There is great potential for development among preschoolers through physical play. Using play as a universal medium in which all children can learn is an important factor when considering the dramatic rise of non-English speaking children in our classrooms. In North Carolina alone, there are over 83,000 students who are classified as limited English proficient (NCLis-ten.com, 2006). The purpose of this article is to share with educators the broad developmental benefits, specific challenges, and helpful hints regarding outdoor play for preschoolers, particularly those with limited English proficiency (LEP).

Youth Development in the Early Childhood Setting

In our experience, the notion of youth development is a no-brainer for the early childhood environment—in this environment, teachers do not identify a specific area of development (e.g., motor skills) as a focus. Rather, all types of learning and development are naturally integrated. Their classrooms exemplify developmentally appropriate practice focusing on the strengths, interests, and needs of individual children with consideration for specific social and cultural contexts (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). For example, on one day you may see activities focused on flying because the children had questions about a plane flying over on the previous day. Thus, physical play is not seen as a separate part of the children’s day. It is one part of the learning picture that is created across varied activities (e.g., story time, centers) and social groupings (e.g., whole class, small groups).

We have found, however, that physical play provides some unique opportunities for learning, especially for children who are new to the English language. For example, play can be an important context for literacy development. The gross movements of children easily reinforce directional (forward, sideways), positional (over, around, on), and speed (fast, slow) concepts. The more relaxed setting and open space during outdoor play will also often spark more language usage as opposed to indoor teacher-directed activities. Additionally, being active and moving during outdoor play boosts a child’s attention span and capitalizes on verbal, visual, and kinesthetic learning so they are more likely to retain concepts like colors, shapes, ABCs, movement terms, etc. Finally, we find that physical play can be a huge boost for a child’s self-esteem. LEP children can be overwhelmed or shy in the classroom but feel more comfortable and successful during outdoor play. This can translate into greater feelings of security and confidence in the classroom. These benefits may vary according to each class of children (i.e., you need to know your kids) and whether outdoor play includes free play, teacher-directed group activities, or center-based play. Although we will talk about the advantages and disadvantages of different types of outdoor play, they are not necessarily exclusive. We have used different types of play on the same day for different purposes.
Using ribbon sticks in teacher-directed play provides multiple learning opportunities.

### Using ribbon sticks in teacher-directed play provides many cognitive, physical, and social learning opportunities for young children. Listed below are the many developmental opportunities that result from ribbon stick exploration. In addition, sample activities are described to help jump start your ribbon stick lesson planning.

### Learning Opportunities

#### Academic
- Colors, shapes, letters
- Body awareness—knee, head, shoulder, foot
- Prepositional phrases—above, below, to the side, next to, behind, in front
- Directions & pathways—forward, backward, straight, curved, zig-zag
- Levels—low, medium, high
- Speed—fast/slow (or fast/faster/fastest)
- Space awareness—self-space, general space

#### Physical
- Locomotor patterns—gallop, skip, slide, march
- Body movements—bending, twisting, moving to simple rhythms
- Coordination

#### Social
- Cooperative work
- Matching/mirroring
- Creative imagery
- Awareness of friends
- Knowledge of safety in the play environment

### Sample Ribbon Stick Activities

#### Creation of Ribbon Sticks. Using 2-sided adhesive tape, a paint stirrer, and two pieces of ribbon, each child can create his/her own unique ribbon stick. For early language learners, have them choose the same color of ribbon for each strip so they are not confused when you ask children with a certain color of ribbon to do something.

#### Stationary Ribbon Stick Movements. In a teacher-directed environment, children can be lead through a progression of ribbon stick movements that help reinforce many concepts discussed within the classroom:
- Can you move your ribbon stick in a circle? Triangle?
- Can you move your ribbon stick to make the first letter of your name? The number for how old you are?
- Can you touch your knee with your ribbon stick? Head/hair? Shoulder? Hip (same side, across your body)?
- Can you move your ribbon stick above your head? Around your waist? Around your feet?
- Can you move your ribbon stick next to your body? Far away from your body? In front of your body? Behind your body?
- If you have red ribbons on your stick can you move it in a circle? If you have yellow ribbons on your stick can you move it at a low level?
- Can you move your ribbon stick like a snake? A river? A lasso?

#### Dynamic Ribbon Stick Movements. Challenge your children by asking them to coordinate some of the stationary ribbon stick movements listed above while moving in general space.
- Can you march in a zig-zag pathway while moving your ribbon stick next to your body?
- Can you gallop while making a lasso above your head?
- Can you walk at a low level while moving your ribbon stick like a snake?

#### Ribbon Stick Mirroring. Pair children so they are standing facing each other. Designate one child as the leader and the other as the follower and see if the children can mimic each other’s movements. First introduce as a stationary activity and then add in traveling.
**Free Play**

During free play, equipment or space may be accessible to the children; however, the ways children use them are wide open. For young LEP children, free play provides a relaxed opportunity to be around peers. For example, in a free play activity such as riding trikes, the use of language is not needed and therefore no pressure to communicate exists. Without this pressure, we have found some children are actually more likely to communicate with their peers. Despite this, some drawbacks to free play do exist. First, without any kind of structure, LEP children may form small communities that segregate themselves from their English-speaking peers (or vice versa). This can impact language and social development for all children. Secondly, in some cultures, men and women have very traditional roles that are strictly reinforced, and it can be especially challenging to encourage children to explore multiple types of roles and activities when we speak a different language. In a free play set-up, we have seen this in action when young girls do not engage in any self-initiated gross motor play because they are too busy acting out domestic roles, such as cooking or caring for babies. While we believe that there are some benefits to this type of play, it is also important for children to try out new things and learn new skills.

**Teacher-Directed Play**

Another type of play environment is teacher-directed, large group play that has a distinct purpose. Conducting teacher-directed activities allows us to give a lot of feedback and helps establish a common base of learning experiences for all children. These experiences are especially important for children who tend to limit their play choices and playmates. See boxed plan, showing strategies for using ribbon sticks in a large group set-up to enhance learning in multiple domains. For some LEP children, large group activities may be better because they do not necessarily have to understand the directions but can simply mimic the actions of their peers. For others, so many bodies in one space doing a lot of movement coupled with instructions they cannot understand can be intimidating and/or confusing, thus causing them to withdraw.

**Center-Based Play**

Similar to indoor learning, centers can be a powerful strategy for physical play. Setting up outdoor centers is important for children to actively explore different activities at their own level. Within this play environment, children are provided choices of where to go and with what and whom to play. In addition, children can creatively decide how to play at each center and are allowed to modify the activity to match his/her developmental level and interest. We may have a throwing center where children build something with foam blocks or boxes and throw something to knock it down. At the center, they choose how they want to build and whether to build alone or with friends, what to throw, how to throw, and where to stand.

Using centers is also a great way to reinforce to LEP children important classroom themes. For example, if the teacher is working on postal delivery indoors, a center with different colored objects and large boxes of the same colors can reinforce delivering an object according to its address [color]. An obstacle course center that requires children to go through, over, under, and around is also great practice for classroom activities.

Expecting a class composed of predominantly non-English speaking students to comprehend all that is going on in centers is a challenge. As a result, we slowly introduce one or two centers at a time and then work toward multiple centers. Also, when initially using center-based play, limiting their choices at first, using a specific rotation system (e.g., clockwise) where children visit all centers and/or allowing them to switch to a center of their choice after a certain amount of time, may work better. Without some kind of encouragement to move to different centers, children may stay in the same group and at the same center for the duration of the lesson, preventing them from interacting with other children and engaging in new activities. If a rotation is used, we think it is important to provide them choices at the end to go to any center and gradually move toward doing free choice for most, if not all, of the play time.

**Teaching Strategies for Helping LEP Children be Successful**

Regardless of how outdoor play is structured (or not), there are consistent strategies to help make children's play experiences more enjoyable and developmental. First, establishing clear boundaries for the children's safety should be a top priority. For all children, physical boundaries (bright cones) are very important. Second, using predictable routines creates a more comfortable environment for LEP students because they know what to expect. For example, using music as a start-stop signal, sitting in a circle for demonstrations, alerting children prior to stopping an activity [change in voice tone or using a countdown], and having designated clean-up and line-up routines can contribute to children's comfort. When demonstrating, use verbal and visual clues such as hand signals, posters, and pantomimes to help children comprehend the activity. In addition, using a “buddy system” can facilitate understanding and give a child more confidence knowing that they are not alone in their outdoor exploration. Introducing a variety of activities and toys is encouraged, especially toys that contradict prevailing gender stereotypes like a pink car and decorative blocks. Third, using verbal, visual, and
kinesthetic strategies reinforces movement concepts. For example, children can see how they can move in different ways by traveling along marked pathways (zigzag, curved) on the floor. Visual strategies are also effective for specific activities using equipment like ribbon sticks (see boxed plan). In these activities, cue cards with pictures of shapes, numbers, and letters can support what you are challenging them to do. Fourth, initially introducing positional and other phrases in consistent, specific language eliminates some confusion. It is best not to use similar terms like above/on top of, below/under, big/large, and little/small at the beginning of the school year. Sticking with one descriptive seems to work better. We have been most successful with the following terms: under, beside, behind, in front of, around, and between. Finally, using music is one sure way to get children involved because no matter what the language, the joy of movement to music appears to span across all cultural backgrounds.

**Conclusion**

Physical play is a powerful arena for young children’s development. It can be particularly beneficial for LEP children who are attending school for the first time and, with little understanding of the dominant language or customs, may feel like they are on the outside looking in. It is critically important that teachers embrace opportunities to use physical play as a developmental “hotbed” and an opportunity to build community. It is up to each teacher to decide which play set-up (or combination) offers the greatest benefits for their specific context; however, committing to the process is a significant first-step for the cultural mosaic of today’s schools.

**References**


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