

NAIT Movement Breaks at Home Guidance

Advice from Occupational Therapists and teachers

This guidance has been written by occupational therapy and teaching professionals. It is intended as a guide for parents who wish to support their child to be well-regulated when spending time at home.

Why do we have movement breaks?

Everybody benefits from physical movement. It makes it easier to focus attention, be ready to learn and enjoy activities. It reduces feelings of being overwhelmed or overloaded. Movement can be calming or 'regulating'.

Some children tend to lose focus when they are still or seated for a period of time. Others may be over-stimulated by events and activity or simply by noises, smells and busyness in the immediate environment. Movement breaks are used to provide sensory input through joints and muscles that is intense enough to calm those children who are over-excited, or to alert children who are feeling sleepy. The same activity can be effective for both.

What is a movement break?

A movement break (sometimes called a sensory break) is a planned activity that is different from what you have just been doing. They are predictable and desirable; they have a clear start and finish.

Movement breaks can:

- be for one child or for a few children together
- be timetabled across the day (e.g. every half hour) or happen at regular times (e.g. just before mealtimes or before reading a story)
- help to regulate a child before a less preferred activity (e.g. getting dressed or cleaning teeth)
- provide an opportunity to step away from an activity and return (e.g. watching movie clips on a tablet)
- support transition between two activities (e.g. computer game – movement break – lunch)
- be adapted to suit a child's interests or motivations e.g. include a favourite song or character
- require no equipment
- be fun!

Movement breaks work best when they are planned at regular intervals across the day. Providing predictable and engaging movement opportunities can help a child to retain a calm and regulated state and to avoid getting to a point where they are bored, frustrated or distressed.

Movement break ideas

Movement breaks can meet a range of sensory needs and preferences. Not all are desirable for every child. Knowing what kind of movement your child likes and does not like will help you to choose from these ideas. If a child is not enjoying an activity or expresses discomfort, stop and do not repeat.

Heavy work:

- Tug of war
- Carrying or lifting heavy items such as shopping bags or a filled laundry basket or back pack
- Actions to 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat'
- Helping to move light furniture

- Sweeping up

Pressing and squishing:

- Long, firm ‘bear hugs’
- Massage using firm pressure
- ‘Sausage roll’ – roll child up in a sheet so full body deep pressure is provided (making sure their head is out of the blanket and they can breathe easily)
- Play a game, puzzle or draw etc. when lying on their tummy
- Play dough - using tools and moulds/ squeezing and pinching/ making models
- ‘Squashy sandwich’ – make a ‘sandwich’ out of your child’s middle between sofa cushions. Gently add pressure as you pretend to put on pickles, cheese, lettuce, etc. (keep head clear of cushions and ensure that they can breathe easily)

Head upside down:

- Let the child lie over a gym or yoga ball on their tummy with their weight through their arms. Gently rock forward onto hands and back onto feet.
- ‘Steam roll’– roll a large gym or yoga ball over the child’s body whilst they are lying on their tummy (always lie them on their tummy to protect internal organs and always ensure that they can breathe easily)
- (Not too) rough and tumble play on a bed

Household Activities:

- Knead dough to make bread or biscuits
- Squeeze sponges or cloths, etc. (e.g. in the bath)
- Helping to make the bed by shaking out a duvet
- Play or work above shoulder height (e.g. cleaning windows)
- Spraying water from a spray bottle (e.g. to water plants)

1. Shake Game

This is a great body awareness game. It’s also fun, needs no equipment and can be done quickly.

- The adult starts as ‘leader’.
- The child or children stand where they can see the ‘leader’.
- The leader describes and demonstrates the actions required.
- Once a child understand the game, they could take a turn to be the leader.
- The leader explains and models that everyone is going to “draw a bowl” in the air by making a half circular movement that meets at the base with both hands. Everyone who is playing then dips their hands in their own imaginary bowl and, when they lift their hands out, their hands are shaking.
- The leader explains and models that the ‘shake’ is to be placed in another body part, e.g. shoulders, and touches that body part on themselves with their hands.
- Everyone copies and shakes the body part touched, no longer shaking their hands.
- The leader models touching the body part again to pass the shake back to their hands, “put the shake back in your hands”.
- Each person playing could have a turn to decide where the shake goes next on the body. Children quickly discover that some body parts are easier to shake than others but some tricky

ones are usually suggested, e.g. throat, little toe, nose, etc.! One body part that is frequently suggested is 'bottom' – just go with the flow!

- To finish the game, the leader models quickly touching all down their body and shaking their whole body, saying, "The shake is in your whole body" followed by dipping their shaking hands, back in the imaginary 'bowl' to put the shake away. Say, "Shake is finished."

2. Body Building

This game can be simple (one or two instructions) or complicated (using all of the instructions listed below). It is usually best to start with a simple version and add an action on once a child has mastered each action.

Before you start, sit facing your child, or, if there is more than one child playing, sit in a circle.

The adult is the 'leader' who models and describes the actions on their own body. The child is to copy the actions on their own body.

Full Instructions:

Both hands clasped on top of head and push down, feel it go down neck and spine, so sit up straight.

- Hands on back of head and push forwards
- Hands on forehead and push backwards
- Hands on side of head and squeeze
- Pull tops of ears and 'ping off'
- Pull middle of ears and 'ping off'
- Pull lobes of ears and 'ping off'
- Push down on shoulders
- 'Pat' breastbone and say "Ahhh" (most children love this bit and are keen to repeat)
- Push tummy in and feel ribs
- Put one arm out straight in front of you and with the other hand (fingers on top) squeeze down arm and rub elbow on the way
- Squeeze each finger with whole hand
- Repeat with other arm
- Do legs in same way, using both hands to squeeze. Rub knee on way down, rub ankle bones, squeeze heel, foot and toes
- Reach forward, trying to keep legs fully pressed to floor to encourage stretch and grasp toes
- Pat yourself on the back at the end

3. 'Heavy Work'

These activities provide more intensity of sensory input through resistive muscle actions.

Hot Seats:

Sit at front of a dining style chair and hold side edges of chair with a hand on either side. Brace arms and try to lift bottom from chair. Some children will need to keep feet on floor, and others will be

able to take their body weight through their arms. Hold for a second or two, and then relax. Repeat five times.

Push the Ceiling:

Sit on a chair, clasp hands above head and turn palms upwards. Push upwards towards ceiling through arms, hold for a second or two, and then relax. Repeat five times.

Neck Stretches:

Sit on floor or on a chair. Let head fall slowly forwards as far as is comfortable. Repeat twice. Let head fall slowly backwards as far as is comfortable. Lift head back to upright position. Repeat twice.

N.B. These exercises must not be done by children with Down syndrome.

'Owl' stretches:

Look over one shoulder, return head to front, look over other shoulder and return to front. Stretch neck to look as far over first shoulder as is comfortable, return to front and repeat with second shoulder. **N.B. These exercises must not be done by children with Down syndrome.**

Reach Forwards:

With hands together, stretch forwards trying to keep shoulders back. Repeat twice.

Shoulder Spirals:

Stand with arms out to the side at shoulder height. Begin by making small spirals with whole arm/hand. Gradually increase size of spirals. Spiral back to small spirals as at beginning. Aim to do this in both directions, and encourage children to keep shoulders and arms in line. This is a tiring exercise. Practise daily to increase shoulder stability and trunk strength.

Desk Presses:

Stand at a stable desk. Place both hands flat on desk. Press firmly through hands then relax. Repeat five times.

Toe Stretches

Sit on floor with legs extended. Stretch forward and hold toes. Hold briefly and relax. Repeat five times.

Elbow Squeezes:

Hold elbows, and give self a squeeze. Hold briefly then relax. Repeat five times.

Bunny Jumps:

Jump up from floor five times.

4. Sensory Circuits

Sensory circuits are another tool way of giving a child a movement break, using a specific order or structure (alerting, organising and calming). The order is important in improving a child's readiness for activity or learning and helping them to cope with the next part of their day.

Alerting Section

Aim is to provide opportunities for big/fast movements.

Organising Section

Aim is to provide activities that require the need to organise their body, plan their approach and do more than one thing at a time.

Calming Section

Aim is to provide input to ensure that as the child finishes the movement break and settles back to the next part of their day, they are well regulated. Slow/calm movements.

Plan the movements in this specific order.

Examples of Alerting

- Jumping on a trampette
- Running (running on the spot)
- 'Jumping Jacks'

Example of Organising

- Walking heel to toe
- Weaving in and out of cones
- Weave in and out of cones walking while balancing a bean bag or ball on a bat

Example of Calming

- Pick up and carry heavy balls
- Carry a 'weighted' backpack (e.g. back pack with 6 bean bags in or small amount of shopping)
- Commando crawl through a play tunnel/under the table/under chairs
- Push against a wall
- Chair push ups (see above)
- Push down on own head/shoulders/squeezing arms and thighs
- Finish by giving self a big cuddle