



# Classroom Choreography

## Enhancing Learning Through Movement

Donna Furmanek

*When we think of intellectual activity, we always imagine people sitting still, motionless. But mental development must be connected with movement and be dependent on it.*

—Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*

**B**ECAME INTERESTED IN USING MOVEMENT IN THE classroom based on my dance background. Dance helps release stress and channel energy in constructive and creative ways, and I felt that the children I teach would benefit from movement. However, it was a teachable moment that occurred during kindergarten circle time that revolutionized the way I use movement in the classroom.

Five-year-old Vincent has difficulty staying still during circle time. One afternoon I rhythmically clap and chant, “Sit down, Mr. V; sit down, Mr. V.” Spontaneously, the children join in the chant with bouncy, rhythmic jumping, which has us all laughing and helps the chil-

dren channel their energy constructively. After several minutes, the children, including Vincent, bounce back to their seats. They are now ready to listen. I learn that I can use movement as a tool for guiding children’s behavior. My passion for movement now has a deeper purpose in the classroom.

“Children’s future happiness depends on a rich movement life.” This profound quotation from movement theorist Rudolf Laban (1963, 7) holds true today. Young children move endlessly. They skip, jump, and hop spontaneously to show their feelings. They have a natural tendency to move—what Laban calls *flow*, or the “normal continuation of movement as that of a flowing stream” (Laban 1971, 55). Movement is a natural, inherent tendency in young children.

Research validates what many such theorists taught long ago—movement matters—and linking movement to teaching practices establishes a mind–body connection that enhances children’s learning.

## Research and theory

John Ratey, associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, believes that the way we think, learn, and remember is directly influenced by our movements. Ratey states, “To keep our brain at peak performance, our bodies need to work hard” (2008, 4). Current brain science links physical movement with improved cognition. In a study reported by Scudder et al. (2014), 46 preadolescent children, ages 9 to 10 in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, were tested via neuroelectric measures over a two-day period to record the brain’s response during cognitive engagement. Researchers found that children who exhibited higher aerobic fitness had greater reading achievement scores compared with children who were less fit. At Gratz College in Melrose Park, Pennsylvania, “17 action research designs conducted in 2009 focused on the impact of movement on the teaching and learning process” (Lengel & Kuczala 2010, 22). The overall results of the 17 research projects concluded that movement had a positive effect on learning. In particular, an unpublished action research study by Burr (2009) found that there was a correlation between kinesthetic activities and increased spelling assessment scores in second grade classrooms (Lengel & Kuczala 2010, 22–23).

In 2001 Cindy Hess, a now-retired physical education teacher, developed action-based learning in kindergarten through second grade classrooms at Highland Elementary in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, where students engaged in physical tasks, such as jumping rope and walking on specifically designed rungs of a ladder, while reviewing reading and math concepts. DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills), a set of measures for assessing early literacy skills in grades K–6 administered by reading teachers, showed that reading scores greatly improved with only four students out of 220 not reading at grade level. Hess and Jean Blaydes Madigan, a neurokinesologist, formed the Action Based Learning Lab in 2005 (Blaydes Madigan & Hess 2004). The methods of the lab are based on brain research that supports improved brain function through movement for preschool through second grade (Lengel & Kuczala 2010).

In *Teaching With the Brain in Mind*, Jensen (2005), a former educator and leading trainer of educators in the field of brain-based learning, discusses the strong connections between improved cognition and physical education, movement breaks, and recess for children ages 4 to 12. Jensen lists numerous playful activities that improve cognition, including walking indoors and outdoors, dancing, building

with blocks, exercising aerobically, doing puzzles, engaging in rough and tumble play, running relays, and playing Simon Says, hopscotch, and hide-and-seek. Jensen believes that play, recess, and physical education enhance social skills, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution ability. He states that a variety of movements can improve children’s mental states (Jensen 2005). (Also, see “Integrating the Brain and Body Through Movement” on page 82.)

## It is important that teachers acknowledge children’s efforts and participation more often than noting whether or not children are doing the movement *correctly*.

Attentive teachers can observe “how children reveal their experience through their non-verbal movement repertoire” to better plan “more individualized curricula . . . and build on each child’s strengths” and different learning styles (Tortora 2006, 379). For example, during recess two children leap and twirl while using a Hula-Hoop as an extension of their creative movement play. Based upon this observation, teachers can plan to incorporate props such as ribbons or scarves into a dramatic play area to encourage freely expressive movements “for the pleasure and joy of moving” (412).

This article discusses how teachers can channel children’s natural flow to enhance learning by integrating movement activities throughout the school day. It shares a variety of movement experiences and suggestions of ways teachers can develop their own classroom choreography.

## Why plan movement activities?

Educators can inspire in children a lifelong love of movement. Carefully planned movement activities let children explore a wide range of motion and freedom of expression that can improve their fitness levels and develop their problem-solving skills. For example, during movement activities children learn to follow directions, imitate actions, and move in a variety of ways. They learn body boundaries as they are challenged to stay in their space, jump, bend, and balance in a contained space (Tortora 2006).

Movement helps children recharge during a busy learning day and develop their gross motor skills. It is important, however, that teachers keep movements simple and fun. To feel successful about movement, children need a supportive, noncompetitive environment. For example, when introducing movement activities as a regular part of the curriculum, it is important that teachers acknowledge children’s efforts and participation more often than noting whether or not children are doing the movement *correctly* (Tortora 2006). Teachers can choose movement activities based on children’s developmental stages. For example,

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## Incorporating Movement in the Curriculum

The following are suggestions to get you started. So put on your virtual dance shoes and start moving!

### Spatial awareness and movement

With children standing on their designated carpet spot or behind their own chair, show them how to draw imaginary bubbles, or kinespheres, around their bodies. Suggest they stretch their arms all the way to the edges of their bubbles. Do the same with legs. Now pretend the bubble is shrinking and they must curl up small. Pretend the bubble is growing again and they will reach wide with their arms and legs.

Next, have the children imagine their bubbles are floating lightly through the air. Demonstrate how they can stay in their bubbles by not bumping anyone or anything. If children get into a crowded space, remind them to shrink their bubbles.

Suggest that children in small groups create a bubble dance. Play classical or waltz tempo music to encourage them to move lightly and express themselves creatively while being aware of others' space. Moving to music helps children express themselves and enjoy moving their bodies (Tortora 2006). As children return to their spots, they can sit down and "pop" their bubbles.

### Reading and rhyme and movement

Many stories and rhymes lend themselves to movement. Adding small and large motor movements "increase[s] children's attention, [and] support[s] their learning of verses and prompt recall" (Schickedanz 2008, 57). Children respond well to the rhythms of narratives and verse, which makes for enjoyable reading and movement experiences. Consider using simple movements while chanting rhymes. Begin with an anchoring movement pattern, such as "Sway, sway, sway, sway." Then come in on the steady beat and recite a rhyme such as "Hey, Diddle Diddle" or verses of Bill Martin Jr.'s *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (1967), as children sway from side to side. The swaying movement helps children feel the rhythm of the verse in their bodies and keeps the group focused on learning and performing the rhyme.

*From Head to Toe* (1997), by Eric Carle, invites children to turn their heads like an owl, kick their legs like a donkey, stomp their feet like an elephant, beat their chests like a gorilla, and arch their backs like a cat.

*Owl Moon* (1987), by Jane Yolen, enhances the flow of imagination. Children pause and use their imaginations to listen for the sound of the owl. This activity also challenges their thinking as children visualize (imagine what the owl looks like) to organize their thoughts and understand the story. *Today I Feel Silly and Other Moods That Make My Day* (2007), by Jamie Lee Curtis, is about how we show our feelings. Ask children to practice facial expressions for different moods—happy, grumpy, excited, angry—giving them opportunities to move different facial muscles and become familiar with their own and others' expressions of emotions. This activity helps children be more sensitive to their own and others' feelings.

When learning experiences are coupled with movement, children internalize their learning in a creative and personal way, giving it meaning. For example, the preschoolers and I talked about ways to follow different paths—straight, curvy, and zigzag. We incorporate the story *Rosie's Walk* (1971), by Pat Hutchins, a book about a little hen that moves around the farm encountering different obstacles while being followed by a hungry fox. The children, being Rosie the Hen, skipped in straight lines, jumped in zigzags, and crawled along curvy paths. While introducing alphabet letters one day, I heard a preschooler say, "That letter is zigzag," using the language of movement to describe letters. This teachable moment led to the children sorting letters into curvy, straight, or zigzag shapes.

### Move with the beat—Refocusing children's attention

When children transition from independent activities to whole-group

activities, help them refocus with a steady beat. Tap your knees and invite children to join you. As you tap, say, "Beat, beat, beat, beat," anchoring the rhythm. Tap different body parts and chant, "Feet, feet, feet, feet" or "Shoulders, shoulders, shoulders, shoulders." Using a strong, steady beat enhances body coordination, helps to build classroom cohesiveness, and reinforces names of body parts.

### Moving with objects

Give children scarves, pieces of ribbon, or even newspaper. You don't need to spend a fortune on materials. Newspaper makes different sounds, depending on how you move it. Play some flowing or rhythmic music that inspires children to move freely using their props. Remind them to adjust the size of their individual bubbles while moving. This can be a great way to unwind at the end of the day.

### Center time and free choice activities

Keeping children engaged at center time is both challenging and rewarding. A variety of movement opportunities throughout the day gives children with different learning styles and personalities a chance to try new movement efforts or reinforce familiar ones. Following are demonstrations I use in learning centers to model different movement efforts:

- **Float:** Place light objects, such as ping pong balls, in the water table along with heavier objects that sink, such as golf balls.
- **Punch:** Encourage children to pound, punch, and create with clay or dough.
- **Glide:** Provide paint or shaving cream to let children experience a gliding effect with finger painting.
- **Slash:** Offer large sheets of newspaper for ripping and crepe paper or scarves for waving to encourage creative movement.
- **Dab:** Place paint, sponges, Q-tips, and bingo markers at the easel.

Encourage children to dab on the paint using tools or their fingers.

- **Wring:** Place large sponges at the water table for children to wring, or doll clothing that children can wash and wring.
- **Flick:** Provide a small broom and dustpan to practice cleaning up spills to encourage this flicking action.
- **Press:** Let children explore writing with a variety of tools—crayons, markers, pencils, and chalk—to experience the movement *press*. Using a rolling pin and cookie cutters is another way to experience pressing.

### Walking patterns, math, and driving lessons

Use masking tape to create a large circle on the floor to help children focus while walking in a circle. As they walk, clap or play sticks to a steady beat, such as “1, 2, 3” or “1, 2, 3, 4,” with children synchronizing their steps to the beat. This reinforces children’s counting skills. Count backwards while children walk backwards. To reinforce direction concepts, chant “Left, left, left” or “Right, right, right” as they turn and walk in another direction. Introduce a variety of movements, such as tiptoeing, walking on heels, hopping, or galloping. Suggest that children weave or zigzag around tables and desks. I feel that I am preparing children to be good drivers when I teach directions through movement! To do this outdoors, make the circle with cones or large blocks.

### Resting: A movement inward

Resting brings children to a calm and quiet state, and gives them space to relax. Children can sit or lie down while listening to soothing music or visualizing calming images, such as a gentle breeze blowing against them or pretending to be a melting ice cream cone. Teachers can guide children to feel their breathing—inhaling and exhaling to relax.

### Movement and transitions

Transition time is like getting on and off the expressway. Once you get on, you’re back in the flow. But the

entrance and exit qualities have strong impacts.

**Arrival.** Morning arrival consists of hanging coats, emptying backpacks, hand washing, and general morning greetings. To help children get settled as they sit in a circle, begin with a rhythmic chant. One classroom favorite is “Hickety Pickety Bumblebee, Won’t you say your name for me?” The children pass Hickety Pickety, a stuffed bumblebee, around the circle between each chant until all the children have said their names. We end with, “We’re all here, let’s give a cheer.”

Another chant uses call and response. The teacher begins with a steady beat, tapping fingers on knees. Children follow. The teacher then says her name rhythmically—“Ms.-Smith,” and the children echo, “Ms.-Smith.” Then Carlos, the next child, says, “Car-los,” and the children echo, “Car-los,” then “Su-san-na,” and so on around the circle.

To engage the whole group quickly, develop listening skills, and reinforce patterning, the teacher physically models a snapping and clapping pattern: “Snap, clap, snap, clap.” The catchy rhythm invites children to naturally chime in and imitate the pattern, until the majority of the children are clapping and snapping. To keep their interest, vary the snapping and clapping pattern. In moments, you can have the children’s attention and then tell them about the next activity.

**End of the day.** Play a quiet game with the children at departure time. Choose a child to hold the “quiet puppet,” which can be a small stuffed animal. As the other children rest, the child passes the quiet puppet to a quiet classmate. The child then proceeds to get his coat and backpack, and may then sit back down at the circle or line up. Meanwhile, the second child looks for a quiet classmate to give the quiet puppet to. Continue this procedure

until everyone has had a turn. The last child to have a turn gives the quiet puppet to the teacher. Adding music to this closing ritual can anchor the attention of the children who are still awaiting their turn for the puppet. This activity develops a structured transition, and encourages autonomy and leadership in the children. Densmore and Bauman assert that “a good leader knows how to size up the situation, observe peers, and plan accordingly,” and that “play fosters leadership skills” (2011, 176).



Once all the children are ready to leave, sing or chant your favorite goodbye song with them. We sing and sway to the chant, “We’ll see you all tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow. We’ll see you all tomorrow, we had a great day!” You might choreograph a way for the children to line up, or have children create movements for lining up. Besides being engaging and fun, this activity develops children’s creativity and active listening skills.

**Exiting the classroom.** Remind everyone to stay in their bubble as they quietly float out the door.

## Integrating the Brain and Body Through Movement

Educators can help children unwind, recuperate, and feel more balanced by planning movements that strengthen fundamental movement patterns, or “patterns . . . which our neuromuscular system develops for executing movement sequences” (Hackney 2002, 13). Fundamental movement patterns begin in the mother’s womb and continue developing after birth, such as moving limbs away from the center, then pulling them back into the core, or wiggling the spine from head to tailbone.

Body connectivity, or a sense of coordination and connection between body parts, is developed as our bodies grow from infancy into adulthood. Anne Green Gilbert (2006) developed a series of exercises based on body connectivity patterns, which she calls BrainDance. BrainDance patterns are “based on the developmental movement patterns that babies progress through in building the central nervous system and brain” (Gilbert 2006, 36).

Children benefit from the BrainDance sequence as it uses all of the developmental patterns of connectivity, providing both movement skill and brain development. Integrated movement activities such as BrainDance develop brain cells, stimulate neural connections, create new synaptic connections, and help the brain retain plasticity (Gilbert 2006). The following is a variation of one of Gilbert’s movement sequences. Teachers can model the movements and play music for children to enjoy while they perform these exercises.

- **Breathing:** Begin by breathing in and out. Raise arms overhead on inhaled, and lower arms on exhaled.
- **Core/distal:** Reach arms and legs away from trunk and extend them out to the farthest edges of one’s kinesphere. Jump back to core and curl down into a ball. This can be adapted for children with disabilities by having them reach their arms out to the side while sitting in a chair.
- **Head and tail:** Roll down through the spine like a rag doll, then roll up again. Wiggle the spine in various directions.
- **Upper/lower:** Shake arms up high, then down low. March in place using only the lower body.
- **Body half:** While standing or sitting, open up right arm and leg to the right side, away from the midline, and then return to center. Repeat on the left.
- **Cross lateral:** Alternate crossing hands and arms, one over the other. Then cross the legs, one over the other, across the midline. Now try simultaneously crossing arms and legs. Try crossing them in back of the body (a super challenge!).

infants and toddlers benefit from free flowing explorations. Teachers can encourage many gross motor activities such as rolling, rocking, swinging, and stamping. An obstacle course would be appropriate for a group of preschoolers, who are likely to vary in their developmental levels and attention spans (Tortora 2006).

Educators can integrate movement activities into content areas such as math and science. Simple, repeatable movement sequences such as jump, wiggle, clap, jump, wiggle, clap help children embody patterning concepts. Science vocabulary, such as weather concepts, can be enhanced through movement. Children can dance or act out being “sunny,” “rainy,” or “thunder and lightning.”

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The importance of including movement in the curriculum is supported by early learning standards. For example, the Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards, for ages 3 to kindergarten, set goals and benchmarks in all areas of development, including physical education and health. According to Goal 19, educators must provide opportunities for children to “acquire movement skills and understand concepts needed to explore the environment, support learning, and engage in health-enhancing physical activity” (Illinois State Board of Education 2013, 75). Physical movement “promote[s] and enhance[s] health and well-being through the use of effective communication and decision-making skills” (82). The Illinois State goals are interconnected, recognizing that children develop holistically—socially, emotionally, cognitively, and physically.

## Teachers as classroom choreographers

Effective early childhood teachers are excellent choreographers, planning and managing the day for the children they teach. They provide a variety of learning experiences and activities, shaped to suit young children’s abilities and attention spans and address early learning guidelines. Best practices indicate that young children learn best when teachers construct meaningful, authentic learning experiences (NAEYC 2009). Teachers create a rich, harmonious classroom environment by arranging space for children to move in and by using movement as part of the foundation of learning.

If using movement in the classroom conjures up images of leading ballet, disco, or exhausting physical education routines, don’t worry. You need not be a professional dancer or a movement expert to do so. As a classroom choreographer you can try out new ideas, see what you are comfortable with, and express your creativity. Use movement as the salt and pepper of your curriculum, seasoning your teaching with it whenever you think it will improve children’s learning.



## Using movement in the classroom

Some teachers and administrators may fear that movement activities may get out of control. Indeed, you may have to accept the possibility of a little chaos at first. Children often need to get used to moving freely in and around the classroom. You can establish a few boundaries, for example, decide when movement activities will take place and where your movement space will be. Identify physical boundaries by using traffic cones or tape on the floor. Consider having children move on a designated spot, such as a place on the carpet, or behind a chair. Children can move in interesting pathways around their chairs or tables. Organize music and props. Use start and stop signals, such as ringing a bell to begin movement and dimming lights to end movement. Move between children who talk or shove. Model appropriate behavior to others. Acknowledge children who are looking and listening.

## Conclusion

In many settings, early childhood education is becoming increasingly structured, with emphasis on academic achievement and testing. Using movement activities throughout the day is an effective and enjoyable way to support learning and development. Plan your own classroom choreography, offering developmentally appropriate activities, and keep children engaged through movement. Don't worry if things do not go exactly as planned. Have fun and keep it light. Let your own joy of movement come out. With time, you will achieve a more balanced learning environment.

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