

Building Blocks for an Active Start

Framework overview · Physical Development Audit Tool (PDAT)

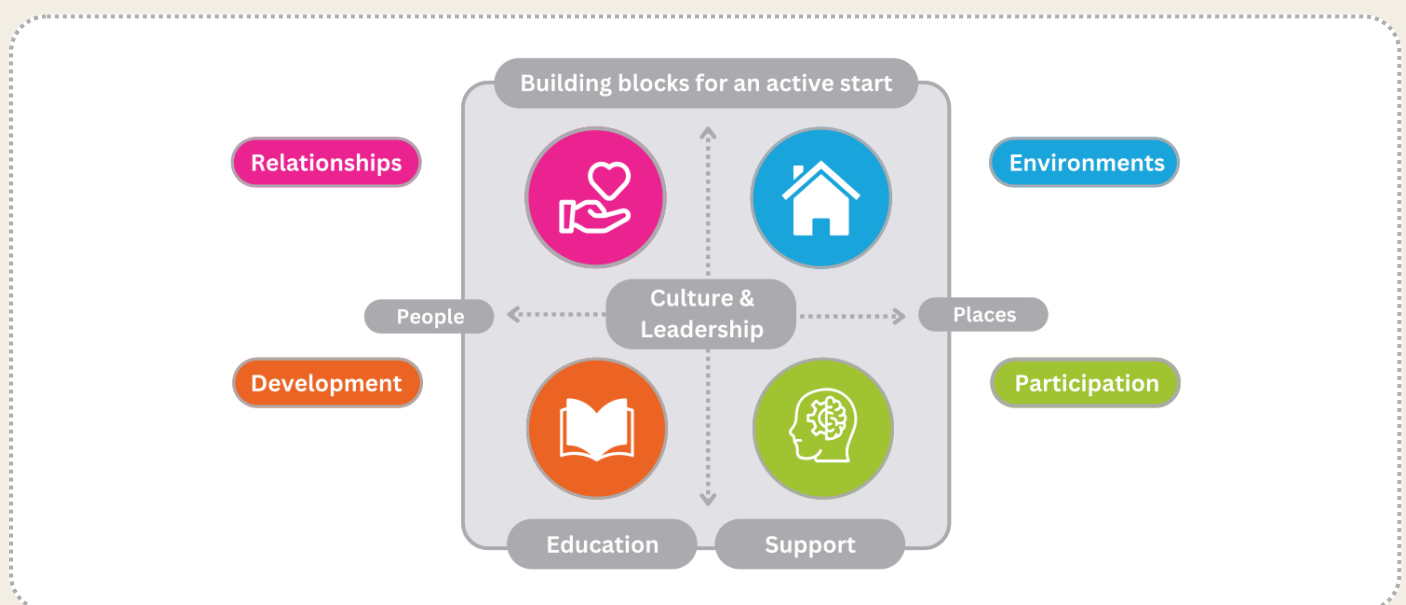
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Every child deserves an active start. The early years provide a vital opportunity to nurture children's enjoyment of movement, develop physical competence and build the foundations for lifelong physical literacy.

The Building Blocks for an Active Start framework brings together eight key principles to help educators reflect on and strengthen their physical development provision. From creating enabling environments and building responsive relationships to embedding movement throughout daily routines, the framework recognises that physical development is not an isolated activity, but an essential part of children's everyday experiences, learning and wellbeing.

The Building Blocks for an Active Start framework identifies eight key principles for supporting movement and physical development in early childhood. Each is connected to the Physical, Social, Cognitive and Affective domains of physical literacy, helping to nurture physical literacy holistically from birth to school age. The framework brings these principles to life through practical, developmentally appropriate examples for infants (0–1), toddlers (1–3) and pre-schoolers (3–5).

The framework at a glance



Physical literacy: **Move** **Think** **Feel** **Connect** Move (physical), Think (cognitive), Feel (affective), Connect (social)

How to use this with your PDAT results

Use the Building Blocks for an Active Start principles to find practical ideas linked to your chosen priorities. The eight building blocks help you consider different aspects of physical development, from enabling environments and responsive relationships to everyday routines, play, outdoor experiences and children's autonomy.

Each principle and foundation shows its PDAT section, the physical literacy domains it covers and three ideas: **Quick win**, **Develop practice** and **Build it in**.

Inclusive practice: Inclusive practice is embedded across all eight principles. Children develop and experience movement in different ways, and opportunities, environments and interactions should be adapted where needed so that every child can participate, explore, make choices and experience success in movement.

Framework structure: 8 Building Blocks describe the experiences and conditions children need across Relationships, Environments, Development and Participation. The 4 Culture & Leadership foundations describe the whole-setting conditions that enable those experiences to be valued, inclusive and embedded.

The eight Building Blocks principles (1–2)

1

PRINCIPLE 1 SPACE TO MOVE

PDAT section: Environments

Move

Feel

Providing children with sufficient time, space and freedom to move. Environments should encourage exploration, physical challenge and the development of movement skills.

EXAMPLES BY AGE

Infants (0–1)

Give infants time out of restrictive devices such as car seats to stretch and move their limbs, building early movement confidence.

Toddlers (1–3)

Provide safe spaces where toddlers can explore, run and climb to develop coordination, strength and joy in movement.

Pre-schoolers (3–5)

Create an enabling environment where young children can learn new movement skills, e.g. jumping, balancing, throwing and carrying.

QUICK WIN

Walk through the setting from a child's perspective and identify one change to furniture, equipment or routines that would create more space or freedom to move.

DEVELOP PRACTICE

Review indoor and outdoor spaces across the whole day so children have regular room for free and large-scale movement, with resources accessible and adaptations made for different physical and sensory needs.

BUILD IT IN

Make enabling movement environments part of routine planning and review. Observe how children actually use spaces and continually adapt layouts, access, resources and routines to maximise independent movement for all.

2

PRINCIPLE 2 PHYSICAL INTERACTIONS

PDAT section: Relationships

Feel

Connect

How adults use positive, appropriate physical interaction to connect with children. This includes professional touch, movement, playful interaction and shared physical experiences that help children feel safe and connected.

EXAMPLES BY AGE

Infants (0–1)

Use professional touch and movement (rocking, bouncing, skin-to-skin contact) to help babies regulate their emotions and feel secure, supporting early bonding. Sing songs, cradle and gently rock babies to the sound of your voice.

Toddlers (1–3)

Offer movement-based interactions (dancing, roly-poly play) to build confidence and social bonding. Toddlers gravitate to movement, so give them opportunities to try new ways of moving, such as swinging, crawling, rolling and climbing.

Pre-schoolers (3–5)

Introduce clapping games, active action rhymes or chase games, e.g. 'What's the Time, Mr Wolf?' to teach cooperation, turn-taking and emotional regulation.

QUICK WIN

Notice one everyday interaction where movement can strengthen connection, for example rocking, dancing, copying actions or moving together, and intentionally build it into the day.

DEVELOP PRACTICE

Support staff to use responsive movement interactions, rich movement language and co-regulation strategies, adapting their response to children's confidence, emotions and cues.

BUILD IT IN

Make warm, responsive physical interaction, including appropriate professional touch, a consistent feature of practice across routines and play, with staff confidently using movement to support connection, communication, emotional regulation and movement confidence.

The eight Building Blocks principles (3–4)

3

PRINCIPLE 3 DAILY LIFE

PDAT section: Participation

Move

Think

Feel

Making movement part of everyday experiences and routines. Children develop physical skills through ordinary activities such as dressing, tidying, walking, carrying, climbing and moving between experiences.

EXAMPLES BY AGE

Infants (0–1)

Offer floor play, back time and tummy time to strengthen core muscles and lay the foundation for rolling, sitting and crawling.

Toddlers (1–3)

Provide movement variety so children learn how different actions (e.g. running or climbing) need different levels of control and effort.

Pre-schoolers (3–5)

Plan for pre-schoolers to be physically active for at least 180 minutes a day, including energetic play that supports coordination, balance and spatial awareness.

QUICK WIN

Identify one part of the daily routine, such as tidy-up time, transitions or getting ready, where children could move more rather than being asked to wait or sit.

DEVELOP PRACTICE

Build movement into routines, transitions, play and learning across the day, and review timetables or layouts that unintentionally reduce opportunities to be active.

BUILD IT IN

Create a movement-rich daily culture in which physical activity is naturally integrated throughout children's experiences, with regular review of whether routines and organisation support sufficient variety, frequency and intensity of movement.

4

PRINCIPLE 4 PHYSICAL MILESTONES

PDAT section: Development

Move

Think

Understanding how children's physical skills typically develop over time. Educators recognise individual differences, notice progress and identify when a child may need additional support.

EXAMPLES BY AGE

Infants (0–1)

Allow plenty of free movement so infants can naturally develop postural control, rolling and early grasping.

Toddlers (1–3)

Give toddlers regular opportunities to practise and rehearse emerging fundamental movement skills such as jumping, running and climbing, remembering that these progress at different rates.

Pre-schoolers (3–5)

Refine skills like hopping, balancing, throwing and skipping through playful practice, preparing children for sport and structured movement.

QUICK WIN

Observe one familiar movement experience and note what children can currently do, what they are practising and where they may need more opportunity or support.

DEVELOP PRACTICE

Provide frequent, varied opportunities to practise and progress fundamental movement patterns such as crawling, climbing, rolling, balancing, pushing, pulling, jumping and swinging, adapting challenge to individual development.

BUILD IT IN

Use observation and developmental knowledge consistently to plan, monitor and adapt movement opportunities over time, with clear processes for identifying and supporting children who need additional help or challenge.

The eight Building Blocks principles (5–6)

5

PRINCIPLE 5

LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT

PDAT section: Development

Think

Feel

Connect

Recognising movement and physical development as foundations for wider learning. Motor skills, sensory experiences and physical confidence contribute to independence, communication, engagement and learning.

EXAMPLES BY AGE

Infants (0–1)

Respond to movement as a baby's first form of communication, using "back-and-forth" interactions to support cognitive and social growth.

Toddlers (1–3)

Build movement competence to support self-care tasks like toilet training and dressing, fostering independence.

Pre-schoolers (3–5)

Treat physical development as the foundation for all learning, because motor control supports handwriting, social interaction and emotional self-regulation.

QUICK WIN

Choose one everyday learning or self-care experience and consider how more purposeful movement could support it, for example large-scale mark-making, carrying, action songs or dressing.

DEVELOP PRACTICE

Connect movement intentionally with sensory development, self-care, communication, early writing, language, mathematical concepts and emotional regulation, rather than treating physical development as a separate activity.

BUILD IT IN

Make physical development a recognised foundation for wider learning across curriculum planning, routines and staff practice, with adults understanding and using movement to support children's holistic development.

6

PRINCIPLE 6

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

PDAT section: Relationships

Feel

Connect

Creating warm, responsive relationships that support children's security, confidence and wellbeing. Educators tune into children's cues and provide the emotional support they need to explore and learn.

EXAMPLES BY AGE

Infants (0–1)

Build trust through responsive caregiving: holding, cuddling and talking to babies fosters a sense of security and a secure attachment.

Toddlers (1–3)

Use movement-based play to strengthen relationships, e.g. dancing together, playing "Ring a Ring o' Roses" or joining in movement play with peers.

Pre-schoolers (3–5)

Plan collaborative physical activities like obstacle courses, relay races or partner balances to build teamwork, communication and confidence in groups.

QUICK WIN

Identify one regular opportunity for children to move with others, such as dancing, partner play, chasing or a simple cooperative movement game.

DEVELOP PRACTICE

Plan varied opportunities for co-play and collaborative movement, helping children navigate space, take turns, communicate and build confidence with trusted adults and peers.

BUILD IT IN

Create a relational culture in which movement regularly supports belonging, cooperation and confidence, and families are included as partners in supporting positive movement experiences beyond the setting.

The eight Building Blocks principles (7–8)

7

PRINCIPLE 7

PLAY & OUTDOOR PLAY

PDAT section: Environments

Move

Think

Feel

Connect

Using play and outdoor experiences as powerful opportunities for movement, exploration and learning. Children benefit from sensory experiences, appropriate challenge, manageable risk and opportunities to be physically active.

EXAMPLES BY AGE

Infants (0–1)

Offer daily outdoor time for sensory experiences, such as watching tree branches move, feeling the wind or lying on grass, to foster early curiosity.

Toddlers (1–3)

Provide varied outdoor environments, appropriate challenge and loose parts (e.g. logs, planks, crates) to encourage problem-solving, adaptable movement and exploration. Climbing, jumping in puddles and balancing on uneven ground build physical skills, confidence and the ability to assess and manage appropriate risk.

Pre-schoolers (3–5)

Protect time for free outdoor play to foster creativity, resilience and problem-solving, helping children develop confidence and social competence. Offer appropriate risk and challenge so children can test their capabilities, make decisions and build confidence and resilience through movement.

QUICK WIN

Add one open-ended outdoor opportunity that invites children to explore movement in different ways, for example loose parts, uneven surfaces, balancing or transporting.

DEVELOP PRACTICE

Offer varied outdoor movement experiences that include natural elements, sensory exploration, loose parts and appropriate risk and challenge, allowing children to test ideas and capabilities.

BUILD IT IN

Establish outdoor and adventurous play as a consistent part of provision, using a thoughtful risk-benefit approach and regularly adapting challenge, resources and environments in response to children's interests, confidence and development.

8

PRINCIPLE 8

AUTONOMY & CHOICE

PDAT section: Participation

Think

Feel

Giving children opportunities to make meaningful choices and take ownership of their movement and play. Children are supported to explore, take appropriate risks, solve problems and develop independence.

EXAMPLES BY AGE

Infants (0–1)

Encourage self-directed movement (e.g. reaching for objects, rolling) in an enabling environment to build early decision-making skills.

Toddlers (1–3)

Encourage choice within structured activities, e.g. 'Would you like to jump or spin?' to build confidence and motivation.

Pre-schoolers (3–5)

Allow children to set movement challenges for themselves (e.g. 'Can I jump further this time?') to support problem-solving, self-regulation and confidence in movement.

QUICK WIN

Offer a simple, meaningful choice during movement, for example how to travel, which equipment to use or which movement challenge to try.

DEVELOP PRACTICE

Increase child-led movement exploration and reduce unnecessary adult direction. Notice children's interests, motivation and confidence and use these to shape opportunities and choices.

BUILD IT IN

Make autonomy and meaningful choice a consistent feature of play, routines and planned experiences, ensuring choices are culturally responsive and accessible to children who need adaptations or additional support.

Whole-setting foundations that underpin all eight principles (PDAT section: Culture & Leadership).

1

CULTURE & LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION 1 **VALUE & CHAMPION MOVEMENT**

PDAT section: Culture & Leadership

Move Think Feel Connect

Creating a culture where movement is recognised, valued and championed. Leaders and educators prioritise physical development, physical activity and physical literacy and model positive attitudes that support children's enjoyment, confidence and motivation to move.

IN PRACTICE

- Make movement part of the setting's ethos and priorities. Protect time for active and free play and embed movement throughout the day, including routines and transitions.
- Leaders and educators should model positive attitudes towards movement, celebrate children's effort, exploration and enjoyment, and use inclusive language that supports confidence and motivation.
- Develop a physical activity policy.

QUICK WIN

Reflect as a team on where movement already happens throughout the day and the language and attitudes adults use around it. Identify one opportunity to encourage and positively model more movement.

DEVELOP PRACTICE

Review routines and timetables to protect opportunities for active and free play. Encourage educators to model enjoyment and confidence in movement, join children's movement play where appropriate and use positive, inclusive language that celebrates effort, exploration and enjoyment.

BUILD IT IN

Create a consistently movement-positive culture in which physical development, physical activity and physical literacy are explicit within setting-wide priorities, policies and everyday practice. Leaders and educators champion movement, model positive attitudes and recognise children's individual progress and different ways of experiencing movement.

2

CULTURE & LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION 2 **BUILD CONFIDENT & KNOWLEDGEABLE ADULTS**

PDAT section: Culture & Leadership

Move Think Feel Connect

Developing the knowledge and confidence of the adults who support children's movement. Educators build their understanding through professional learning, reflection and collaboration, while parents and carers are engaged and empowered to support positive movement experiences beyond the setting.

IN PRACTICE

- Provide opportunities for staff CPD, reflection and sharing of good practice to develop knowledge and confidence around physical development and the physical, social, cognitive and affective domains of physical literacy.
- Engage and empower parents and carers by sharing why movement matters, providing simple and realistic ideas for active play at home, and encouraging two-way communication about children's movement experiences, interests and development.

QUICK WIN

Ask educators what they feel confident about and where they would like more support in relation to children's movement and physical development. Share one useful idea or resource as a team, and offer parents and carers one simple, realistic movement idea to try at home.

DEVELOP PRACTICE

Provide targeted professional development around physical development, sensory systems and physical literacy, with opportunities for educators to discuss, observe and share effective practice. Develop regular two-way communication with families about movement and physical development, inviting them to share children's interests, experiences and movement practices from home.

BUILD IT IN

Establish ongoing professional learning so new and existing educators have the knowledge and confidence to provide high-quality, movement-rich experiences. Build family engagement into the setting's approach to physical development and physical literacy through accessible information and resources, two-way communication and signposting to appropriate opportunities and support.

3

CULTURE & LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION 3

CREATE AN INCLUSIVE WHOLE-SETTING APPROACH

PDAT section: Culture & Leadership

Move

Think

Feel

Connect

Making movement and physical literacy part of inclusive, everyday whole-setting practice. Environments, routines and experiences are considered together and adapted to remove barriers so every child can participate, make meaningful choices and experience success.

IN PRACTICE

- Embed movement and physical development within policies, planning, team discussions and setting priorities.
- Consider how routines, environments, interactions and provision collectively support an active start.
- Identify and remove barriers to participation and ensure children with additional physical, sensory or developmental needs are supported to engage and make meaningful choices about movement.

QUICK WIN

Consider whether every child can access, enjoy and make choices within current movement opportunities. Identify one barrier within routines, environments or practice that could be removed or adapted.

DEVELOP PRACTICE

Review routines, environments, resources, planning and activities to identify barriers to participation. Adapt provision so children with different physical, sensory and developmental needs can participate, make meaningful choices and experience success.

BUILD IT IN

Build inclusive movement and physical development into policies, planning, team discussions and everyday practice. Regularly review how routines, environments, interactions and provision support an active start for every child, seeking appropriate specialist advice where needed.

4

CULTURE & LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION 4

REFLECT, ADAPT & IMPROVE

PDAT section: Culture & Leadership

Move

Think

Feel

Connect

Using observation, reflection and evidence to continually strengthen practice. Educators consider children's physical development and movement experiences, identify priorities and adapt provision in response to children's needs.

IN PRACTICE

- Regularly review strengths and areas for development.
- Use observations and PDAT findings to identify priorities, agree achievable actions and revisit progress.
- Adapt environments and practice in response to children's experiences and development.

QUICK WIN

Choose one aspect of movement provision to observe: what are children doing, who is participating, what appears to engage them and who might be missing out?

DEVELOP PRACTICE

Use observations and PDAT findings to identify strengths and priorities. Agree a small number of achievable actions, assign responsibility and review whether changes are improving children's movement experiences.

BUILD IT IN

Establish a regular cycle of reflection, action and review. Use observations, staff discussion, children's experiences and repeat PDAT audits to inform ongoing improvement in physical development, physical activity and physical literacy provision.

Next steps

Remember: your PDAT results are not an end point. They are a tool for reflection, planning and continued improvement. Small, purposeful changes, revisited over time, can help create richer movement experiences and stronger foundations for every child's physical development.

PDAT results ›

Identify priorities ›

Choose principles
or foundations ›

Agree actions ›

Implement changes ›

Review progress

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

To support you in turning your PDAT findings into meaningful improvements, we also offer targeted Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to help build educators' knowledge, confidence and practical skills in physical development. Our CPD can be tailored to the priorities identified through your audit, helping you translate findings into effective practice and sustainable changes across your setting. Whether you need to strengthen understanding, develop pedagogy or explore practical ways to enrich children's movement experiences, we can work with you to identify the support that best meets your needs.

Your PDAT results identify the priorities; our CPD can help you take the next steps with confidence.

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