



Good Balance Is Important For All Children

by Sue McLaren | Gross Motor Skills | 2 comments



Balance is the ability to maintain control over the body and is an important skill in everyday tasks such as walking, sitting, dressing, or riding a bike.

Balance begins to develop in infancy. The child first learns to maintain control over their head, then as core strength develops they can maintain sitting, standing and finally walking balance.

However, as with most skills – if we don't continue to practice the skill, we lose it.

We know that many children are not getting the recommended amount of **Physical Activity** each day. For 3–5-year-olds this is 3 hours per day. Reduced PA means less time to practice important skills.

Can balance affect development?

Children who do not have good balance are at a much greater risk of injury. They may stumble and fall as they seek to move quickly without the necessary skills of recovery.

Children who have poor balance are more likely to find it difficult to sit still and pay attention. Lack of balance may present with fidgety, restless behaviour and an inability to maintain focus and concentration. This obviously has a big impact on learning.

In contrast, a child who has good balance skills has a calmer vestibular system. This in turn allows the brain to focus and concentrate on other things.

When we challenge a child's balance – we are asking them to slow down, to focus and become aware of their surroundings and where their body is in space. To think ahead and plan their movements.

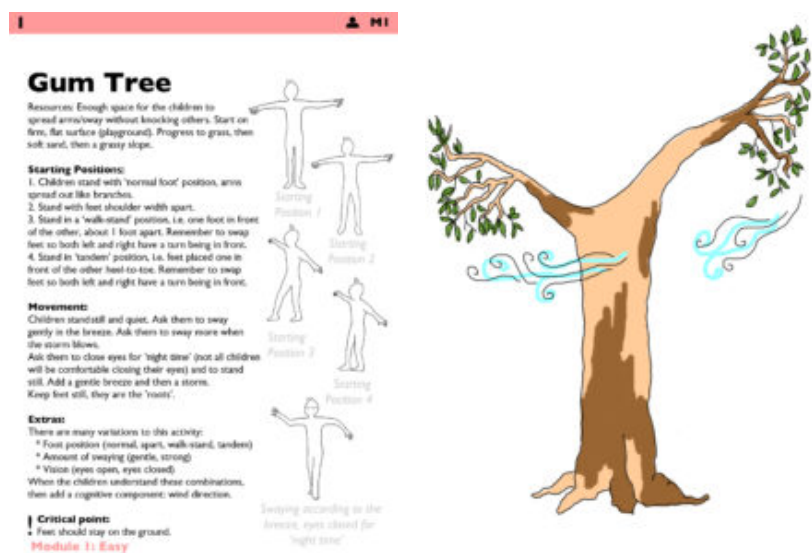
We often hear how important hand-eye coordination is for development of fine motor tasks such as handwriting. In fact, foot-eye coordination is an important precursor to hand-eye coordination. This skill allows children to move confidently without stumbling. It also helps to develop the balance required to be able to negotiate stairs, step over or around obstacles and to kick a ball.

What is Static and Dynamic Balance?

Having well developed static and dynamic balance are the building blocks for other gross motor skills. Locomotion skills (**hopping, jumping, skipping**) and object control skills (throwing, catching, **kicking**) all require balance. Static balance is the ability to maintain balance when standing still.

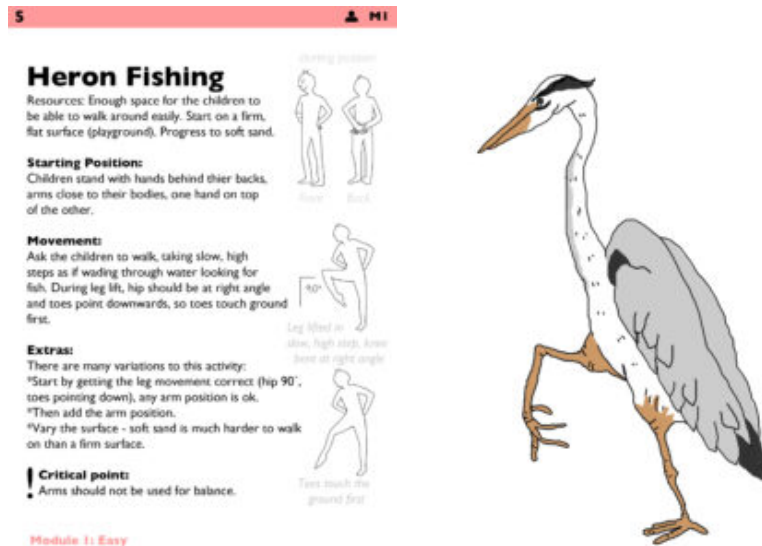
In the Animal Fun program, we pretend to be big, tall trees, with feet stationary (roots hold us strong to the ground), straight tall trunk and high branches (arms above head). Then we pretend it is a wild stormy day – the wind means our branches move but our feet stay still. As we move our arms outside of our centre of gravity, we are challenging our static balance skills. We can also challenge our balance by closing our eyes and pretending that it is night time.

Ideas for extending this activity include using different musical instruments to represent each of the different weather conditions: I use a Thunder Tube for stormy day – or you could use drums, a Rain stick or soft bells for a Gentle Breeze and a Triangle or Gong for Night time. This adds a cognitive load to the activity, as children need to use their listening skills and working memory to match the correct movement to the sound.



Dynamic Balance is the ability to maintain balance when the body is moving. Slowing a movement down requires greater degrees of control and balance.

Heron Fishing requires high knee lifts as the children imagine they are a Heron wading through water while maintaining balance on the opposite leg. As the children bend forward to “catch” a fish they are activating their vestibular systems. You can increase the challenge by asking them to try bending forward while balancing on just one leg. I like to do this activity in a sand pit and pretend that it is a big lake. I bury some colourful pegs or other small objects just under the surface of the sand, so children are feeling with their feet for the “fish”. When they feel a “fish” they bend over slowly to catch it.



Other Animal Fun activities that promote balance:

Rocking Starfish – make it a game of musical statues. Freeze when the music stops. For young children freezing with both feet on the ground is sufficient. For older children, try freezing on a tilt with only one foot grounded. Now they are really working those muscles and balance skills!

Prancing Horses: Slow, controlled locomotion movement. High knee lift, upright posture. Imagine you are a very elegant horse, parading around the ring.

Pencil Pine: Narrow base of support as feet are together. Strong upper body work which promotes shoulder strength and stability.

Forest: Pretend to be a dense forest of trees. Allocate each child a particular variety of tree depending on their ability. Children who have poorer balance or upper body strength might be old growth trees with wide legs and low arms.

Meerkat: Up on tip toes looking out for those dangerous leopards and tigers! Introduce some masks and puppets to make the play come alive.



Obstacle courses often include elements of balance. Why not allow the children to build their own course? Provide them with a whole range of elements: balance beams, climbing frames, hoops, stepping stones, branches, logs, bean bags and mats. This type of activity also promotes social skills and problem

solving as children negotiate and work together. I always like to incorporate an imaginary element to obstacle courses. How much more fun is it to imagine you are an intrepid explorer balancing on a log to cross a crocodile infested river? Or pretend to be a possum climbing up a tree to find some food – moving slowly and watching out for predators! Using imaginary play makes obstacle courses much more FUN!



Be challenged.

Gradually increase difficulty levels by adding in **elements of risk** – such as height off the ground, thickness of the walking surface and stability of the surface. For very young children the idea is to build confidence with a high degree of success. Beginning with a nice wide, flat balance beam low to the ground might be in order. For older children, a natural log with uneven surfaces that raises some height off the ground might offer a greater challenge.

Using language cues such as “Pay attention to...” or “Be aware of...” is more useful than “Be careful!”. A change of language can scaffold children’s learning and planning and creates a sense of confidence and a growth mindset instead of a fear factor. If you do need to support children as they practice balance skills, try to offer that support at the hips or shoulders rather than holding a child by the hand/arm. This can provide a degree of reassurance but leaves their arms and hands free to use as counter balance.

How to tell if your child may have a problem?

- They frequently fall or stumble.
- They avoid playground equipment or participation in sports.
- Slower than their peers to master bike riding, swimming or climbing.
- Tend to push too hard, invade personal space, move uncontrollably fast without meaning to.
- Be afraid of trying new equipment such as swings, flying foxes when compared to their peers.
- Have difficulty dressing. For example, need to sit down to put on underwear or trousers.

If you have concerns about any aspect of a child’s development we recommend speaking to your health professional. An assessment by a qualified **Occupational Therapist** may also be of benefit to provide reassurance and/or some great advice.

Having great static and dynamic balance is a foundation building block for other motor skills. It is something that we should all continue to work on across the lifespan to help prevent injuries and falls. So regardless of your age, get active with the children, participate in the play and work on your own balance skills at the same time.