

FEATURE FOCUS:

Static Balance and the River Stones



Teachers often tell us that some children have problems with their balance. But did you know that there are in fact three different types of balance (see box)? When these all work well together, we move elegantly, smoothly and efficiently. Balanceability helps you pinpoint what type of balance children find difficult and how to help them achieve dramatic improvements.

THREE TYPES OF BALANCE

Static balance.

This is the ability to hold a position – sitting on a stool, for example.

Proactive balance.

This is predicting what you need to do to keep your balance a split second before you do it. When you jump from the floor onto a soft mat, for example, you know instinctively how much tension and elasticity to apply in your legs and how to regain your balance when you land.

Dynamic balance.

This is when you move and keep your balance at the same time. Acceleration and speed help, because the vestibular system (which coordinates movement with balance) works to keep you from falling. (Just think of someone flailing their arms around when they stumble.) A child learning to ride a bicycle will find it easier to balance if the bicycle is going faster.

Mark is a very active five-year-old boy. He is good at running and boisterous play, and he rides a bicycle well. But when physiotherapist Hannah Harboe met him, she found that Mark couldn't stand still – literally. If Mark stopped moving, he would fall to the ground. At mealtimes, he would fall from his chair unless he rested his head on the table. When playing on the floor, he couldn't sit, but had to lie down. Mark would often get chided by adults, who kept telling him to take it easy and relax.

Hannah quickly realised that Mark found dynamic balance easy and had good proactive balance. But it was clear that he found static balance and physical stability difficult – so much so that when he did relax, he lost his balance.

Hannah set Mark a challenge using the multi-coloured Balanceability River Stones. She placed a high stone in the middle and scattered smaller ones around it. She asked Mark to stand on the high stone ('base'). She then told him to put one foot on a stone of a certain colour while keeping the other foot on base. Each time Hannah called a new colour, Mark had to go back to base (both feet on the big stone) and then decide which foot to use to step on to the colour Hannah called.

This exercise focused specifically on static balance. "Mark had to make a special effort to keep his balance when both feet were on the high River Stone," explained Hannah. "He also had to allow for the difference in height when his feet were on two stones." The exercise also encouraged Mark to slow down. "At first, he would rush and forget to go back to base, which made us both chuckle," said Hannah. "But when he concentrated, he got it right, which gave him a sense of achievement."

Hannah explained that this exercise can easily be adapted depending on the child's ability. "An easier game would be to lay all the River Stones randomly and ask Mark to stand on different colours. To make it more challenging, I could take my time choosing a new colour so that Mark had to spend longer keeping his balance while straddled between River Stones of different heights." Hannah could also have switched between stones in front and behind base, and to the left or right of it, or specify which foot Mark should use rather than letting him decide.

After a few minutes of playing with the Balanceability River Stones, Mark no longer made mistakes.

"He mastered the game, slowed down and his static balance improved significantly," said Hannah. "We also had a lot of fun!"

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