

physical development on a budget

Step up

In the final instalment of this eight-part series, **Dr Lala Manners** considers how stairs can be used to support strength, balance, co-ordination and agility

Why are stairs such an enduring draw for young children? Perhaps it is the sheer effort and determination involved to reach the apex, the new perspective on the world they offer, the intoxicating feeling of challenge and achievement – or is it simply that they are there?

Stairs are found in many different environments – private and public – inside and outdoors. They may be made of stone, marble, wood, glass, metal, rubber or plastic, be plain, carpeted or decorated, perfectly vertical or ascend in a spiral.

HARD STAIR

Safety is critical when engaging with stairs. All activity should be supervised; ensure children are wearing suitable clothes (tight jeans and flowing skirts are not advisable) and remove shoes indoors if stairs are clean and hazard-free. No toys should be carried so both hands can be used, and mouths must be empty.

Most importantly, demonstrate precisely how you expect children to descend stairs.

BABY STEPS

Climbing starts very early when children push up on one knee to get onto a chair or sofa. If stairs are easily accessible, they will immediately transfer this skill and between one and three will practise going up and down all the time.

By four, most children can manage stairs, but this depends on the level of practice they enjoy.

GROSS MOTOR: LOWER BODY

Going upstairs

- Pushing up stairs using one knee is very physically demanding as all weight needs to be propelled upwards through one small body

part. Children also need to balance and organise themselves for every step, which requires a significant amount of strength.

- With practice, children become much stronger and soon begin to explore going up stairs leading with the same foot, accessing whatever support is available.
- As they become ever more competent they will use alternate feet fluently.
- Coming downstairs is more challenging and requires far greater balance, strength and co-ordination: ensure children know how to descend slowly and safely. This could be by sitting, or sliding on tummies feet first, or holding banisters.

UPPER BODY

Stairs offer many possibilities for strengthening arms and shoulders as they can be hoovered, brushed, swept, polished, dusted, washed, wiped and rubbed.

AS CHILDREN GROW AND DEVELOP

Stairs offer many interesting opportunities for language development if you consider: area, angles, corners, height, depth, width, area, near, far, up, down, trajectories, velocity, forces.

- Suggest children bump on their bottoms up and down the stairs counting each step as they go.
- Invite them to kneel on the bottom step and put both hands on a higher step, take weight on hands and bounce both knees up a step, move hands up again, followed again by both knees.
- Now ask them to jump down from the first step with both feet together. On landing, stretch arms up and balance on tiptoes.

TAKING IT FORWARDS

Stairs are particularly useful for practising throwing overarm,



Stairs can challenge children's physical skills and may even be used to teach vocabulary and number

underarm and aiming. Use rolled up socks, bean bags or crushed paper bags. For each activity, encourage children to determine the most effective throwing action.

- Choose particular steps to aim for, place stickers on them to make this clear, invite children to throw their material to land on those steps.
- Now suggest they climb up to the steps, sit on them and throw the materials into a container placed on the floor.
- Place numbers 1-10 on the steps in ascending order, invite children to throw resources to each step and count them as they go, then subtract some, add more – see where you end up.

As children get stronger and more co-ordinated, suggest they:

- Go up two steps at a time as fast as possible.
- Step down sideways slowly.
- Tap one foot then the other very fast on the bottom step.
- Jump on and off the bottom step with feet together then apart.

PD FOR ADULTS

- Sit on a step then stand, repeat.
- Step up and down at speed using the first then second steps.
- Place both hands wide apart on a step, keeping feet together on the floor; try a press-up or two. ■

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