



# Fine Balance

By Margaret Sasse, director of Toddler Kindy GymbaROO

**BALANCE** is the ability to take up and maintain a body position against the forces of gravity. Without balance we would simply stumble and fall over.

**BALANCE** develops from the time an infant first raises its head against the forces of gravity. As its brain puts together messages from the inner ear, the neck muscles and the eyes, the infant, with head raised and held steady, looks at the world. The vital building blocks of learning have begun.

Early childhood patterns of movement and the attainment of balance depend on this coming together of messages from muscles, ligaments, inner ear and eyes. Through much practice the infant learns to rise against gravity and **BALANCE** his body – experience is a superb teacher. **BUT** if the infant is not receiving good messages from his body parts due to poor muscle tone, visual difficulties, lack of movement or illnesses such as inner ear infections, he will be slow to develop **BALANCE**.

For instance, if a child has no slopes to practice walking or running up and down to practice balancing one side and then the other (balance is acquired through imbalance), or no stairs to learn to balance on one leg as they go up and down, then he will miss out on important experiences which help develop the ability to move rapidly through space – and stay upright! Such children may be clumsy, walk into things, be frightened of heights or even have no fear at all – because they are unable to judge distances. They may find turning somersaults threatening because

they do not know where they are in space. Yet, these activities are necessary and part of early childhood development. They generally do not need to be encouraged, just provide the right environment.

Even a seemingly small ‘hiccup’ in the area of balance can lead to immaturity in later skills and may even cause learning difficulties by school age.

## BALANCE MATTERS

To help children develop balance, learn about activities which are not only fun, but also stimulate the inner ear, which has many connections to the area of Brain which controls **BALANCE**.

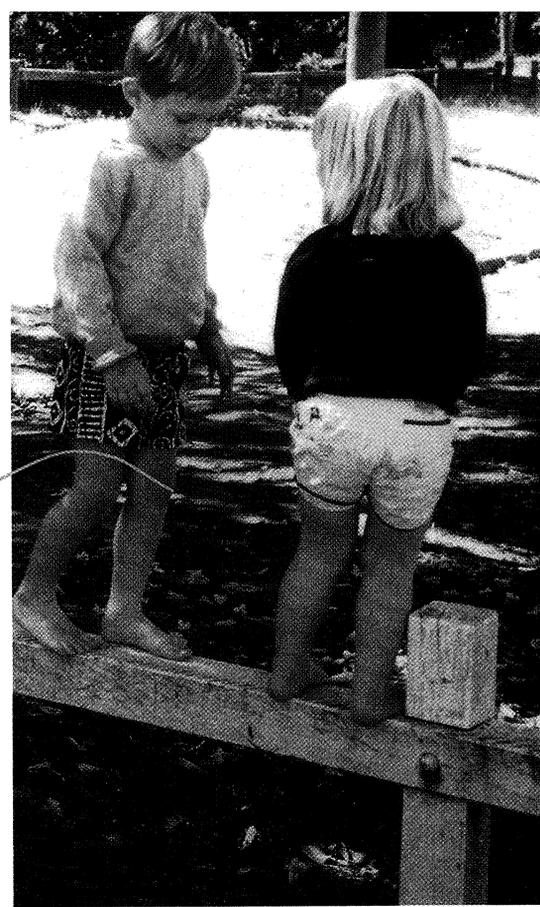
Inner ear stimulation is called **VESTIBULAR** stimulation. Fluid in the inner ear passes over nerve endings, sending messages to the brain about the position of the body in space, and helping the young child counter gravity, control eye movements as well as attain **BALANCE**.

Short bouts of **VESTIBULAR** stimulation (no more than 2 minutes) are more effective than long periods.

## A BALANCING ACT

Here are some great ways to provide joy to your little one and at the same time help them in the attainment of **BALANCE**:

Pram rides for the very little ones – be sure that the pram bounces a bit – the old rocking cradle and rocking chair are comforting to the infant **BECAUSE** they provide **VESTIBULAR** stimulation.



Playing with your infant on large beach balls, rocking them back and forth on their backs and fronts.

Swing your infant between two people in a blanket, toss them about ‘gently’- they love it!

Roll your toddler up in a blanket and then unroll him – leave his head so he can see, otherwise he may get frightened

Sing and bounce your infant and later rock your toddler on your knees to nursery rhymes.

Dance, swing and jiggle your infant in your arms.

Encourage all sorts of jumping and being frogs etc. as children get a little bigger.

Young children love to skip – hopping first on one foot and then the other **FAST**. No one teaches them to do this - it is simply part of nature's plan.

Walking along fence railings (a beam or large log will do) is a firm favourite. No one needs to encourage these youngsters, everyone wants to play this game. ■