When teachers break up the day with transformers, many topsy-turvy children become better learners. These simple movement experiences can prepare children mentally and physically to transition to the next activity. This article gives examples of transformers that offer plenty of variety to keep children in preschool through second grade interested throughout the year.

Mind and body connections

Engaging the brain through movement is central to learning (Jensen 2004). Kinesthetic movement engages the cerebellum, the part of the brain that affects movement and timing (Salman 2002). And movement activities have an impact on more than just physical learning. Because each developmental domain—physical, social, emotional, cognitive—is closely related to the others, physical development affects other kinds of learning. For example,

When babies begin to crawl or walk, their ability to explore the world expands, and their mobility, in turn, affects their cognitive development. Likewise, children's language skill affects their ability to establish social relationships with adults and other children, just as their skill in social interaction can support or impede their language development. (NAEYC 1996, 5).

Jensen states that for activities to engage the brain and stimulate learning and development, they must be novel, challenging, nonthreatening, and emotionally stimulating (2004). That is, activities must vary in their problem-solving content and process; be appropriate for children's developmental levels; invite everyone's participation; and evoke a variety of emotions, like excitement, joy, resolve (Jensen 2004).

Research shows that when activities engage children in novel ways, young learners can better express ideas and focus their energy (Zachopoulou et al. 2006). Incorporating varied movement experiences in the classroom schedule can help increase children's focus, improve balance and coordination, and coordinate the mind and body. The transformers approach can engage and focus children while meeting Jensen's criteria to stimulate learning.

Transformers as daily movement experiences

Young children have a limited attention span and need more time to connect new information with prior learning. Research shows that most young children cannot process information for extended periods of time (Pellegrini & Bohn 2005). Movement experiences throughout the day give children time to better process what they are learning.

Regularly scheduled movement experiences may also serve as coping strategies for children with shorter attention spans (Hall 2007). Research shows that it is not enough to change the components of a cognitive learning activity, like moving from reading to math; children require actual breaks in instruction to internalize new knowledge (Bjorklund & Green 1992).

Engaging successfully in movement activities with their classmates can be a source of joy for all children and can create a sense of belonging and ownership. Children learn actions and chants quickly, and they enjoy doing the call-and-response activities as a group. Soon one group can call and the other respond. Transformers lend themselves to a variety of skill levels and settings, and teachers can use them throughout the day.

When activities engage children in novel ways, young learners can better express ideas and focus their energy.

Julia Coleman Vagovic, EdS, teaches physical education classes daily, prekindergarten through fifth grade, at Monte Sano Elementary School in Augusta, Georgia. She advocates increasing children's physical activity and has presented locally and nationally on the topic.

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Establishing movement activities

The daily schedule can include specific times for movement activities, times when children tend to be fidgety or low on energy. Below are explanations of movement activities for five times of the day: morning, mid morning, after lunch, and afternoon or after nap (depending on whether children in your class nap). Some are performed with chants or songs. You can create your own transformer base by choosing a few components that match the skill levels of the children in your classroom and fit with your teaching style.

Here are a few tips to keep in mind when leading movement activities with children:
• Begin and end each activity with deep, slow breaths to center the mind.
• Count or sing to make the routines easier for children to remember.
• Use helicopter spins (explained in “Refocus in Mid Morning,” p. 28) to teach spatial awareness.
• Model the movements—explain, demonstrate, and let children practice.
• Follow an eight count for repetitions, as most of the rhythms and chants are in 4/4 time.

Begin the transformers by discussing a few guidelines with children. For example, you might remind children to “Use your inside voices” and “Concentrate on the body part you are moving.” Have children practice taking deep breaths, focusing on inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth. Ask them, “Can you hear the quiet sound of your breath?”

Clear presentation is critical in using transformers. Patiently model new exercises or variations, being sure all children have a complete grasp of the movements involved so everyone can perform competently. Start small and build onto a transformer over time. Children are likely to experience less frustration and more success if you add to already familiar transformers instead of frequently introducing new ones. Building on familiar exercises also brings a sense of novelty while allowing children to use their prior knowledge.

The following movement experiences include many steps and variations, so teachers can introduce new twists over time. Use the steps suggested here, or create your own!

Focus energy in the morning

Deep breathing and a strong core are the foundation of all transformers. Including these basics in the first transformers of the day reminds children how to perform them correctly. Start by leading the children in Early Morning Big Breaths to increase oxygen to the brain, improve posture, and increase attentiveness. Explain to children,

1. Stand tall with your core strong.
2. Place your hands on your rib cage.
3. Breathe slowly and deeply.
4. Breathe deeply again, raising your arms overhead as you inhale and puffing out your cheeks and lowering your arms as you exhale.
5. Inhale slowly and exhale, making a quiet sound: Shhhhhhhhhhh.

When children take big breaths with their hands on their ribs, they can feel their rib cage expand and contract. Have them puff their cheeks and “blow like the wind” when exhaling. Using imagery makes transformers fun and the steps easier to remember.

To help children grasp the concept of tightening the core, lead them in placing their hands on their stomachs and drumming lightly. Explain that this is the body’s center, which helps with balance when we tighten it. Have children lean back slightly while still drumming, to sense the tightened stomach muscles. Tell them to use their tightened core muscles to help them stand up straight. All say shhhhhhhhhhh, with hands on the stomach to feel the diaphragm tighten.
Lead the children in standing straight and tall like a tree, with feet firmly planted. Have them slowly bend their knees, keeping feet flat, then straighten their legs to stand tall again. Next, have children bend the knees and sway gently and slowly from the waist, side-to-side and front-to-back, like trees swaying in the breeze.

In another activity, have the children lean over and scoop up imaginary leaves from the floor, then stand up and release them overhead. Moving from low, with the head upside down, to high engages the vestibular system, located in the inner ear, which is responsible for balance. This also helps children learn where their bodies begin and end in relation to other objects (Aldrich & Shelly 2006).

Next, the children stretch arms outward like the branches of a tree and make small arm circles, forward with palms down and then backward with palms up. Have them drop their arms and shrug shoulders up and down, up and down. End by circling shoulders up, back, and down and taking more deep breaths.

Refocus in mid morning

Side spins or helicopter spins (Dennison & Dennison 1989) cross the body’s center line to integrate the left and right sides of the brain and increase brain activity. Lead the children in Late Morning Spins to improve their spatial orientation—their sense of their body’s position in relation to others nearby—and to engage the left and right brain and the vestibular system:

1. Stand tall with knees soft, but keeping the core strong.
2. Breathe slowly and deeply.
3. Stretch out your arms to the sides, with feet apart.
4. Twist your arms and torso from side to side, like a helicopter blade, keeping one foot slightly lifted to prevent back discomfort.

Next, have children reach up with alternating hands, as if climbing a ladder. They complete the experience by taking deep breaths.

Another activity to engage the vestibular system incorporates a call-and-response technique. The teacher calls, “Where are you?” Children stand straight and tall and respond, “Here I am!” The teacher says, “Ready?” and then everyone repeats the following rhyme and touches the appropriate body part:

Head, shoulders, knees, and toes;
Ankles, elbows, ears, and nose!

After lunch explorations and marching

In many elementary schools children have recess after lunch—a natural and healthy progression. Recess is a vitally important time, when children choose their own activities and are free to explore without teacher direction (Pellegrini 2005).

In early afternoon introduce movements using opposites, to engage the left and right sides of the brain. For children in primary grades who no longer nap, after lunch explorations combat lethargy. Start by leading After Lunch Marshmallow Marching:

1. Stand tall with knees soft, keeping the core strong.
2. Breathe slowly and deeply.
3. March in place as if in slow motion, with quiet feet.
4. Swing arms across your body in sync with your marching feet, tapping the hand to the opposite knee with each step.

Traditional call-and-response songs and chants, like “Che Che Koolay” and “Going on a Lion Hunt,” engage learners.

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kinesthetically. Lead the children in “Che Che Koolay,” a musical call-and-response activity from Ghana, demonstrating the motions for each response. (Find the words, with video and audio, at www.cyloong.com/Multicultural/AfricanAmerican.html.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher (solo)</th>
<th>Children (echo)</th>
<th>Motion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Che che koolay</td>
<td>Che che koolay</td>
<td>Hands on head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Che che kofee sa</td>
<td>Che che kofee sa</td>
<td>Hands on shoulders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kofee salanga</td>
<td>Kofee salanga</td>
<td>Hands on waist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kakaashee langa</td>
<td>Kakaashee langa</td>
<td>Hands on knees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koommadyeday</td>
<td>Koommadyeday</td>
<td>Hands touch toes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Che a ehdai</td>
<td>Che a ehdai</td>
<td>Everyone squats low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Going on a Lion Hunt” is too long to include here, but you can find this chant online, at www.songsforteaching.com/chants/lionhunt.htm.

Afternoon balance and spatial orientation

In classrooms where napping is no longer part of the day, invigorate children with a break for Afternoon Rock and Roll. This movement activity improves balance and engages the front and back of the brain and the vestibular system.

Direct the children to

1. Stand tall, keeping knees soft (slightly bent) and the core strong.
2. Breathe slowly and deeply. Focus your eyes on something not moving.
3. Rock back and forth: forward to toes and backward to heels.
4. Rock forward and stop, then backward and stop.
5. Stand, with knees still soft, and roll forearms in front of the body. Reverse the direction of the roll.
6. Continue rolling arms and move them downward toward the earth and upward toward the sky. (Variations: slow/fast, stop/go.)

The Hand Jive is a classic, rhythmic activity that is easy to learn and fun to do. Children may sit or stand to perform it. Calling out words (left column, below) for each movement (right column, below) helps children remember the motions. The teacher may also give a cue for everyone to freeze on the second hitchhiker thumb, to transition to the next activity (Vagovic & Dohoney 2007).

- Pat, pat Pat thighs two times.
- Clap, clap Clap hands two times.
- Over, over Cross hands (like big scissors) two times.
- Under, under Switch the top and bottom hands and cross twice again.
- Potato, potato Switch the top and bottom fists and bump them twice.
- Thumb, thumb Pump thumb back over shoulder (hitchhiker) two times.
- Thumb, thumb Repeat the thumb-over-the-shoulder movement twice with the other hand.

Another activity, Toe Tapping, energizes the legs and feet while calling for concentration. Children can tap their toes while seated. Each round becomes more demanding! Instead of tapping, patting the lap may be easier for younger children to learn. Lead the children in these repetitions:

- Tap the right foot 8 times, tap the left foot 8 times. 1 set
- Tap the right foot 4 times, tap the left foot 4 times. 2 sets
- Tap the right foot 2 times, tap the left foot 2 times. 4 sets
- Tap the right foot 1 time, tap the left foot 1 time. 8 sets

Wake-up after nap time

Waking up their bodies is a favorite routine for preschoolers and helps them begin to focus on afternoon activities. Gently lead them in After-Rest Wake Up, which helps children awaken gradually while identifying parts of the body. These are the movements:

1. Tap the fingertips together.
2. Pat the hands together, then pat each arm.
3. Pat the stomach, sides, and back.
4. Pat the thighs, knees, shins, and ankles.
5. Pat your hair, wiggle the ears, lift the eyebrows, and wrinkle the nose.
Speak softly while tapping fingertips together, and say, “Wake up, fingers.” Continue the warm-up with hands, arms, torso, legs, and head. Children will respond to your cues, gently patting each body part as it is named.

Modify the original directions, saying, “Rise and shine” instead of “Wake up.” Children respond by engaging in more vigorous motions. For example, for “Rise and shine, fingers,” direct children to flex their fingers apart and together or to curl and uncurl them. For “Rise and shine, arms,” they bend and straighten the arms. After waking their bodies, preschoolers will be ready for the rest of the day.

**Resources for Movement Activities**

Learn more about developmentally appropriate movement activities for young children in these resources.

**Books and articles**


**Web sites**

Dr. Chet-Yeng Loong: Early Childhood Music Specialist offers music, chants, songs, and games from multicultural repertoires, including African, Chinese, Hispanic, Islamic, Japanese, Native American, and Filipino, many with links to audio and video files. [www.cyloong.com](http://www.cyloong.com)

*Songs for Teaching: Using Music to Promote Learning* is a source for educational music, with links to numerous sites for teachers and for parents. [www.songsforteaching.com](http://www.songsforteaching.com)
Conclusion

Transformer movement experiences can help children focus and can offer opportunities to connect mind and body. These uplifting activities help teachers build an atmosphere of trust that encourages children and adults to think, learn, and interact within and beyond the classroom walls.

References


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