A REFLECTION

# *Learning* to move

Stimuli, posture and motor learning in childhood



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# What children learn when they move

## Exercise and the meaning we give it

I started thinking about this after watching a video in which exercise was used as punishment. It left me with a question that goes beyond that scene. What does a child learn about movement when we use it as a consequence for doing something wrong?

Holding a plank or doing a squat can be an interesting challenge when children understand the game and want to take part. If that same effort repeatedly comes with a reprimand, they may begin to associate it with discomfort, embarrassment or obligation. That is one possible association, and a single video tells us very little about what any particular child learned. In physical education, SHAPE America recommends keeping physical activity separate from punishment and behaviour management. [1]

## Rewards, expectations and motivation

I ask a similar question about rewards. If sweets or video games always signal a job well done, children may come to expect them as part of every achievement. The CDC recommends avoiding routine use of food as a reward in the classroom. At home, food and screens can have a place in the daily routine, separate from rewards. We can also celebrate an achievement by noticing what the child did. “You tried a different way and found one that worked for you.” [2]

When I think about associations and reinforcement, I am interested in what a child comes to expect and what makes them want to repeat a behaviour. One of dopamine’s roles is in learning from the difference between an expected reward and the reward actually received. A child’s motivation in any given situation also depends on the context, their past experiences and how the task feels to them. [3]

**THE STARTING POINT**

When children move, they learn how to solve a task and begin to form their own sense of what it means to move.

**SOURCES**

[1] SHAPE America. Physical activity and punishment.
[2] CDC. Nutrition and physical activity in the classroom.
[3] Schultz (2016). Dopamine and reward learning.

# Making movement rewarding

## We also learn how an activity feels

As children learn to run, jump or throw, they discover what their bodies can do and how it feels to do it. If physical effort repeatedly comes with a reprimand, they may start to expect an unpleasant experience. When moving gives them a chance to play, feel supported and see themselves improve, they are more likely to want to try again. [4, 5]

A positive experience can involve effort and frustration. What matters to me is that children feel safe making mistakes, have a challenge they can take on and can see their own progress. Enjoyment and confidence give them reasons to keep practising. [5]

## Movement can be its own reward

If a child misses a pass, I can offer a cue and give them another go. When they see that the cue helps them play better with their teammates, the satisfaction comes from the activity itself. That is the kind of reward I want to encourage.

The same principle applies at the table. If I want a child to eat a varied diet, I can make trying a food a relaxed experience we share. Saving some foods for rewards and serving others as punishment can teach a different preference from the one I hoped to encourage. [6]

**WHAT I WANT TO SHARE**

Before I teach something, I ask myself what I want the child to learn and how I want them to feel while doing it. If they discover that they can improve and enjoy the process, they have a reason to come back.

**SOURCES**

[4] Hofmann et al. (2010). Associative learning and preferences.
[5] Vasconcellos et al. (2020). Motivation in physical education.
[6] American Academy of Pediatrics. Children’s eating habits.

