

Building **bodies** ready to

sit



Preparing
babies,
toddlers
and young
children
for **seated
learning**

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Introduction

Many ECD practitioners and parents are under increasing pressure to ‘get children school-ready,’ which often translates into inappropriate expectations such as preparing little ones to sit at a desk, hold a pencil, and focus for extended periods.

However, in early childhood, true readiness for seated tasks doesn’t begin with the desk – it begins with the whole BODY.

For babies, toddlers and young children, the ability to sit still and maintain good posture for learning is not something that develops by simply being placed at a table. In fact, forcing premature seated tasks can be harmful, leading to postural issues, reduced muscle tone, poor concentration and even long-term aversions to learning.

Instead, we need to scaffold this skill. That means recognising the physical, sensory, emotional and neurological building blocks that contribute to “school sitting.” These foundations are developed naturally through purposeful play, movement, and responsive interaction – not passive sitting.

This manual is designed to guide ECD practitioners in understanding what true postural readiness looks like, how to support it in developmentally appropriate ways, and how to create environments that build the underlying skills required for primary school desk work — without putting babies and toddlers at desks.

From tummy time to table time: encouraging healthy movement in young children

Movement is crucial for children aged 0 to 5 years because it's how they explore, learn and develop physically and cognitively. In early childhood (0 to 5 years), formal sitting is a skill that develops gradually. It is not natural to place children in formal seated positions before the age of 5. With this said, children can still engage in

What skills do we need to sit?



activities presented at a table. The position they take at the table can however vary between standing, kneeling or non-fixed sitting on a chair e.g. with both legs, one leg or side sitting on the chair, frequently changing position. In the age group 0 to 5 years the focus should be on building attention, self-regulation and engagement through short, meaningful seated activities combined with lots of movement and play.

Movement guidelines

Infants and toddlers (0 to 2 years)

Infants (0 to 12 months) and toddlers (1 to 2 years) should be encouraged to engage in free movement such as rolling, reaching, crawling and kicking. They should not be strapped in and unable to move for more than half an hour at a time. Restrictive equipment such as bouncers, swings, car seats and walking rings should be avoided for extended periods. Infants should spend at least 30 minutes per day in tummy time (when awake). The more time infants spend on floor time, the better for their development. Young toddlers should be encouraged to engage in unstructured and supervised outdoor play.

Preschoolers (3, 4 and 5 years)

Preschoolers should also not be strapped in and unable to move for more than half an hour at a time. It is also advised that they should not sit for extended periods. When seated at a table, it is important to keep in mind that, as mentioned above, chair and table seating should not be static or formal. The children should move in their chairs and frequently change their position. In older preschoolers, floor seating is still recommended. It is, however, important to maintain a proper seated position on the carpet. The image on the next page demonstrates different beneficial sitting positions when seated on the floor.

W-sitting

W-sitting is not recommended as in this position, a child's base of support is wider, and their centre of gravity is lower to the ground, allowing for increased stability through the hips rather than developing their core muscles. It's a convenient position for play because your core does not need to work as hard on keeping your balance and maintaining a seated position. In this position, children are not as free to move as in correct seating positions. W-sitting limits trunk rotation and children can't shift their weight from side to side. This affects the development of balance reactions and the ability to cross midline. When making use of this position for an extended period, hip and leg muscles can become shortened and tight which may affect their gait pattern.



Sitting choices

Mountain

Both legs pulled up to your chest like a mountain



On belly

Lying on your belly, arms bent and tucked under your chest – leaning on your elbows



Long and straight

Both legs straight, hands on your thighs



Up and down

One leg straight, one leg pulled up to your chest, arms holding your pulled leg up



Criss cross

Legs crossed, hands in your lap or on your knees



Mermaid

Legs are bent to one side like a mermaid



Formal sitting guidelines for ages 5 and older

These guidelines should inform your available table seating options at any age.

- Feet: Should be flat on the floor or on a footrest to provide stability.
- Ankles: Bent at a 90-degree angle.
- Knees: Bent at a 90-degree angle.
- Hips: Bent at a 90-degree angle.
- Back: Straight and supported by the back of the chair.
- Elbows: Should rest comfortably on the table without raising their shoulders.
- Table height: Should be at a level where the child's elbows can rest on the table without hunching their shoulders.

Please refer to the infographic on the next page.

Developing age-appropriate sitting skills

Balance

Babies

(0 to 18 months)

- Begin developing balance through tummy time, rolling and sitting with support.
- Encourage reaching while seated, shifting weight and using both hands during play.
- Rocking, gentle swaying and baby yoga help stimulate the vestibular system.

Toddlers

(18 months to 3 years)

- Balance improves through walking, climbing, jumping and squatting.
- Activities like dancing, riding toys and soft play obstacle courses support postural control.
- Allow time for barefoot play to build strong foot muscles and improve coordination.

Young children

(3 to 5 years)

- Focus shifts to dynamic balance – staying steady while moving.
- Games like hopscotch, balance beams, yoga poses and wheelbarrow walks are excellent.
- Encourage crossing midline (e.g. touching opposite foot with hand) to build brain-body coordination.

Correct seated posture for children



Elbows at sides

Desk height at elbow-level

Feet flat on the floor

Hips, knees and ankles at 90°

Muscle control (tone)

Babies

- Develop tone through tummy time, rolling and pushing up.
- Gentle resistance like pushing against caregiver's hands builds strength.

Toddlers

- Activities like climbing, pulling, carrying objects develop tone.
- Play that includes resistance (push/pull toys) is key.

Young children

- Include core-building games like animal walks and wheelbarrow races.
- Encourage heavy work: moving chairs, carrying books or watering plants.

Stable head and shoulders

Babies

- Strengthen with tummy time, lifting head and turning to sounds.
- Track objects with eyes while head stays steady.

Toddlers

- Encourage throwing, reaching, scooping and catching.
- Play with overhead items or hanging toys.

Young children

- Promote drawing on vertical surfaces (e.g., easels).
- Build shoulder strength through crawling and gross motor play.

Stable trunk

Babies

- Core stability starts with rolling, sitting unsupported and crawling.
- Use wobbly surfaces like cushions or caregiver's lap.

Toddlers

- Practise climbing, dancing, kneeling play and floor-sitting.
- Encourage balance games and reaching in different directions.

Young children

- Use core-building activities: yoga, crab walks, sit-ups in play.
- Try balance discs or kneeling activities at tables.

Motivation

Babies

- Motivated to move by toys just out of reach or caregiver's face/voice.
- Use mirrors and high-contrast objects to engage them.

Toddlers

- Provide purposeful tasks: pulling a wagon, stacking, pretend cooking.
- Praise effort, not just outcome.

Young children

- Create inviting spaces that encourage exploration.
- Give them autonomy in activity choice to boost intrinsic motivation.

Anti-gravity pull

Babies

- Build it by lifting head, pushing up on arms and kicking in the air.
- Baby yoga and gentle swinging help too.

Toddlers

- Activities that go upwards: climbing, standing up from floor, reaching.
- Use ramps, slides and steps.

Young children

- Focus on vertical movements: climbing frames, monkey bars, rope pulls.
- Include push-ups against the wall or crawling uphill.

Reflexes

Moro Reflex (startle reflex)

- Appears at birth, fades around 4 to 6 months.
- Triggered by sudden movements or loud sounds.
- Helps alert caregivers to danger.
- If not integrated, may lead to poor balance, hypersensitivity and difficulty sitting still.
- Support with tummy time, gentle rocking and secure wrapping.

ATNR (Asymmetrical Tonic Neck Reflex)

- Appears at birth, fades around 6 to 7 months.
- Head turns to one side, arm/leg on that side extend while the other side bends.
- If not integrated, can impact handwriting and posture.
- Support with rolling, hand-to-mouth play and cross-body movements.

STNR (Symmetrical Tonic Neck Reflex)

- Appears around 6 to 9 months, fades by 11 months.
- Head down = arms bend, legs extend; head up = arms straighten, legs bend.
- If retained, may lead to slumping and difficulty focusing while sitting.
- Support with crawling, tunnel play and transitions between positions.

TLR (Tonic Labyrinthine Reflex)

- Appears at birth, fades around 3,5 years.
- Head back = body extends; head forward = body curls.
- If retained, may cause poor balance and posture issues.

- Support with tummy time, rocking games and rolling activities.

Good sensation (sensory processing)

Babies

- Explore different textures, temperatures and sounds.
- Use gentle massage, water play and sensory mats.

Toddlers

- Support tactile play (sand, slime, clay).
- Include deep pressure activities like big hugs or crawling under cushions.

Young children

- Offer multi-sensory tasks: playdough, painting, sound matching.
- Watch for sensory sensitivities and adjust as needed.

Restrictive equipment

Important note on walkers and jumpers

When discussing walking rings, we can include jumpers too. Many caregivers believe these tools help with walking development, but this is a misconception.

Do baby walkers and jumpers help my baby learn to walk?

NO – baby walkers and jumpers do not help a baby develop their walking. In fact, walkers and jumpers can impede or delay your baby achieving these important milestones. The more time babies spend in a walker or a jumper, the more delay they experience.

Instead, encourage babies to spend time on the floor exploring, crawling, pulling themselves up, cruising along furniture and practising balance naturally.

Highchairs in baby hubs

Bad posture caused by insufficient chair support strains your back and neck muscles, leading to discomfort and possible long-term issues. A chair that does not provide adequate back support or fails to follow the natural curvature of the spine may force the baby's body into abnormal positions.

What is the 90-90-90 rule for highchairs?

The 90-90-90 rule refers to the ideal seated posture in a highchair:

- 90-degree angle at the hips
- 90-degree angle at the knees
- 90-degree angle at the ankles

This posture supports safe eating practices, particularly during baby-led weaning or while feeding purées. It promotes physical stability and aids digestion.

Key features to look for in a highchair

- **Five-point harness:** Secures your baby at the shoulders, waist and between the legs to prevent slipping or accidents.
- **Stability:** A wide, sturdy base prevents tipping. If the highchair has wheels, ensure they are lockable.
- **Proper placement:** Keep away from counters, hot surfaces, sockets and electrical cords. Never leave a baby unattended.
- **Regular cleaning:** Clean regularly and inspect for any signs of wear or damage to maintain hygiene and safety.

Important note

Where possible, avoid using highchairs beyond feeding times. They should not be used for learning activities or extended sitting. Where possible, use a low chair for feeding only, allowing babies more natural, supported freedom of movement during play and learning.



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