Balance Skills

Introduction

Balance is the ability to adjust and control body movement during everyday activities such as sitting, walking, dressing and riding a bike. Static balance refers to the ability to maintain an upright position such as standing on one leg while dynamic balance refers to the ability to maintain balance while moving such as hopping or skipping. Children develop balance skills from an early age, for example obtaining and maintaining head control, moving against gravity and the ability to adjust movement. The development of muscle strength, core stability, sensory awareness and movement reactions are also important factors in the development of good balance.

Some children cannot process information from certain movements (e.g. car movement and playground activities) and may find this frightening or even nauseating. It is very important not to force a child who cannot tolerate these activities into carrying them out. Children with poor balance may appear to rush, this can be as a consequence of the increased effort it takes for them to balance which can also result in their ability to attend to a task being reduced.

Children with poor balance should be encouraged to practice skills within a safe environment. Initially they may need some physical support and/or prompting to obtain and maintain postures which will increase their balance skills.

If you feel that a child's balance is very poor do not have them balancing on items off the ground.

Below are some activities which will encourage good balance.

1. **Weight-bearing, pushing and carrying.** These activities stimulate large muscle groups.
   - **Playing Statues** - Ask the child to kneel on all fours and stay as still as possible whilst someone else tries to gently move them.
   - **Twister** - See how long the child can play this game before they fall over.
   - **Crawling races** - Try racing short distances on all fours, increasing the distances with practice. To increase the challenge try doing wheelbarrow races

2. **Dynamic balance.** These activities encourage the child to maintain postural control whilst moving.
   - **Walking** - Encourage the child to walk toe to heel forwards then backwards in as straight a line as possible.
     Try balancing a beanbag on the child’s head whilst they do this.
     Get the child to walk on an inflated lilo, squaishy mat or soft mattress.
     The child could try this with their eyes closed to increase the challenge.

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Balance skill activities – Advice Sheet

**Jumping/Hopping** - Practise hopping with the child. First get the child to hold onto the back of a chair with two hands, then one hand, then one finger, finally removing the chair. Try hopping in different directions and using different legs. Hopping can be incorporated into playing hopscotch.

**Stepping stones** - Make a route along the floor using coloured shapes, hoops or quoits. Get the child to walk along the route stepping onto the markers or into the hoops. Vary the distances and directions of the stepping targets. Encourage the child to walk on different parts of their feet – toes, heels, insides and outsides.

3. **Postural Adjustment**. These activities require the child to respond to changes in the environment that lead to a shift in body position.

**Ball Rolling** - Roll a ball towards the child and encourage them to stop it by placing a foot on top of the ball.

**Throw/catch** - With the child in an upright kneeling position, encourage the child to catch and throw a ball or beanbag to you. You could also try this with the child standing with one foot balancing on a box.

As the child’s balance skills improve and they become more confident the complexity of the tasks can be increased and made more challenging.

**Leisure Activities which promote balance skills**

- Swimming
- Horse-riding
- Bike-riding
- Tae Kwon do/Judo/Karate
- Trampolining
- Dancing

**Useful websites**

Perth - [www.liveactive.co.uk](http://www.liveactive.co.uk)

Dundee - [www.leisureandculturedundee.com](http://www.leisureandculturedundee.com)


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