



Can children
improve
coordination
through
involvement in
sport? ▶

Dr. Geraldine Van Gyn, associate professor in kinesiology at the University of Victoria, says coordination is the capability to control the body's actions in time within our environment, with body parts moving in an appropriate manner. Just as an orchestra works together to make music, the body parts must move in the correct direction with the right amount of force and at the right time to create a coordinated action.

By about age six, most children are able to perform basic skills such as walking, running, hopping, jumping, throwing, and catching. More complex skills such as skipping will be a challenge, and many children look awkward or uncoordinated when they try them for the first time. In order for children to learn how to skip, they must link the actions of walking and hopping, using the correct timing. For most sport skills, timing is one of the most difficult tasks to learn. Imagine how difficult it is to learn how to catch a thrown or batted ball on the run: actions must be coordinated to catch the ball and move the body to the right place at the right time.

Coordination naturally develops with age, but greatly improves with experience and practice. If you want a child to be an ace pitcher or hitter, you have to spend time tossing the ball after school and on weekends. The average child can develop most skills with experience.

Van Gyn says that children who appear clumsy or uncoordinated when first learning a sport skill may be reluctant to continue their participation. "It is important that a child's initial experience be successful and positive so that he or she will be eager to participate further. With practice, coordination will improve." Some sports such as baseball, soccer, and swimming can be modified to accommodate young children learning new skills. T-ball is a good example of how to modify a sport.

Growth spurts which occur during puberty may affect coordination, warns Van Gyn. As the body's length and weight change, awkwardness and lack of coordination may result. But if the child continues to practise, this awkwardness will eventually disappear.

"The more time the child spends experiencing different kinds of sport and practising moving in different environments, the better coordination will become," says Van Gyn. Involvement in sport can help children to become coordinated movers, but sport involvement will only continue if the experience is positive.