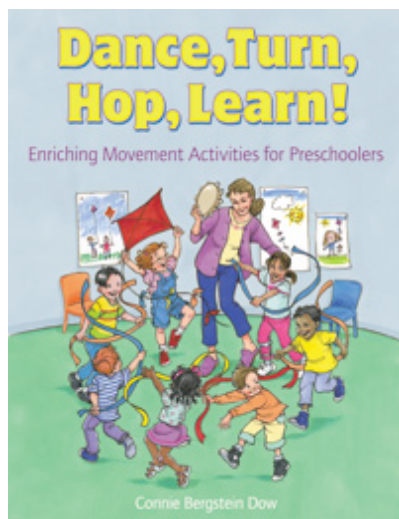


Just Add Movement: Five Activities That Can Turn Squirming into Learning

by Connie Bergstein Dow, author of

Dance, Turn, Hop, Learn! Enriching Movement Activities for Preschoolers



The young children in your care seem to have energy to spare, and you've just finished outdoor playtime. What if you could use children's fidgeting and squirming in a positive way and teach them something new? You can! Using guided movement activities, you can capitalize on the times when children need and want to move, turning those times into teachable moments. For example, through movement you can introduce the concept of opposites. Start by saying, "Everyone fidget and squirm as much as you can while standing in one place. But when I say 'freeze,' everyone do the opposite, and stand as still as possible."

When you finish that activity, try another "opposite." Ask children to squirm in slow motion—even blink in slow motion. Then ask them to squirm as fast as they can.

Anyone who has spent time around young children knows they love to move. Wiggle, squirm, crawl, jump, run, fall, twirl—if the activity involves movement, children want to do it. Usually, it's much harder to persuade children to sit still than it is to get them moving. So why not use movement as a learning tool? You can make what already comes naturally to children into a positive and fun experience by incorporating movement activities into the daily routine. With guided movement activities, children will be engaged in a fun, productive activity that will enhance large-motor skills while helping children learn to control their bodies and develop other body-awareness skills. Just as important, guided movement games can teach new concepts and/or reinforce concepts children have already learned. You'll be pleasantly surprised how easy it is to use movement as a teaching tool. Any short, guided movement session allows children to use excess energy in a positive way, which in turn helps them concentrate on activities that require fine-motor skills.

Here are five activities that can be easily incorporated into a child's day by teachers, child care providers, or parents in a center or home setting:

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Gestures: Have children think of as many gestures as they can. Ask them if they can think of ways to say things with their bodies instead of their voices; for example, by shrugging their shoulders, pointing, shaking or nodding their head, making faces, stomping their feet, or hugging. Ask children to try to have a short conversation using only gestures. If you wish to extend the idea, set a time limit, perhaps fifteen minutes, during which everyone can communicate only with gestures.



Colors: For this activity, you'll need a visual aid such as a box of crayons or a color chart, and some music. Pull out a crayon or point to a color, and then ask children to think of things that are that color. Ask them how the selected color makes them feel. Put on a musical selection and encourage children to make up a dance about the selected color. Repeat this activity using other colors for as long as the children are interested. It's a good idea to have several different musical selections ready, so that you can try to match the feelings mentioned to an appropriate piece of music. For example, if the children say that the color red makes them feel happy or excited, you can play a selection of music that is upbeat. If they say that green makes them feel calm, then play calming environmental or soft music.

Counting: This is a quick game to grab the attention of little ones, and is a good way to get children sitting on the floor for a seated activity. Make sure the children are at least an arm's width apart from each other. Ask them if they can get from standing to sitting in five slow counts, using all five counts to get to the floor. Once they're on the floor, ask them to repeat the activity, this time going from sitting to standing. Then reduce the count to four slow beats, and then three etc. When you get to the "one" count, slow down even more so that the children are falling in a safe, controlled way, catching themselves gently with their hands, and then repeat the single count up and down several times, finishing with the children sitting on the floor.



Footprints: Ask children to imagine they are making footprints in snow or in wet sand as they walk. Prompt them to make different floor patterns, such as circles, rectangles, curves, or figure eights. Then pair up children in groups of two or three, and ask one child to be the leader while the other child or children try to step in the leader's imaginary footprints. Make sure each child has a turn to lead.

Opposites: As in the example at the beginning of this article, ask children to move in opposite ways. For example, high and low, backward and forward, big and little, in and out, right side up and upside down, straight body shape and twisty body shape. If you have enough space for children to move around more, try cold and hot (imagine ice skating or playing in the snow, then running on a blacktop road on a hot summer day), quiet and loud, and straight and crooked (walking a straight path, then a zig-zag path).

Every day, child development experts learn more about the importance of movement. A 2006 Boston Globe article stated, "Doctors may soon have a prescription for health that even children will like: more playtime." The article cites an international study on the benefits of children being active. The benefits include healthier blood pressure, cholesterol, and insulin counts. The experts said, "The study doesn't mean children need to be on treadmills or in soccer leagues; they just need to be able to run around and play physically, even for short bursts of time."

Try any or all five of these activities throughout your child's day and you will be doing exactly what the doctor ordered: adding movement!

References

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Connie Bergstein Dow has more than thirty years of experience performing and teaching dance to young children in the United States and Latin America. She holds an MFA in Dance from the University of Michigan. She is the author of *Dance, Turn, Hop, Learn! Enriching Movement Activities for Preschoolers*.

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