

Move, Balance, Cross the Middle

Forty activities you and your child can do together that build the brain through the body

No equipment, no cost, ten minutes. Ages three to eight, and several work earlier.

Why the body builds the brain

You cannot learn to ride a bicycle by reading about it. You have to get on, wobble, correct, fall, and go again — and somewhere in that process the brain builds pathways that no amount of explanation could have produced.

A brain is not filled. It is built — by doing things. Shut a newborn in a quiet dark room and feed them and their brain will not develop normally, because development is not a schedule that runs on its own. It runs on experience.

Which is why movement matters more than it looks. When a child balances on one leg, crawls under a chair, or claps a rhythm back to you, the brain is processing balance, body position, timing, sequence and correction, all at once, and adjusting itself as it goes.

Three things happen when you do this together

Back and forth	You move, they copy. They laugh, you laugh back. That loop — a serve and a return — is the single most studied ingredient in early brain development, and it only happens with another person.
A lot of senses at once	Balance, body position, sight, sound and touch all firing together. A screen delivers one channel. A game of wheelbarrow walking delivers all of them.
Trying, missing, adjusting	The wobble is the work. A child who balances perfectly first time is not building anything — the correction is where the learning is.

None of this requires a program, a purchase or a specialist. It requires ten minutes, a bit of floor, and you joining in — which is the part that cannot be skipped.

Cross the middle

An invisible line runs down the center of the body, and reaching across it is harder than it looks — both sides have to work together and talk to each other. Reading a line of print does the same thing.

Cross crawl	March on the spot and touch each knee with the opposite hand. Slowly at first. Twenty of them.
Windmills	Feet apart, reach down and touch the opposite toe, then the other. Nice and slow.
Lazy eights	Draw a big sideways figure eight in the air with one hand and follow it with your eyes without moving your head. Then the other hand. Then both together.
Elbow to knee, standing	Same as cross crawl but lift the knee high and touch it with the far elbow.
Pat and rub	Pat your head with one hand and rub your tummy with the other. Then swap. Almost nobody gets this first time and that is the fun of it.
Draw two at once	A crayon in each hand. Draw a circle with both at the same time — first the same way, then mirror-image.
Cross-body catch	Toss a beanbag so they must catch it with the hand on the far side of their body.
Sideways scissors	Jumping jacks, but the arms cross in front and the legs cross behind.

Make it harder: Do it with eyes closed. Or add counting backward from twenty out loud while doing it — movement and thinking at once is much harder than either alone.

Balance

Balance is the brain constantly measuring where the body is and correcting. A child who is working hard to stay upright in a chair has less left over for anything else — which is why this matters more than it seems.

Flamingo	Stand on one leg. Count how long. Then the other leg. Then with eyes closed, which is much harder.
The line	A strip of tape on the floor. Walk it heel to toe. Then backwards. Then sideways. Then carrying a cup of water.
Curb walking	Any low wall or curb, with a hand held at first and then without.
Freeze on one foot	Music plays, you dance. Music stops, freeze on one foot and hold it.
Statues	Move around the room, and on the word <i>statue</i> hold whatever position you are in — however awkward — for ten seconds.
Log rolls	Arms above the head, roll the length of the room in a straight line. Harder than it sounds and very good for the balance system.
Spinning, then stopping	Five spins, then stop and stand still. The recovery is the exercise. Only a few and only on a soft floor.
Pillow crossing	Cushions on the floor as stepping stones. The floor is lava.

Make it harder: Balance on an unstable surface — a folded blanket or a cushion. Or close the eyes, which removes the easiest source of information and forces the balance system to do the work.

Rhythm and timing

Keeping a beat means predicting what comes next and matching it. The same timing system is involved in hearing the parts of a spoken word — which is why children who can keep a rhythm tend to find the sounds inside words easier.

Clap it back	You clap a short pattern. They clap it back. Start with three claps and build.
Pat-a-cake and hand clap games	Any of the traditional ones. They are traditional because they work.
Drum on anything	Pots, a table, knees. Keep a steady beat together, then take turns leading.
March to music	Left, right, in time. Add an arm swing on the opposite side.
Bounce and pass	Bounce a ball to each other on a steady count. Then speed up. Then slow down.
Jump rope	Even just swinging it and jumping over it once. Timing, coordination and rhythm together.
Syllable stomps	Say a word and stomp once per part. <i>El-e-phant</i> , three stomps. Use their name and everyone else's.
Echo songs	You sing a line, they sing it back. Volume, speed and silliness all optional.

Make it harder: Add a second layer — clap the rhythm while stepping a different one. Or clap on the silences instead of the beats.

Eyes that track

Following a moving object, and landing the eyes where you meant to, is exactly what a line of print will later require. It is worth building before there is anything to read.

Balloon keep-up	Do not let it touch the floor. A balloon moves slowly enough for young eyes to follow, which is the whole point.
Bubble popping	With one finger. Then the other hand. Then a specific finger.
Flashlight chase	Lights off. You move a torch beam on the ceiling and they follow it with their eyes, not their head.
Roll and catch	Sitting opposite each other, roll a ball back and forth. Then bounce it. Then throw it.
Beanbag targets	Buckets at different distances. Aim, throw, adjust.
Follow my thumb	Hold up a thumb and move it slowly — side to side, up and down, in a circle, toward the nose. Eyes follow, head stays still.
Find it fast	Spot the red things in the room. Then the round things. Then things that are both.
I Spy, moving	Same game, in the car, with things going past.

Make it harder: Keep the head still while only the eyes move — that is the harder version and the one that matters. Put a hand gently on their head if they cannot feel themselves doing it.

Heavy work and knowing where your body is

Pushing, pulling and carrying tell the brain where the body is and how much force it is using. It is also the most reliable way there is to settle a child who cannot sit still.

Wheelbarrow walking	You hold their ankles, they walk on their hands. Across the room and back.
Animal walks	Bear crawl on hands and feet. Crab walk facing up. Frog jumps. Snake slither.
Push the wall	Both hands flat, push hard for ten seconds. Then a chair, then each other, gently.
Carry the shopping	Genuinely useful, and the weight is the point.
Tug of war	A towel between you. Slow and steady rather than a yank.
Blanket rides	They sit on a blanket, you pull them across the floor.
Squeeze and pull	Playdough, bread dough, a stress ball, or wringing out a wet cloth.
Under and over	An obstacle course of chairs and cushions — under this, over that, around the other.

Make it harder: Add a second task. Carry something while walking the tape line. Do a bear crawl while naming animals. Two things at once is where the value is.

Two of you, one game

Everything above is better with a partner, and these need one. The coordination between two people is a different skill from coordination on your own — and it is where the laughing happens.

Mirror	Stand facing each other. One moves slowly, the other copies exactly, like a reflection. Then swap. No talking.
Row the boat	Sit facing, feet touching, hold hands and rock back and forth. Sing it.
Balloon between	Hold a balloon between two foreheads, or two backs, and walk across the room.
Pass it round	Stand back to back and pass a ball around — one way at waist height, then the other way overhead.
Follow the leader	Around the house, doing whatever the leader does. Swap often.
Copy the pose	You make a shape with your body. They copy it. Then they make one for you.
Partner stand-up	Sit back to back, link arms, and stand up together without using your hands.
Count together	Count to twenty out loud, taking turns, while doing cross crawls in time.

Make it harder: Do them silently, using only gestures. Or add a rule that changes halfway through and see who notices first.

How to actually do this

Ten minutes, most days

Not an hour once a week. Short and frequent beats long and occasional, every time. Before school, after dinner, waiting for something — any of these fit into the gaps.

Pick the level, then push it

Aim for something they manage about four times in five and have to work for. Too easy and nothing is being built. Too hard and they stop. That narrow band just past comfortable is where all of the value is — and it moves, so you have to keep moving with it.

Say that the hard bit is the point

When they wobble, miss, or get frustrated: **“that is the part where it is working.”** Children rarely hear this. Most of what they hear about difficulty implies they should be finding it easier.

It changes how a child responds to being stuck — and being stuck is going to happen a great deal in the years ahead.

Do it with them, not to them

Not supervising. Doing it. Badly, ideally — a child who watches you fail at pat-and-rub and laugh about it learns something about difficulty that no amount of encouragement conveys.

And stop while they still want more

The point at which it stops being fun is the point at which it stops working. Better to end early and have them ask again tomorrow.

A rough order to start in

Age	Where to start
Two to three	Rhythm and heavy work. Clap it back, drumming, animal walks, blanket rides, carrying things. Balance on the flat.
Three to five	All of it. Cross crawl, the line, flamingo, balloon keep-up, mirror, wheelbarrow. This is the richest age for this.
Five to eight	The same games with the harder versions — eyes closed, two things at once, silent partner games, rhythms with layers.

None of these have to be done in order and none of them are a test. If one is a hit, do that one for a month. Repetition is not boredom — it is the practice.

You cannot learn to ride a bike by reading about it. You get on, and you wobble, and the brain builds itself in the wobbling.

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