

Birth to three...

rolling

Why rolling is an important physical activity, and how settings can help their children to practise it. By **Dr Lala Manners**



ABOUT THIS SERIES

This is the first in a four-part series on essential physical skills and how to support them in children from birth to three. Dr Lala Manners is a physical development trainer and director of Active Matters

Rolling is one of the 'whole body' or 'big body' movements that most babies initially experience in close contact with their carers and then practise independently throughout their first year. The visual simplicity of rolling belies the real impact it has on developing overall muscular strength, joint stability, balance, agility and co-ordination.

Ideally, rolling should remain a vital part of children's movement 'vocabulary' long after its primary function as preparation for crawling has declined. As adults, we should also recognise how we can benefit from revisiting this essential early skill.

Development

Usually in the first few months, babies lie on their carers' tummies and roll side to side. Some newborns will naturally roll onto one side to sleep when placed on their backs, and babies will roll their heads each way.

At some point (this varies greatly), babies may begin to roll themselves from their tummies to their backs. Then they may start to roll onto one side and wave the upper leg around.

Finally, with a big effort, children manage to roll from their backs to their tummies. This is a much more challenging movement to learn and can happen very suddenly and almost accidentally.

Rolling may look very messy and unco-ordinated for a while, but with practice comes increased strength and a steady progression towards the mature stage.

The mature version of rolling is a 'pin-roll'. This is when the arms and legs are held together completely straight and the whole body then

rolls in perfect alignment in an economical and rhythmical way – you often see this being performed in primary gym sessions along with forward and backward rolls.

Importance

- Rolling provides an effective way of stimulating vestibular function – which is closely linked to balance and the relationship with gravity – as the head must keep righting/aligning with the body.

- Proprioceptive function is also supported, as the body has to travel through space and know where it begins and ends.

- Rolling from back to tummy provides the impetus for a range of movement skills. Lifting the head strengthens the neck muscles and supports visual skills, while opening and taking weight on the hands strengthens the arms and begins to stabilise the shoulder joints.

- It is very hard work for the whole body to roll for any length of time and remain in the optimum position for the chosen speed and direction, making rolling an excellent way to promote muscular endurance.

- Rolling is also a very important movement for safety reasons, as it helps avoid injury when young and is essential when playing certain contact sports when mature.

Encouraging rolling

Small babies may enjoy lying on their backs between two rolled-up towels and rolling from one side to the other – the less you interfere, the better at this stage. Once they can roll from back to front independently and easily, offer lots of opportunities for them to

practise. They will also hold their toes and roll happily backwards and forwards, often getting their toes to the floor over their heads.

To ensure that children keep practising and refining this skill, it is up to us, as practitioners, to make it interesting and challenging:

- If you have an accessible small outdoor slope (of sand, snow or grass), or an indoor one, encourage the children to roll down it and run up to try again.
- Inside, encourage the children to roll across a sheet of bubble wrap and pop the bubbles. Or provide a length of Lycra for the children to roll on and wrap themselves up in.
- Children can also roll under a sheet stretched low over the floor, or get into a tunnel and roll themselves both ways.
- Rolling across a pile of cushions is hard work and can easily be included in an obstacle course.

How we may also benefit

Working with small children, our backs are under continual strain, so do some rolling movements a couple of times a day (the children may enjoy doing this with you):

- Lie on your back, with your knees bent and hip-width apart, your arms by your sides and your palms facing upwards.
- Gently roll your head from side to side, feeling the stretch down your neck.
- Now slowly roll your knees from one side to the other – remember to breathe!
- Stretch your arms and legs as long and straight as possible and hold this position for a moment.
- Now come back to your starting position and repeat. ■