

Splinter Skills

As adults, we can make the mistake of applying the “shortest distance” theory to children’s development. For instance, give a child a pencil, show him the correct pencil grip, teach him how to write the letters, and have him go practice. We think, “Job done.” But here’s the thing: Practicing with a pencil is great if all you’re ever going to do with your hand is write. But what about painting? Or the piano? Or sign language, ballet, or baseball?

In early childhood, our focus needs to be on preparing the muscles for everything they may be called on to do (in and out of school). Otherwise, there’s a chance *splinter skills* may form.

Splinter skills are isolated, unrelated, and often unrelatable skills that may give the appearance of full physical competency but actually mask deficiencies. Often they involve muscle memory for specialized high-performance tasks, such as sports or dance. But there’s no need to focus on high performance just yet. In fact, a well-balanced profile of physical capabilities in the early years can make it easier to develop specialized skills for high performance later on.

Offering young children a wide variety of physical experiences is the best way to ensure well-balanced development. But of course, just like us, little ones have their preferences. For instance, if your preschooler loves playing with a soccer ball, that’s great. But encourage her to try other things as well. Introduce her to other fun games such as running, jumping, climbing, or walking along the cracks in the sidewalk.

And if she’s not enjoying a new activity, don’t push it. Go back to the soccer ball and return to the different game another time. But don’t give up! Keep introducing variety into your child’s physical “diet”—you both might be surprised by what she enjoys doing.

Finally, if you’re interested in an early sports program or dance class for your child, look for programs that promote physical and social exploration rather than rigid techniques. Specific skills will come easier if your child has a broad base of physical capabilities to draw on.

