

The movement story of many Kiwi kids - not so happy ever after?

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Apologies as most of my recent editorials have focused on kids' sport – and here I go again. I recently attended a youth athlete development conference which re-ignited my interest in how kids develop movement. This was a path I started to walk when undertaking my PhD some years ago. My interest was in lower extremity movement patterns of youth and potential links to overuse injuries. This was inspired by the work of well-known American physical therapist, Dr Shirley Sahrman and my own work as a physiotherapist with Graeme and Steve White here in New Zealand. Sahrman's work on the diagnosis and treatment of movement impairment syndromes always appealed to me as a way to look past the diagnosis to the cause of the problem. Unfortunately, I quickly learnt that PhD proposals rely heavily on the availability of reliable tests, which were scarce in the movement world and thus the PhD focused on the development of reliable movement tests, rather than the development of kids' movement patterns!

So it was great to listen to American physical therapist Jeff Moreno talking at the youth athlete conference about what he termed a kids 'movement story'. As an aside I'm not sure when you should start referring to kids as 'athletes' rather than just kids who play sport! - but let's debate that another day. A well-known reason for kids dropping out of sport (or not engaging in the first place) is a lack of movement competency. One of Jeff

Moreno's contentions is that a key indicator of good movement ability when kids are older is the amount of movement banking they do when they are younger – a significant chapter in their movement story. Movement banking was what Jeff thought occurs during the unstructured, deliberate play (sometimes called 'free play'), that happens when kids play on the street and in the park with their mates. Nobody is there telling them what to do, they have to work out how to move effectively - the skate part was cited as an excellent example of an environment where a kid could bank a lot of movement (and probably a few fractures - all part of the learning!). We recently showed in a study of Kiwi kids that more free play may reduce the risk of overuse injury in sport. It has been suggested by others that this protective effect of free play may be the result of more diverse movement development – more deposits in the movement bank and likely a richer movement story? Jeff's thinking aligns with comments I have made before where I've likened healthy movement development to a healthy diet – you need lots of colours on your plate!

So how do we promote more movement banking in our kids so they live happily ever after? Simply put, do parents just need to get their kids to close their devices, switch off the screens, and kick them out of the house more so they can play? Probably a good start, but kids need time to engage in free play and this likely means they need to reduce the amount of structured organised sport they

participate in. I've suggested before that one way to achieve this would be for sports to delay representative team ages (congratulations to Netball NZ who have recently made a move in this direction). Young kids would then have a lot more time for movement banking at the local park with their mates! This week I've been watching the FIFA U17 women's world cup and I congratulate the team on a great achievement and creating history for NZ Football. I also recently watched my nephew run in the 200m at the Youth Olympics. Everyone at both events looked to be having a great time – but representing your country at 15, 16 years old (and as young as 12 years old in some sports!) is it really necessary – why the rush? Do these structures mean that too many young kids (note I haven't called them athletes!) end up time poor, juggling too many games, trainings and school work? Is there any time left to bank some movement with their mates at the park? An additional advantage of delaying representative selections would be to avoid the well documented relative age effect and the effects of maturation variability – delayed selection would significantly decrease the effect of both.

Jeff Moreno also suggested that movement was acquired and then learned in a similar manner to a popular theory underlying how kids learn language. The acquisition learning theory suggests language is acquired before it is learned. The acquisition stage involving a subconscious process reliant on meaningful interaction with the language. This is followed by the learning stage which is a product of more formal instruction and includes conscious processes resulting in knowledge about the language (e.g. grammar rules). According to Stephen Krashen who proposed the theory, acquisition is more important

than learning. If this is true of movement development then young kids need to get out on the street and down to the park to immerse themselves in subconscious movement banking!

Movement learning is still important and perhaps we are letting Kiwi kids down here as well. Coming from a family of primary school teachers trained in the 60s my parents have often commented on the lack of quality physical education available to kids in today's primary schools. They suggest that teacher training back in their day prepared teachers to be more confident and effective in teaching movement ability, alongside maths and reading! These days it appears movement education is a very poor cousin to the three R's in our primary education system.

It seems to me there is a lot to be said for Jeff's idea of encouraging movement banking in our kids. There's a good chance it would result in more of them developing a rich and colourful movement story that has a happy ever after ending!