



Developing a child's gross motor skills



Children need to be physically prepared for Kindergarten

By Stephanie Sollazzo

My first baby is now approaching four years old and will start Junior Kindergarten this year.

I have enjoyed my time with him at home but can feel myself ready for him to take the next leap in his learning. I am all the things Moms are before their baby starts JK – nervous for him to take the bus, wondering if he will have any friends in his class, hoping that he gets a teacher that is good with active little boys

with minimal attention span, feeling certain that by Friday he is going to be exhausted without a nap, and wondering what to do if he has an accident or doesn't eat his lunch.

I am reminiscing about his first year and how quickly milestones are met. In that first year, whether we were at the grocery store or the doctor's office, the questions always related to motor development; how old was he when he started rolling, sitting, and walking?

Now in preparation for JK, most people ask me if he is potty trained, can count to 10 and do his ABCs. Rarely, if ever, do people ask how coordinated his running pattern is, how high he can jump, if he can kick a ball straight, walk a line, or stand on

one foot. But those are the questions I ask as a physiotherapist.

Kindergarten readiness can mean many things; for the most part it includes identifying colours, shapes, the alphabet, numbers, communication, fine motor skills and social-emotional development. Less focus is on gross motor skills and whether the child is ready to keep up with their peers physically. Don't get me wrong, I think communication, social-emotional development and problem-solving skills are greatly important for how my child and every child will perform, and I ask those questions too.

We have all been hearing about the effects of too much screen time on brain development, and this definitely leads to less time working on gross motor skills. In fact the Canadian Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines put forth by the Society for Exercise Physiology (csep.ca) recommends screen time for preschool-aged children (two to four years) be limited to under one hour per day. I know I am guilty of turning the TV on to be able to get a few chores done and during meal prep, but I do try to stay within these guidelines, or at least balance it out with outside play.

The Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines (csep.ca) recommend preschoolers accumulate at least 180 minutes of physical activity a day, progressing toward at least 60 minutes of energetic play by age five.

Here are some things a child should be able to do by four years of age:

- Catch a ball from five feet away with both hands.
- Throw a small ball overhead in the direction of a person in front of them at least six feet.
- Climb up a ladder and slide down a slide without help.
- Hop on one foot without losing their balance, five times.
- Jump forward on two feet at least 20 inches.
- Balance on one foot for at least five seconds.
- Stand on their tiptoes for at least three seconds.
- Walk up and down stairs alternating feet.
- Walk backwards for four feet.

(Adapted from the Ages and Stages Questionnaire-3 and Peabody Developmental Motor Scales-2)

You can easily work on these skills in your own home. There are also many opportunities in the community to expose your children to gross motor challenges and learning to play with other kids, which in turn develops their communication, problem-solving and social-emotional skills. The YMCA has family drop-in times where balls, slides, and bikes are readily available in the wide-open gym. The Early Years Centres also have daily playgroups, including parachute play and outdoor programming.

Swimming is also a fantastic way to work on gross motor skills and coordination. Find a drop-in time at your community's pool or visit one of many splash pads throughout the region.

If you're looking to work on balance, coordination and climbing skills the numerous parks in each municipality in Grey/Bruce



offer great opportunities and challenges for children of all ages.

To make practicing gross motor skills fun for a child of Kindergarten age, do it together. See who can stand on one foot the longest pretending to be a tree or a flamingo. Walk along a curb pretending not to fall into the crocodile-infested water below. Climb up the slide backward if you dare! Skip to my loo! Dance like nobody is watching. All these things work on balance, coordination, endurance and agility.

If you have any concerns about your child's gross motor development, talk to your child's health professional, teacher, coach or schedule an appointment with a pediatric therapist.

Perhaps I am a little biased, and work more on the physical than the fine motor, math and spelling, but I do feel like my four-year-old is ready for JK. The question is, am I? **GBK**

STEPHANIE SOLLAZZO, Registered Physiotherapist Ontario, MScPT, BScKIN, lives in Owen Sound. She has worked at The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto and holds a status appointment as Lecturer within the Department of Physical Therapy University of Toronto. She now works at Physiotherapy III Healing Waters Clinic. Learn more at physio3.com.