

Executive Summary

Developmental Movement Play 10-year research project conducted by JABADAO

Final report and recommendations from a 10-year action research project investigating the way the early years sector supports babies and children to be fully physical

With relevance for:

- the wellbeing agenda
 - early years guidance: care, learning and development
 - the physical activity agenda
 - the health & safety and safeguarding agenda
 - dance and arts policy
 - multi-agency partnerships
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Introduction

A group of holiday makers from across Europe are sitting round the pool getting to know each other. "Ola! I'm Alvaro from Spain," says one. "Zdravo! I'm Dinka from Bosnia," says another. "And I'm Darren from England," chips in the lad on the end. They all turn to him. "We know" they say, "we've seen you dance."

Founded in 1985, JABADAO is a national charity which aims to make it possible for people of all ages to live full-bodied, wholehearted lives that make them feel good. The team works in partnership with the education, health and community care sectors, bringing a new perspective to existing aims and strategies.

We are dancers. In a culture that is used to solving problems by starting with the intellect, we start from the body and the 'feeling of life itself'. This ten-year action research project was set up to reveal and articulate the contribution that specialists dancers, working within a social policy framework, can make to 'change for children'.

The project began in response to a perceived lack of confidence amongst early years practitioners about supporting movement activities with babies and young children. It has been supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and Arts Council England throughout. The total investment to date, both from subsidy and JABADAO's own resources, has been £689,000.

The research was carried out in four phases.

- 1998 - 2000: Consultation in over 1,000 workshops across the country
- 2000 -2002: Development of a new approach and training
- 2002 - 2005: Research Cycle One testing the approach with 14 research partner settings
- 2007-2009: Research Cycle Two testing the approach again with 12 more settings

Initial consultation

The key themes from the consultation are still relevant ten years on:

- in a prevailing culture that militates against free and enthusiastic involvement in spontaneous movement, practitioners' attitudes to children's movement are heavily influenced by their own, often unspoken, discomfort with spontaneous, expressive movement
- many responses to children's movement are based on habit and assumption, rather than clearly debated policy within a team
- practitioners lack a coherent theoretical understanding about links between movement and learning and feel little ownership over the methods they use to develop movement work. This substantially limits their creativity and enthusiasm
- practitioners often feel anxious about supporting children's spontaneous movement play because of safety, safeguarding, noise and classroom management issues, and because parents might not see movement play as 'real' learning
- practitioners generally control movement activities very tightly, especially indoors, and often more tightly than any other area of the curriculum

The result is that children's choices about how they want to move are often ignored, sidelined and undervalued. This has a significant effect on the way they come to feel about, and engage with, their physicality throughout their lives.

A new approach and training

To address the findings of the consultation, JABADAO researched and developed a totally new approach, combining developmental movement theory with a play-based, child-led movement approach drawing on our specialism as dancers. We named it Developmental Movement Play (DMP).¹

This approach aimed to give practitioners the motivation and confidence to support children's full-bodied, wholehearted physical responses to the whole of their lives. It is not just a PE programme.

The approach is based on three key elements:

- simple theory linking movement, learning, development and wellbeing, including a 'five-ways of moving' framework emphasising early developmental movement
- a specific movement practice making spontaneous, play-based movement as comfortable for adults, as it is for babies and young children
- close links with Early Years curriculum guidance

Gathering evidence

Between 2002 and 2009, 26 early years settings (research settings), represented by eighty-one early years practitioners (research partners), joined the JABADAO team to test the approach in two cycles. They began by participating in the new DMP course, made changes in their practice and then gathered evidence about those changes over a 26 month period. The evidence draws on the experience of 50,640 movement sessions, or 55,367 child-involvement sessions.

Alongside the main research cycles evidence was also gathered from over 1,000 practitioners involved in the DMP training programme, or in linked DMP projects in Kirklees and Cornwall.

¹ This has since started to be used as a generic term rather than the name of this specific approach

Research partners used a range of tools to gather evidence including case studies, individual action research projects, sensory motor checklists, questionnaires, structured individual interviews, group discussions, photographs, film and 'beautiful books' - scrapbooks containing anything research partners wanted to collect. A substantial body of anecdotal evidence was also amassed by asking early years practitioners the same questions over the ten year period.

Evidence gathering was supported by a JABADAO research coordinator. Data was analysed and written up in two full reports. There is a high level of consistency between the two cycles.

The Evidence - Outcomes

Early Years Practitioners: confidence, understanding and attitude

100% of the research partners and newly trained practitioners have reported increased and now high levels of confidence in supporting children's movement play both indoors and out, following training in this approach. This training is successful for both reluctant and eager participants, and for practitioners with all levels of experience and training.

Research partners' awareness of the significance of movement play in learning, development and wellbeing changed significantly; they now value and support different kinds of movement play. They have a new capacity to move with children in their settings - in spontaneous ways as well as in more formal structures - and have a new pleasure in supporting children's movement. In all the research partner settings, movement is now seen as an underpinning for all development and learning, rather than just Physical Development. The average score for 'usefulness' of the course is 9.2 out of 10 - scored by over one thousand practitioners attending the DMP course between 2002 and March 2008.

Provision: environments, resources, experiences

Environments

Both research groups have increased the amount of movement play taking place indoors. Cycle Two partners reported a shift from 35% to 60%. (This was additional movement, not simply a change of location.) All but one setting have created at least one new indoor movement area - a place where children can move freely as they choose. The nature of these areas has varied greatly, from elaborately fitted out rooms to a single, dedicated mat. Practitioners in both research groups have removed tables to make more space for movement and moved activities off tables and onto the floor, providing more opportunity for children to be involved in developmentally significant movement on their backs and tummies, bellycrawling and crawling. Cycle Two partners have also used the DMP approach to shape and influence outdoor provision.

Resources

All settings have acquired new resources to support movement play in both the indoor and outdoor environment. Often, their choice has been supported by an audit using the DMP five-ways of moving framework, to assess gaps in existing provision. This audit has also enabled practitioners to use existing equipment in new ways.

Experiences

Children in all the settings now have more opportunities for spontaneous movement play, as well as more adult-led and adult-initiated movement activities. There has been a significant change in the value given to spontaneous movement as practitioners are now more physical themselves, both modelling and joining in more with children. Children

have received different messages from adults about their spontaneous movement play, and about their physicality, and as a result, are engaged more in movement of their choosing, rather than movement directed by adults. Practitioners have felt that their relationships with children were substantially enhanced by their new involvement in movement play.

Parents as Partners

Both research groups have valued the involvement of parents in movement play activities. They used many methods to engage interest. Increased knowledge about the significance of movement play enabled them to engage parents in new conversations about their children's movement. All settings have created new resources for parents - leaflets, posters and photo displays. Practitioners have a great willingness to organise family movement play groups. They caution, however, that this is often the aspect of the work for which they need the greatest support from specialists.

Changing Practice: planning and curriculum development

All research partners have spoken about new movement play activities being an important aspect of their curriculum now, with movement work routinely embedded within their planning. Some have created special planning sheets for the purpose. Planning includes continuous provision, small group work and one to one activities. All settings use more movement observation to inform planning. Some Cycle One settings made explicit links with the Birth to Three Matters and Foundation Stage curriculum; all Cycle Two settings link DMP with the Early Years Foundation Stage requirements.

The Cycle One special school setting spoke about gaining the confidence to include this kind of movement assessment in IEPs as well as the broad curriculum. The Cycle Two special school now timetable DMP sessions and estimate that one group of children are now involved in an additional 3 hours and 20 minutes of movement activity as a result.

Changing Practice: supporting quality and sustainability

Evidence drawn from the Kirklees three-year associate project

Where commitment is present at manager level from the start and throughout, the subsequent, informed support for project practitioners plays an important part in the development of sustained new opportunities for children. Practice changes faster and with greater depth when there is a greater number of trained early years practitioners in a setting. Where there is just one trained practitioner the work is unsustainable. Children's movement play is better supported when other staff in a setting are also aware of the theory and practice of DMP; and opportunities for involvement in movement play improves when practitioners are able to share practice, concerns and ideas with each other and with specialist dancers.

The Evidence - Impact

Impact on children's physicality

Children have been involved in markedly more physical activity in all the research partner settings, with the increase relative to the nature of the provision (part time / full time / continuous provision or sessional). Opportunities have also increased at home when parents were involved.

In both cycles, given expanded opportunities for child-led movement play - and freer choice - children chose to engage in 'spin-tip-roll-fall' play most frequently and in 'push-pull-stretch-hang-buffet about' as the second most frequent activity.

Cycle 2 partners also monitored levels of involvement² in addition to frequency of engagement. Again, children showed highest involvement in 'spin-tip-roll-fall' play; with 'push-pull-stretch-hang-buffet about' play coming a second.

Children showed least involvement in bellycrawling - a movement activity that is considered to be significant within developmental movement theory. In Cycle One, active support from early years partners didn't make a significant difference to the amount of bellycrawling children engaged in. However, in Cycle Two, bellycrawling increased by 34.8% with active support.

Impact on children's learning and development

Learning environment

Research partners found that children are more involved in their learning when they are on the floor, rather than at tables. When children are free to arrange their bodies as they wish in story time, (rather than 'sit up, sit still'), research partners found that children focus just as well and there are fewer disruptions from children who find sitting still a challenge. Their conclusion was that children learn just as well, and sometimes better, when adults control their bodies less; that this way, they have increased opportunities for developmentally significant movement as they learn.

Six areas of the EYFS

Cycle Two partners recorded involvement and learning in all six areas of the EYFS during movement play. They reported increased involvement in Creative Development through the detailed data they returned; anecdotally, they stressed a significant increased involvement in CLLD, especially for boys.

Social and emotional development

Research partners noted a significant effect on children's social and emotional learning. They were exceedingly enthusiastic about the value of supporting 'children's first language - movement' and the effect this had on social involvement for the youngest children, for children with additional needs and those with autism.

Communication, Language and Literacy

Practitioners across both cycles cited language development as an example of benefit, plus increased support for self-expression using movement as a child's first language. Research partners, and allied speech and language therapists, noticed that, for a significant number of children, speech and language seemed to improve in conjunction with involvement in movement play. Cycle 2 were emphatic about the contribution that DMP has to make to the Communication, Language and Literacy Development, especially for children with language barriers or challenges.

Autonomous learners

Anecdotally research partners observed an increase in autonomous learning which they attributed, in large part, to the new DMP opportunities. They reported children's increased confidence and self-esteem affecting all areas of learning. One case study, following a group of children from nursery to school, compared scores with the previous year's cohort, a similar mix of children. The Reception teacher asked the

² Using the Leuven Involvement Scale as a guide for observations

Children's Centre 'what they had done differently' as this group showed enhanced scores in almost every area, plus a greater capacity for autonomous learning.

Physical Development

Practitioners' initial reason for learning about DMP is generally to enhance the Physical Development area of their provision. Research partners agreed that children become more physically confident when they are more able to choose their own ways of moving; and that most (but not all) children are more able to risk assess for themselves than adults generally allow. However, after they had become immersed in the DMP approach, all research partners felt that PSE and CLLD were the most significant areas of benefit.

There is a significant discrepancy between the quantitative data we have gathered and the anecdotal evidence of practitioners. We feel that we have not yet found the most useful ways to gather quantitative data to reflect the value of DMP as witnessed by early years practitioners. The large amount of anecdotal evidence we have gathered over seven years is hugely positive. The quantitative data as a whole does not reflect the extremely positive benefits for CLLD or PSE. We discussed the mismatch between raw data and practitioner observations with Cycle 2 research partners, searching for any reasons we could find for the discrepancy. No one issue seemed to sway the evidence. Further detailed, long-term research is needed to support future understanding about the links between movement play and the six areas of learning - and in particular a series of long term case studies and an impact study over one whole authority.

Impact on wellbeing

The most significant evidence returned by research partners was on children's levels of wellbeing. Detailed evidence is taken from Cycle 2 research partners who observed children in 42 case studies in both general activities and in specific movement play activities.

Children show increased levels of wellbeing in all seven areas of the Laevers wellbeing scale when they are involved in movement play, varying from a 13% increase in 'openness and receptivity to others and the environment', to 78% in 'being in touch with oneself'.

The three areas which score lowest in general observations, show the largest percentage increase in movement play. 'Being in touch with oneself' showed a 78% increase in 'high' and 'very high' wellbeing scores; 'relaxation and inner peace' showed a 38% increase and 'self-confidence and self-esteem' a 50% increase on the same basis.

Learning environment

Research partners and other practitioners report that the atmosphere in the classroom / setting is calmer when children have access to a free choice movement area for at least some of the time. They also report that a movement area does not distract children engaged in other activities in the classroom or nursery.

Health and safety

Fewer accidents have been reported when children have expanded opportunities for child-led movement play from an early age.

Conclusions

1. Increased access to spontaneous movement play has substantial benefits for children's wellbeing. Children who are supported to learn on the move are more involved in their learning, communicate more, are more confident and more in touch with themselves.
2. The level of enthusiasm amongst practitioners for DMP is exceptionally high. This approach is already making a significant impact across the early years sector and will continue to do so.
3. Without this new understanding, adults restrict babies' and children's movement in many ways and give subtle and unconscious messages about what is and isn't valued. They often stop children from moving as they are naturally prompted to do and then tell them how to move instead. This significantly effects how children feel about, and engage with, their physicality as they grow up, undermining efforts to reduce sedentary lifestyles.
4. Developmental Movement Play is a valuable, tested and well-evidenced way of supporting greater use of spontaneous movement play for children and families. It is successful because it provides new insight about the significance of movement play, and also because it starts by addressing the unhelpful, society-wide, discomfort that many adults feel about their own involvement in spontaneous movement.
5. The DMP approach and training supports real and lasting culture change within early years settings, giving children more opportunities to move in ways that will support their learning, development and wellbeing in future.
6. The nature, extent and quality of the change in settings it is heavily influence by the number of staff trained, the involvement of the manager from the outset, and the awareness other staff members have about the DMP approach.
7. Families are essential and eager partners in creating change.
8. Babies and young children need to learn and develop *on the move*. This needs to be better acknowledged and supported by curriculum guidance, workforce training and CPD.
9. Including movement play in the indoor environment reduces disruptive behaviour and accidents.
10. DMP is of particular significance for children with borderline developmental delays which affect their capacity to fulfil their potential.
11. Change is sustainable and effective when practitioners are supported by managers, advisors and specialists, and when the whole team is involved in new understanding.
12. DMP is a unique and new contribution from specialist dancers working within a social policy framework. For this contribution to grow, the unique specialism needs to be maintained at the core of future training and CPD.
13. The development of quality practice needs to be underpinned by quality assurance measures, including, articulation of a clear purpose, aim, theory and practice by JABADAO and those using the approach; establishment of an ongoing, high quality programme of training for key practitioners and supporting staff; the means to share learning amongst practitioners nationally; a clearly defined role for education advisors working in partnership with specialist dancers; a national programme of CPD to support trained practitioners and specialist support for local authority teams to focus periodic reflection on developing practice in their area.