



## Ball Play to Promote Skill Development in Children

Barbara Luborsky, OTR/L

Playing ball offers a highly motivating, low cost way to help kids develop a broad array of skills which provide the basis for motor skill development and later academic function. Learning to write, for example, depends on the ability to control the eyes in coordinated fashion and to integrate the eyes with skilled fine motor output (the hands). Both of these skills depend on having strong core muscles, like the trunk of a tree supporting its branches. It is essential that that these skills become automatic so that the child can think while writing, rather than thinking about how to form letters. This ability to write automatically is one aspect of what is called fluency. The other aspects of fluency are speed and accuracy. When true fluency has been achieved, it is easy to write one's thoughts while simultaneously thinking about what one wants to say next. Because these skills are the precursors of a successful academic career, it makes sense to find ways to help our kids develop them-as early and as successfully as possible.



## Key Points

1. **Always structure for success**-If you begin tossing a ball with your child and she misses more than 75% of your throws, she will soon become frustrated and want to stop. To make both throwing and catching easier, move closer, throw more softly, and aim right at her hands.
2. **Give verbal and visual cues** such as, “Hands up!” (demonstrate) or “Ready?”
3. While you play, **consider the type of ball** you are using. When playing catch, use a ball that will be easy for the child to catch. If the ball is consistently “slipping through” your child’s hands, use a slightly larger ball. In some cases, just because a ball is larger, it may not be easier to use. For example, beach balls are often large, but may be too light for some children and that may make the task harder. A ball with some weight to it could help increase success by enhancing proprioceptive input, which is the muscle and joint sense.
4. **Grade the activity** - Make it harder by making the size of the target smaller, placing the target farther away, or changing the type of ball you use (smaller or heavier).
5. Many of these activities work on the similar skills in different ways. **To build skills children need repetition and practice.** They need to feel that they are competent, but also need the level of challenge to be enough that they are not bored. This is why you just keep introducing new and different ways to play!



## W-sitting

If your child is floppy, seems to slouch often, tends to “w-sit” or tires more easily than same aged peers, the problem may be weakness in the trunk muscles. To help your child develop better strength in the muscles of the trunk, try these ball activities

1. Roll prone over a peanut ball. Have your child alternately take weight on hands, then knees, as she rolls the ball or peanut forward and back.



2. Play ball games with a medicine ball
  - a. Use a medicine ball to play catch - begin by rolling the ball back and forth. Sit on the floor, a comfortable distance from your child. Depending on the child’s age and strength, use a ball weighing anywhere from 1-5 or even 6 pounds. You want it to feel heavy to the child, but not to be too much of a challenge to the child. Once your child can successfully roll the ball back to you, move a little farther away.

Some other ways to increase the challenge would be to move the child onto a small chair, a therapy ball or, seated straddling a bolster or peanut, or you could use a heavier ball.



- b. Make a game by adding onto a sequence of movements with the ball each time before the ball is rolled back. This will develop sequencing skills and memory. You can focus on specific skills by choosing the movements in the sequence to challenge the child in different ways.

For example:

To build arm strength, have the child lift the ball overhead with both hands 3 times before rolling it back to you.

You could then add to that sequence, a movement that brings the ball into the chest with bent arms, then extend the arms straight out to the front 5 times before rolling the ball back to you.

Adding elements to the sequence one by one will help to improve memory and sequencing skills as you build trunk strength.

To focus on trunk rotation and midline crossing, include elements such as touching the ball to one shoulder then the other, then touching the ball to one knee then the other, and then touching one hip then the other.



c. Toss the ball back and forth in a standing position-this requires a fair amount of strength as well as ability to catch. Do not try this until the child is able to catch a playground ball fairly well because the medicine ball can cause a jammed finger if the child fails to catch it, and instead it hits the extended finger at the fingertip.

3. If you are working or playing with a group, have the children line up one behind the other and pass the ball along the line by holding it in two hands and passing it over their heads.

Once it goes all the way down the line and back over heads, have the children pass it between their legs. This game can also be played seated, as in the photo. If you have enough children, the person in the front can run to the end of the line as soon as they pass the ball over their head so the line continually moves backwards!

A similar game can be played with 3-4 children in a circle, facing outwards. Using a large ball or a medicine ball, have children pass the ball to the right all the way around and then to the left.

4. Work on other ball activities that encourage midline crossing (see below).