolate different body parts in order to undertake higher learning tasks such as writing, and playing sport or a musical instrument.

This isolation of different body parts was part of the concept of "midline development". We have three midlines – (1) separating the left and right sides of the body, (2) separating the upper and lower body, and (3) going through the body separating front from back. Gill encouraged us to do activities with our children that would help midline development. By doing this we would help our children

acquire the fundamental movement skills that would lay a great foundation for our children's schooling. The midline development concept was one that Gill focused on in all her workshops.

If a child is having difficulty learning, such as letter and word reversals or challenges in reading or language, one possible contributing factor to this may be 'mixed laterals'. That is, where a child hasn't acquired their fundamental movement skills, they may not be able to isolate different parts of their body. A behavioural optometrist would be able to identify this and help with a remedial programme.

Ideas for outdoor play

Gill gave the following ideas for outdoor equipment. Look around your local playgrounds to see which ones provide this kind of equipment for your children to explore and play on:

- Slide
- Monkey bars
- Hoops
- Rope
- Hut
- Wobble board
- Launch board
- Ladders
- Wedge
- Rocker
- Roper ladder
- Board
- Barrel
- T-beam
- Trapeze bar
- Rebound net-throwing
- Scooters
- Swings
- Hammock
- Parachute
- Boxes to crawl in
- Fireman's pole
- Tunnel
- Mats

Outcomes for outdoor play include:

- Eye-hand coordination
- Eye-foot coordination
- Balance/ vestibular
- Fitness
- Body awareness
- Body rhythm
- Spatial awareness
- Locomotion
- Eye tracking
- Memory
- Fine motor
- Midline (laterality)
- Temporal awareness (distance and timing)
- Physical education skills
- Language
- Problem solving
- Confidence
- Self esteem

What I liked about Gill's message was that we – parents – can do all this with

our kids by going outside, finding a playground or investing in a few things that would fit our backyard environment, and then having fun with our kids. Spending lots of money on equipment is not necessary, nor is spending lots of money on fees for gym etc. Getting along side our children not only helps them develop and build on their skills, but it helps our relationship with them too.

Motor development

Inhibiting primitive reflexes is a natural and important part of progressing to the next stage of motor development. Where infants skip stages, such as bum shufflers not crawling and babies born breech or by caesarean and therefore not pushed their way out of the womb, they may have issues later on with 'mixed laterals'. She did note, however, that as long as baby is on the floor on his/her back where he/she can begin to move and develop early movement skills (which contribute to inhibition of infant primitive reflexes) after birth, then the method of birthing is not usually an issue. She said that it is those babies who are in containers after a Caesar (when they don't use the reflexes) that they may have problems with motor development later on. However, it should be noted that this doesn't mean that all babies that experience this will be affected.

Connell refers to Sally Goddard-Blythe's work. This author has also written about the different kinds of birthing that can have in influence on later movement development in "The Well Balanced Child" and her new book, "What Babies and Children REALLY Need."

Doing exercises that help midline development can help children with their fundamental motor development. For more information on ideas for exercises with children from 0 to 3 years old, you can refer to Gill Connell's book "Moving to Learn". The WMC has bought this book for its library and it is available for borrowing.

Annette Gittos is a member of the Wellington Multiple Birth Club, and mother of a 3½ year old boy and 5 months old fraternal twin girls.