

# A parent's guide to... **ball skills**

Playing ball games advances a range of developmental skills. *Penny Tassoni* explains how to help children play and learn



For many of us, our childhood involved playing games with a ball. Balls are versatile playthings: they can be caught, thrown, hit or even dodged. There are also many important developmental skills involved in using a ball.

## **FIVE THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT BALL SKILLS**

### **1. Vision and perceptual skills**

Throwing, catching or kicking a ball is a great way to help children's visual and perceptual skills. Even babies around eight months old will watch and try to reach out for a ball that is rolled to them. Catching an oncoming ball requires children to track it, recognise its speed and also to move into a position to receive it. These

skills are quite sophisticated and this is one reason why children find it harder to catch rather than to throw.

### **2. Development of social skills**

Ball games help children develop social skills. At first, ball games are very transactional in their nature: an adult passes a ball to the child, who throws or kicks back with varying success. Once children have developed more skills, they start to play with each other. This is a little hit and miss at first, but by about five years old children start to understand the need for rules.

### **3. Balance and agility**

Learning to catch, hit and kick a ball helps children's balance. This is

because these movements require the body to be in an asymmetrical position – that is, standing on one leg while the other one moves, or reaching out with one arm to hit a ball while turning at the same time. It's therefore not surprising that young children often fall over when trying to do these movements.

### **4. Hand-eye co-ordination**

Some movements involving balls support the development of hand-eye co-ordination. To grip a bat and then hit a ball, or catch a ball, children need to be able to focus on the moving ball and move their hands at the right time.

### **5. Feelings of power and confidence**

Children often enjoy playing with balls because it gives them a sense of power and satisfaction – toddlers smile after they have kicked a ball and older children often love showing off any ball tricks they have learned. These positive feelings can help build children's confidence and self-esteem.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF SKILLS**

There are various stages that a child passes through when mastering the skills of throwing, catching and kicking. Identifying what stage your child is at can help you to understand how best to help them.

The speed that children pass through the stages varies, but they tend to master throwing more quickly than catching. Many children will be at least five before they reach the final stages.

### **Throwing**

A child throws:

1. Overarm with no particular stance, and no accuracy. Their release is erratic and the ball does not travel far.

2. Overarm using either arm and with very limited accuracy. Their release is still erratic, but the ball travels about 1m.
3. Underarm, using either arm, with some accuracy. They tend to lean forwards with one leg advanced, and both the deliberate release of the ball and the distance increases.
4. Using a preferred hand. They lean forwards with one leg advanced and their trunk moves with the throw. The release of the ball is controlled, the throw is fairly accurate and the ball travels a fair distance.
5. Using a controlled movement, with their body arching back, then moving forwards when throwing. Time, stance and accuracy are all good and the ball travels far.

### Catching

A child:

1. Looks at the thrower, not the ball. They show little reaction apart from surprise when the ball is thrown. No success!
2. Looks at the ball in the thrower's hands, with arms out ready. They trap the ball against their chest, with a 50 per cent success rate.
3. Looks at the oncoming ball, but also at their own hands. Their arms are ready and their hands cupped in anticipation. They catch the ball most of the time.
4. Watches to see how the ball is moving. Their arms and hands move in anticipation. They catch a direct throw easily and can even manage some throws to the side.
5. Movements are more confident and co-ordinated. They are mostly successful in catching even when they have to move.

### Kicking

A child:

1. Kicks the ball by walking into it.

2. Stands next to the ball and kicks it gently using their whole leg, but their knee is not flexed.
3. Stands next to the stationary ball and kicks it with some force by bending their knee.
4. Kicks a moving ball.

### STARTING OUT

You can start playing ball games with your child very early on.

A good starting point with babies is to roll a ball across the floor to them when they are first sitting up. They may at first hold onto the ball, but will learn to push it back.

With toddlers, throwing comes fairly naturally, and providing 'safe' balls and beanbags can help with this stage. Toddlers also tend to enjoy kicking a ball, although it usually has to be stationary and they tend to just walk into it rather than kick it.

From about two years, you may find that your child enjoys learning to catch. At first this might be just passing a ball from hand to hand before gradually increasing the distance. Most children will be

ready to try out a bat and ball from about three years, but they will need a large light bat and also a very sympathetic thrower.

### FIVE TIPS FOR DEVELOPING BALL SKILLS

#### 1. Practice

Mastering the skills of throwing, catching, kicking and hitting balls takes time. Not surprisingly, then, your child need times to practise. Choose a time when your child is not tired and is interested in playing with you. Practise a few times and observe your child's enthusiasm. Try to stop while your child is still having fun, so next time you suggest playing with a ball they will be keen.

#### 2. Praise and encouragement

For children to practise these skills over and over again, they need adults to make them feel they are doing well. Remember to encourage your child as well as give them tips. Avoid looking disappointed if your child misses the ball repeatedly or you frequently have to retrieve it. ➤



### 3. Be realistic

Some children stop enjoying playing games with balls because they don't experience sufficient success for them to remain motivated. When setting up games, you should think about how you can allow your child to be successful. It may mean moving targets closer or allowing your child to take some extra turns.

### 4. Alternative objects

One of the problems when it comes to catching for children is the speed of the oncoming ball. Children find it hard to process and react to the ball. It is worth trying out other less aerodynamic objects that will give your child more time to react – try putting a balloon in a cloth bag or using a teddy bear.

### 5. Mix and match

It is worth experimenting to see what games your child likes. Some children find it easier to hit a ball with a mini golf club than a traditional bat, for example.

## COMMON QUESTIONS

**Q. My husband is frustrated that our four-year-old son isn't interested in football. How should we handle this?**

**A.** Many dads dream of playing football or rugby with their sons. Sometimes it is partly about their concerns for their son's masculinity while for others it is about their own unfulfilled dreams. Kicking balls can also help them to bond.

However, if your son is not enjoying it there is a danger that it might affect their relationship and may even lead to him being turned off football permanently. Talk to your husband about this while recognising that he is not unusual in his desire to play football with his son. Perhaps a break from



football might be the way forward, with a few other father-son activities on offer instead?

**Q. My three-year-old looks at me, not the ball, when I throw it to him. Is this normal?**

**A.** Providing this is your only concern about your child's vision, I wouldn't worry too much. At first, many children tend to focus on the thrower rather than the ball itself. Most adults also have to tell children to put out their arms to receive the ball in these initial stages. Keep trying – eventually, your child will work it out.

## ACTIVITIES

### Catching bubbles

One of the earliest catching activities that children can have some success with is bubbles – they move slowly so allow time

for children to react. They help improve babies' eye-tracking skills, and provide an early introduction to catching for toddlers.

### Welly throwing

Children often find throwing wellies and other unusual objects good fun. It makes a change from balls, helps build arm strength, and illustrates how different shapes move when thrown.

### Newspaper golf

For an indoor game, try newspaper golf. This is easy to set up and can help children learn to aim and co-ordinate their movements. Make the stick by rolling up a newspaper and keeping the edges together with a little sticky tape. See if your child can hit a sponge ball along the floor. An upturned container can be used as the 'hole'. ■