

Around age 3, children enjoy simple movements such as hopping, jumping, and running back and forth, just for the sheer delight of performing them. They are eager to demonstrate how they can run across a room and jump all of 6 inches. The run-and-jump will win no Olympic medals, but for the 3-year-old it brings considerable pride and a sense of accomplishment.

At age 4, children are still enjoying the same kinds of activities, but they have become more adventurous. They scramble over low jungle gyms as they display their athletic prowess. Although they have been able to climb stairs with one foot on each step for some time, they are just beginning to be able to come down the same way.

By age 5, children are even more adventuresome than when they were 4. It is not unusual for self-assured 5-year-olds to perform hair-raising stunts on playground equipment. Five-year-olds also run hard and enjoy races with each other and their parents.

How can early childhood educators support young children's motor development? Young children need to practice skills in order to learn them, so instruction should be followed with ample time for practice (Follari, 2019; Morrison, 2017, 2018). A recent study of 4-year-old girls found that a nine-week motor skill intervention improved the girls' ball skills (Veldman & others, 2017).

There can be long-term negative effects for children who fail to develop basic motor skills (Barnett, Salmon, & Hesketh, 2016; Gorgon, 2018). These children will not be as able to join in group games or participate in sports during their school years and in adulthood. In a recent study, children with a low level of motor competence had a lower motivation for sports participation and had lower global self-worth than their counterparts with a high level of motor competence (Bardid & others, 2018). Another recent study found that higher motor proficiency in preschool was linked to engaging in a higher level of physical activity in adolescence (Venetsanou & Kambas, 2017).

Fine Motor Skills

By the time they turn 3, children have had the ability to pick up the tiniest objects between their thumb and forefinger for some time, but they are still somewhat clumsy at it. Three-year-olds can build surprisingly high block towers, each block placed with intense concentration but often not in a completely straight line. When 3-year-olds play with a simple jigsaw puzzle, they are rather rough in placing the pieces. Even when they recognize the hole a piece fits into, they are not very precise in positioning the piece. They often try to force the piece into the hole or pat it vigorously.

By age 4, children's fine motor coordination has improved substantially and is much more precise. Sometimes 4-year-olds have trouble building high towers with blocks because, in their desire to place each of the blocks perfectly, they may upset those already in the stack. Fine motor coordination continues to improve so that by age 5, hand, arm, and body all move together under better command of the eye. Mere towers no longer interest the 5-year-old, who now wants to build a house or a church, complete with steeple, though adults might still need to be told what each finished project is meant to be.

Nutrition and Exercise

Eating habits are important aspects of development during early childhood (Blake, Munoz, & Volpe, 2019; Thompson & Manore, 2018; Wardlaw, Smith, & Collene, 2018). What children eat affects their skeletal growth, body shape, and susceptibility to disease. Exercise and physical activity are also very important aspects of young children's lives (Powers & Dodd, 2017; Powers & Howley, 2018; Walton-Fisette & Wuest, 2018).

Eating Behavior and Overweight Young Children

Young children's eating behavior is strongly influenced by their caregivers' behavior (Black & others, 2017; Lindsay & others, 2018; Scaglioni & others, 2018; Tan & Holub, 2015). Children's eating behavior improves when caregivers eat with children on a predictable schedule, model eating healthy food, make mealtimes pleasant occasions, and engage in certain feeding styles (Daelmans & others, 2017;