

A parent's guide to ball skills (1 of 3)

Playing ball games advances a range of developmental skills. Penny Tassoni explains how to help children play and learn.



For many of us, our childhood involved playing games with a ball. Balls are versatile playthings: they can be caught, thrown, hit or even dodged. There are also many important developmental skills involved in using a ball.

FIVE THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT BALL SKILLS

1. Vision and perceptual skills

Throwing, catching or kicking a ball is a great way to help children's visual and perceptual skills. **Even babies around eight months old will watch and try to reach out for a ball that is rolled to them.** Catching an oncoming ball requires children to track it, recognise its speed and also to move into a position to receive it. These skills are quite

sophisticated and this is one reason why **children find it harder to catch rather than to throw.**

2. Development of social skills

Ball games help children develop social skills. At first, ball games are very transactional in their nature: an adult passes a ball to the child, who throws or kicks back with varying success. Once children have developed more skills, they start to play with each other. This is a little hit and miss at first, but by about five years old children start to understand the need for rules.

3. Balance and agility

Learning to catch, hit and kick a ball helps children's balance.

This is because these movements require the body to be in an asymmetrical position - that is, standing on one leg while the other one moves, or reaching out with one arm to hit a ball while turning at the same time. It's therefore not surprising that young children often fall over when trying to do these movements.

4. Hand-eye co-ordination

Some movements involving balls support the development of hand-eye co-ordination. To grip a bat and then hit a ball, or catch a ball, children need to be able to focus

on the moving ball and move their hands at the right time.

5. Feelings of power and confidence

Children often enjoy playing with balls because it gives them a sense of power and satisfaction - toddlers smile after they have kicked a ball and older **children often love showing off any ball tricks they have learned.** These positive feelings can help build children's confidence and self-esteem.

DEVELOPMENT OF SKILLS

There are various stages that a child passes through when mastering the skills of throwing, catching and kicking. **Identifying what stage your child is at can help you to understand how best to help them.**

The speed that children pass through the stages varies, but they tend to master throwing more quickly than catching. Many children will be at least five before they reach the final stages.

See next week's issue for these stages...