

Say and do

Annette Rawstrone reports on a programme designed to support speech and language through movement

Can you stand tall like a tree?' It may sound simple, but children's proprioception, core strength and co-ordination skills are challenged as they stretch up tall, move their arms like branches and then try to balance on one leg. Added to this, they may be asked to say, 'I'm as tall as a tree', and clap the one syllable in tree, or discuss what words rhyme with the word 'tree' – perhaps 'three', 'sea', 'bee' or 'me'.

This is just one suggested activity in the Talk & Move programme aimed at early years children created by Helen Guntrip, a trained speech and language therapist and children's yoga teacher who has combined her professional knowledge to produce holistic sessions involving movement along with support for early communication skills.

'There are an estimated two million children with speech,

language and communication needs in the UK, so that's equivalent to one in five in the classroom – and that's not looking at pre-school. We know that early intervention is so important, so upskilling staff in something that is fun, that can engage and motivate children and give them a toolbox of strategies, is essential,' says Guntrip.

'By getting children up and moving, even the hardest-to-engage children were really involved. Children without language were joining in because there wasn't an emphasis on having to speak, and it was a plus if they joined in with a song or clapped a syllable,' she explains. 'I stress that it's not a phonics programme. It's that pre-phonics that often gets missed, such as syllable awareness and rhyme rather than the first sounds.'

She trialled the programme in a nursery and primary school before launching it to other settings.

The Talk & Move programme is targeted at those most in need of support, but all children can join in with the sessions

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FURTHER INFORMATION

• <https://talkandmove.co.uk>



INTEGRATING MOVEMENT

Along with balance, there are also suggestions for being active and feeling energised, and ideas for relaxing with calming moves. These are detailed on 29 Talk & Move activity cards, which have bright illustrations on the front – so children can visualise what they are doing and talking about – and simple instructions for practitioners

case study: Blossom Years Nurseries and Pre-schools, south-east London

'We are finding we are caring for increasing numbers of children with speech and language difficulties, from language delay and attention difficulty to some children who are non-verbal,' says operations support manager Renee Jupp. 'It's become more prevalent since Covid, so we wanted to strengthen our delivery in this area and upskill our staff to support children.'

The nursery group currently uses the programme in its two pre-schools in Bromley but, following its success, director Marcelle Imrie says they have decided to introduce Talk & Move into their Chislehurst day nursery too. 'The earlier we can get support around speech and language to children then the better their outcomes will be,' she says. 'We wanted a programme where we could put support in place and start helping children before their needs are formally identified.'

The Talk & Move programme appealed because it is an activity aimed at all children. 'While it's targeted at children who may be struggling with language and literacy skills, everyone joins in, so children don't feel singled out,' adds Jupp. 'It hits all different levels of development for the children.'

Staff had an initial five-week training on how to use the Talk & Move cards to run a session, which they now do with small groups of around ten children for 20 to 30 minutes every week. 'We find the cards really simple to follow and adapt to different ability groups,' says Jupp. 'You don't have to do all the actions listed on the back, so for younger children we may just do the movement and the sound, while for older children we could also be clapping the syllables, talking about rhyming words and extending and pushing the children.'

Children now ask for Talk & Move sessions because they find them so much fun. 'We have noticed that some of the children are repeating the movements from the sessions independently while playing, and we have heard them clapping out words with their friends during play as well,' says Jupp. 'I think they enjoy it because it's very physical and they are actively involved, not just listening. We find children learn a lot more when they are active and engaged.'

Staff have noticed children with speech and language delay are becoming more confident as they join in with the movements and singing, which they attribute to them not feeling pressurised to speak. 'We like the simplicity of the programme,' says Jupp. 'It is also helping staff understand how to teach speech sounds and develop them through movement.'



MEMORIES OF MY EARLY YEARS

In this column, Dr. Stella Louis, early years consultant, trainer and author, shares some memories from her early childhood



Growing up in a vibrant community in south London in the 1970s, I experienced a childhood that was both simple and rich. Surrounded by green fields and a lively neighbourhood,

I felt a sense of freedom and joy that has stayed with me to this day. As the fourth of nine siblings, I learned early on to navigate the complexities of family life. My childhood was filled with love, laughter and lively dynamics, and my parents played a significant role in shaping my experiences.

My mum, a skilled seamstress, left an indelible mark on my childhood. I vividly remember the beautiful blue dress she made for me after my first holy communion. The fabric shimmered in the light, making me feel like a princess. My dad, with his gentle giant hands, was a comforting presence. I recall holding his fingers, marvelling at their size compared to mine. His stories of St. Lucia, full of humour and creativity, transported us to a world of coconut trees and tropical adventures.

As a bossy, big sister, I often took on a maternal role, bossing my siblings around as we played 'schools'. I was dubbed 'troublesome' by my parents, and looking back, I can see why. At just 18 months, I pretended to play with my little sister Utillia, but my playfulness took a biting turn. This early display of mischief set the tone for our lifelong sibling dynamic.

As I grew older, my adventures expanded beyond our front steps. I have fond memories of playing outside and being allowed to go to the big park on my own. One of my favourite games was playing with the bigger boys on the roundabout. We'd crouch down and try to pick up a stick while the roundabout was spinning – it was such a thrill! I loved the challenge and excitement of that game. I'd also play imaginative games with my sisters, using everyday objects like mops and jumpers to create our own magical worlds. Those carefree days taught me the value of imagination, creativity and community.

My childhood was filled with memories of playing group games with my sisters and friends in the neighbourhood. One of our favourite games was 'Canon'. We'd use an empty can of Coke as the 'cannon' and put stones on top of it. Two teams would form, and we'd use a ball to try and knock down the cannon. The team that successfully knocked it down would score points, and we'd all run to get out of the way before the other team tried to set it up again.

Being part of a large family taught me valuable lessons about responsibility, empathy and conflict resolution. As a bossy big sister, I learned to balance leadership with kindness, and my siblings taught me patience and resilience.

My parents' love, creativity and guidance shaped me into the person I am today. The lessons I learned from my family – about love, responsibility and relationships – continue to influence my life.



on the back. There is no need for additional resources or lots of space to follow the programme.

Guntrip explains that the activities are designed to support children's language and literacy skills, physical development and emotional regulation through movement:

- Active movements aim to get children's bodies moving through jumping, hopping and dancing. They can help to energise children who are feeling tired or support those with lots of energy who need to move.
- Balancing movements require more focus and concentration from the children. They can help children to co-ordinate both sides of their body and develop core strength.
- Calming movements involve lying down, curling up or sitting quietly. Some incorporate exhaling long sounds, such as 'zzz', 'sss' and 'shhh', which can help children to feel relaxed.

Combined with the actions are sounds, syllables and rhymes linked to each card to enable practitioners to also explore words and sounds to reinforce speech and language development. So, after children have stamped their feet increasingly faster onto the ground to replicate thunder as they recite the rhyme 'I hear thunder' or say 'thud' and clap the two syllables for 'thund-der', they may settle down and pretend to be

bees. A feeling of calm is created as, accompanied by their practitioner, they breathe in through their nose and out through their mouth and make a 'zzzz' sound, or join in with a rendition of 'Here is the beehive, where are the bees?'. Practitioners can also introduce feelings and emotions by discussing how the different activities have made the children feel.

'This programme is about seeing children as a whole – that they have emotions and also a physical side – and that we can target them at the same time, rather than just focusing on speech and language or having a PE session,' says Guntrip.

LESSON PLANS

After becoming familiar with the cards, practitioners can follow a set lesson plan, which takes around half an hour – such as 'Let's go to the park', including a hello song, bunny-hopping warm-up, waddling like a duck and stretching up like an umbrella before resting like a quiet mouse, among other moves – or devise their own to fit their cohort.

'It's similar to a yoga class where the active moves are first, then getting to a peak of energy before doing some balancing and stretching and core strength before some rhymes and finishing off with relaxation,' explains Guntrip. 'They are working on speech sounds and developing vocabulary, all while moving their bodies.' ■