



STRONGER EVERY DAY:

The School Environment as
a Therapeutic Space

Strength in Every Body

Who this toolkit is for:
For all teaching staff



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 Children who are active now are more likely to maintain healthy habits into adulthood

Welcome!

A practical Toolkit for Schools

Strength • Balance • Belonging

This toolkit supports schools in creating environments and routines where strength, balance, and movement are part of everyday school life – not just in physical education (PE), but across the whole school day. A complementary version is also available for parents and caregivers.

This toolkit has been funded by the Department for Education’s **Inclusion 2028** grant which aims to increase the chances and choices for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) in physical education, school sport and physical activity.

It’s for all pupils, including those with SEND, and supports national guidance and therapeutic principles.

This toolkit was co created with Sport for Confidence, a Community Health Service that combines Occupational Therapy, physical activity, and lived experience expertise to make movement accessible, inclusive, and enjoyable for everyone.

It is practical, adaptable, and grounded in evidence, helping schools support meaningful participation and movement every day.

Schools and teachers play a critical role in helping pupils stay active, feel confident, and thrive.



Latest national data shows that less than half of children in England achieve the Chief Medical Officers’ guideline of participating in at least 60 minutes of physical activity a day.

REFERENCE ACTIVE LIVES SURVEY 24-25



Latest national data shows that less than half of young people with special educational needs and disabilities in England achieve the Chief Medical Officers’ guideline of participating in 20 minutes of strength and balance exercises three times a week.

REFERENCE ACTIVE LIVES SURVEY 24-25

Why is it important?



Movement shouldn’t be a privilege or only tied to sports. Movement is a fundamental right that belongs to every child.

Every child has the right to play, rest, participate, and develop to their full potential. Regular movement helps make sure those rights are upheld. **This is reflected in the United Nations Rights of the child.**

Movement is an essential part of children’s physical, emotional, and social development. It supports:

- Stronger muscles and bones
- Better balance and coordination
- Improved learning and memory
- Positive mood and emotional wellbeing

Research shows that children who are more active tend to have higher confidence, better self esteem, decreased loneliness, and enjoy movement more when it’s fun and meaningful.

By embedding movement across the school day and ensuring activities are accessible to all, we help every pupil grow, belong, and succeed – leading to improved whole-school outcomes through higher engagement, attainment and fewer behavioural challenges.

Supports the brain, helping children focus, remember, and solve problems

Helps children build strength and balance. which supports everyday activities like climbing stair, carrying things, and playing.

Builds confidence. social skills and a sense of achievement.

Boosts mood and helps regulation, so children feel more confident and resilient.

Policy and Guidance



Supporting children’s physical development, emotional regulation, and overall wellbeing is part of a school’s wider safeguarding responsibility. Schools have a duty of care to support pupil’s physical, emotional, and social wellbeing, and this responsibility is reflected in UK guidance and policy, which recognise the importance of movement, inclusion, and participation. The good news is that meeting these responsibilities does not have to be complicated, many can be supported through everyday movement, play, and positive language.

Don’t believe us? Check out the Appendix on page 22 for the national guidance and legislation that supports physical activity for children.

How Does This Toolkit Help?



This toolkit supports schools to:

- **Make movement accessible, inclusive, and enjoyable**
- **Reduce barriers to participation**
- **Support legal and ethical responsibilities in a fun, practical and realistic way**
- **Promote strength, balance, confidence, and belonging for every child**
- **Bust myths and challenge assumptions about disability and movement**

By combining:

- **Environmental adaptations**
- **Inclusive practices**
- **Sensory-friendly approaches**
- **Staff awareness**

...schools can turn everyday movement into a fun, confidence-building, strength and balance-boosting experience for all children!



Inclusion does not require doing more – it often means **doing things differently**, with flexibility, creativity, and a strengths-based approach.



A Consideration for Staff:



We all bring our own experiences of physical activity into school. For some, these experiences may have been limited or negative, and that can make encouraging movement feel uncomfortable.

You do not need to be sporty or an expert. Your role is simply to create safe, supportive opportunities where movement is welcomed and valued.

Small, everyday moments make a big difference

Reference

[*Physical Literacy Consensus Statement for England - one pager*](#)

So, what do we mean by **Strength** and **Balance**?

The Inclusion 2028 **Young Person's Collective**



These definitions were shaped by the Inclusion 2028 Young People's Collective, a group of young people aged 14-20 with special educational needs and/or disabilities who share their lived experiences to help improve the quality of physical education and school sport for pupils nationwide.



Regular physical activity improves mood, self-esteem, and resilience in children.

The toolkit has been designed based on their ideas, showing that strength and balance aren't just physical skills, but also include courage, asking for help, listening, fairness, and creativity.

Full list of definitions: See Appendix on page 22 for other terms we use.



STRENGTH

means using your body to do things that matter to you, being brave in difficult moments, asking for help, and helping someone else.

BALANCE

is how your body stays steady and responds to movement, how you keep calm, how you listen, and how you make fair choices.



Movement as a **choice**



Movement isn't something pupils (or staff!) need to do as another task– it can be fun, energising, and a chance to connect.

Embedding strength and balance into daily routines can:

- **Reduce classroom stress and restlessness**
- **Improve focus and engagement**
- **Create moments of shared enjoyment and connection**
- **Bring variety and energy into the school day**

Short movement moments can reset the classroom atmosphere and make teaching feel more enjoyable.

The vision



You don't need **specialist skills** or to be a **'sporty'** person

Your **willingness to create space for movement** makes a difference



Over half of children in the UK don't meet the government guidelines for daily physical activity – [Active Lives Survey 24-25](#)

Creating a Movement Friendly School Environment

Movement is for everyone. With creativity, planning, and inclusion, schools can make sure every pupil has opportunities to move in ways that work for them, at every stage of a child's school life.

A movement-friendly school plans its culture, routines, and spaces to help pupils build:



Strength



Balance



Coordination



Confidence



Classroom routines with short movement breaks, for example: **embedding a sensory circuit**



Indoor and outdoor spaces that encourage **climbing, crawling, rolling, balancing, hanging, pushing, and pulling**



A school culture where **movement is inspiring, accessible and meaningful**

Even small changes can make a big difference, turning everyday routines and spaces into rich opportunities for learning and wellbeing.

[For more information see the Sports Sanctuary activity cards](#)

Using the **Movement Audit Tool**



The **Movement Audit Tool** helps schools check how well their culture, routines, and spaces support movement. It helps staff to:



See what's working well and what could be improved



Plan simple, practical changes



Include children and staff in sharing ideas

Use the audit tool in a way that works for your school and your priorities.

To get the best results:

- **Involve children:** Ask pupils to share their experiences, ideas, and preferences about movement, strength, and balance activities.
- **Involve staff:** Include teachers, teaching assistants and wider support staff to spot strengths, gaps, and opportunities.
- **Reflect and act:** Use findings to plan improvements, set priorities, and create fun, inclusive movement opportunities for all pupils.

Consider:

- **Scheduling the audit termly or quarterly to keep it up-to-date**
- **Involving parent groups or Parent Teacher Associations to support ideas or fund new equipment**



TOP TIP

Treat the audit as an ongoing process, not a one-off task. Regular reviews help track progress and adapt to changing needs.

Including both pupils and staff makes sure the audit reflects real needs and leads to practical, achievable changes.

HOW MOVEMENT FRIENDLY IS YOUR SCHOOL AUDIT TOOL

Sensory Processing



Sensory processing is how the brain makes sense of information from the body and surroundings, including:



Sight lights, colours, movement	Sound voices, music, traffic	Touch clothes, textures, hug	Movement jumping, spinning, balancing
Taste and smell food, smells in the kitchen or outside	Proprioception knowing where your body is in space e.g., pushing, pulling, carrying, lifting objects	Vestibular sense of balance and movement e.g., swinging, spinning, rocking, tilting head back	Interoception sensing internal body signals e.g., hunger, thirst, needing the toilet, feeling your heartbeat

This affects a child's emotions, attention, behaviour, and how they move.

Some children are more sensitive, while others seek extra sensory input to feel calm or alert.

Some children who are sensitive to sensory input may:

- Cover their ears or squint in bright lights
- Feel anxious in crowded places
- Avoid certain textures or unexpected touch

Children who seek extra sensory input may:

- Move or fidget often
- Touch objects, walls, or textures
- Jump, spin, or rock to feel regulated

Supporting sensory regulation helps children stay calm, engaged, and safe.

Most children can manage their energy by increasing or decreasing it to stay in a comfortable, balanced state.



Helping Children Find Their Balance

If energy is too high: Children may need to slow down or calm.

- Examples: gentle stretches, deep breaths, drinking water, pausing briefly before rejoining an activity

If energy is too low: Children may need to increase alertness or movement.

- Examples: short movement break, jumping, stretching, or changing position (e.g., standing up)

Sensory Overload

For some children, too much sensory input can feel like a serious threat. Their nervous system reacts as if they are in danger, and behaviour may focus on escape or protection rather than learning.



For some children, sensory overload can feel as threatening as being in a burning building – their behaviour is an attempt to escape danger



Quick Classroom Strategies

Movement & Sensory Breaks

- **Short movement breaks** (stretching, jumping, wall pushes)
- **Active transitions** (walking, marching, sensory pathways)
- **Balance activities** (raising leg, obstacle courses)
- **Movement stations** (balls, resistance bands, step stools)

Routine & Predictability

- Use **visual schedules** (Now/Next boards, visual timetables)
- Give **clear instructions** and repeat key points
- **Signal transitions** with visual, sound, or gesture cues

Supporting Self-Regulation

- Teach simple **breathing or stretching routines**
- Help children **check their energy level** (*low / just right / high*)
- **Encourage choice:** "What will help your body right now?"
- **Celebrate small wins**, not just outcomes



Regulation comes before learning.

When we support children's sensory needs, we create safer, calmer classrooms where learning can happen.

Calm & Focus Supports

- **Quiet corners** with cushions, soft lighting, calming objects
- **Noise-reducing headphones** for sound sensitivity
- **Fidget tools** (textured balls, small hand tools)

Sensory-Friendly Learning

- Include **hands-on and movement-based learning within all subjects**
- Offer **alternative seating** (floor mats, standing options)
- Use **different textures** and materials where possible

Co-Regulation with Peers

- Children can regulate together through:**
- **Push & pull activities** (wall pushes, resistance bands)
 - **Passing or moving objects together**
 - **Mirror movements** or **gentle rocking**
 - **Rolling or balancing games**

Integration with strength and balance:

- These activities can improve coordination and strength while also providing sensory input that supports emotional regulation.
- Encourage pupils to notice how their body feels during movement - this promotes body awareness, confidence, and self-regulation.

When to seek additional support:

- If a pupil consistently avoids certain activities or appears to seek intense sensory input, involve the Special Educational Needs Coordinator or an Occupational Therapist (OT). They can assess the pupil's sensory needs and recommend tailored strategies to support participation, learning, and wellbeing.



"Strategies that support children with SEND benefit all children"



Children and young people with SEND should participate in activities that strengthen muscles and bones at least 3 times a week.



Opening Up Opportunities for Movement



Children learn about themselves through movement and play – balancing, climbing, stretching, jumping, and more. These experiences help them:

- Discover what their bodies can do (body awareness)
- Build confidence through practice and mastery
- Regulate energy and emotions, staying focused and calm
- See themselves as capable, resilient, and active learners

MYTH

"Not all children can do strength/balance tasks."

"Movement will dysregulate children."

"You need to be sporty to encourage movement."



REALITY

Adapted activities allow everyone to join in

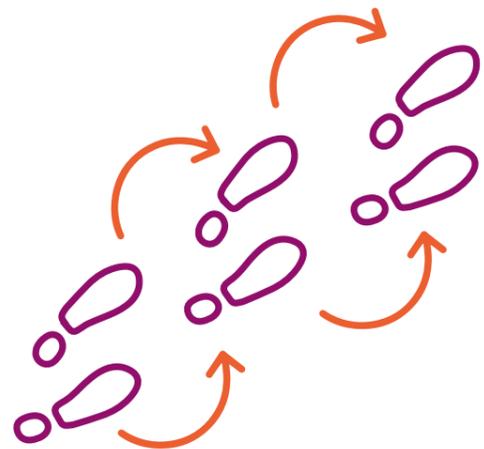
Structured movement supports focus and calm

Anyone can create safe, fun movement opportunities

Strength and Balance Cards



The toolkit includes **Strength & Balance Cards**, co-created with young people from Inclusion 2028's Young Person's Collective. They are fun, simple, and easy to use in school, in classrooms, playgrounds, corridors, or outdoor spaces.



Each card includes three elements:

1. **Movement Challenge** – Simple activities to develop strength, balance, coordination, or posture. Can be done anywhere: the classroom, hallways, playground, or outdoor areas.
2. **Positive Words** – Encouraging phrases to help children feel confident, resilient, and motivated.
3. **Kind Action** – Small ways to show empathy and connection to peers or staff.



TOP TIP

You don't always need the physical cards. Look at them and adapt the activities throughout the day, or make up your own ideas using the same themes.

Interactive Ideas:

- **Class Challenges:** Pick a card as a group and complete it together
- **Movement Leader:** Let a child guide the activity for the class
- **Reflection:** Discuss how the movement felt and celebrate effort

Words that Build Confidence – Using Strengths-Based Language

Pupils flourish when their abilities are recognised and valued. Language shapes how they see themselves and what they can do. By focusing on strengths, celebrating effort, and using supportive, inclusive language, we empower children to try new skills, embrace challenges, and build confidence.

The Strength & Balance Cards are a perfect tool to pair movement with affirming language: each card includes a movement challenge, positive words, and a kind action – helping children connect physical, social, and emotional growth.

TOP TIP

- **Celebrate strengths:** Notice balance, coordination, energy, or enthusiasm
- **Use positive language:** Swap “can’t” for “learning to” or “working on”
- **Involve interests:** Link movement to things children enjoy
- **Build on strengths:** Use existing skills to support new challenges



Speech-mark examples:

- “You’re finding your balance really well!”
- “Let’s see how your stepping skills can help with this obstacle course.”
- “What did you enjoy most?”

The Benefits

- Pupils recognise and value their capabilities
- Progress is celebrated, not perfection
- Pupils feel empowered to try new movements or tasks
- Supports whole-child development – linking physical, social, and emotional growth

Making Strengths-Based Language Visible



Embed positive, affirming language throughout the school day and environment:



Positive affirmations on mirrors, doors, and walls:
Short, encouraging statements children see throughout their day

Co-create affirmations with students:
Reflect strengths, achievements, or goals

Morning and afternoon reflections: Children draw, say or write kind affirmations about themselves or peers

Songs, videos, or movement chants:
Reinforce affirmations while moving

Murals or visual displays: Collaborative artwork showing goals, achievements, or positive messages

Quick Classroom Ideas



- Link **Strength** and **Balance Cards** to affirmations: after completing a challenge, read the positive words aloud
- **Reflection moments:** E.g. questions such as “What made you feel proud today?”
- Encourage students to **notice peers’ strengths** during activities
- Change reflections frequently to keep the environment fresh, interactive, and motivating



Use **positive words** and **affirmations** across different spaces. This helps children feel confident, curious, and ready to try new things.

- | | |
|----------------|-----------------|
| I am kind | I am strong |
| I am enough | I am special |
| I am confident | I am courageous |

Conclusion

Movement does not need to be another thing for schools to add to an already busy day. Instead, it can be gently woven into existing routines, supporting regulation, learning, wellbeing, and inclusion for **all children and young people, inclusive of those with SEND.**

Small, intentional changes can have a meaningful impact.

This toolkit is designed to be flexible and adaptable. There is no “right way” to use it – schools are encouraged to start where they are, choose what feels achievable, and build gradually. Even one small change can support engagement, participation, and a sense of belonging.

We hope this resource empowers schools to view movement as a tool for living and learning well, supporting both pupils and staff, and creating environments where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Thank you for taking the time to explore this toolkit and for supporting your pupils’ growth, confidence, and wellbeing, now and into the future.



APPENDICES:

1. Definitions:

Physical Activity – any movement that requires energy expenditure. Physical activity refers to all movement including during leisure time, for transport to get to and from places, or as part of a person's work or domestic activities.

Occupational Therapy – takes a whole-person approach to both mental and physical health and wellbeing enabling individuals to achieve their full potential.

Emotional Regulation – the ability to manage and influence emotional experiences and responses, deciding which emotions arise, when they occur and how they are expressed, to maintain balance and function effectively.

Sensory Processing – how the brain receives, interprets, and organises information from the senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell, balance, body awareness) to understand the world, respond appropriately and carry out daily activities, learning and social interactions.

Special Educational Need and/or Disability (SEND) – a child or young person has special educational needs and/or disabilities if they have a learning difficulty and/or a disability that means they need special health and education support, we shorten this to SEND.

Inclusion 2028 – a grant funded by the Department for Education aiming to improve the chances and choices for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities in physical education, school sport and physical activity.

Young Person Collective – a group of young people aged 14–20 with special educational needs and/or disabilities who share their lived experiences to help improve the quality of physical education and school sport for pupils nationwide.

2. National Guidance and Expectations

The UK Chief Medical Officers' guidelines, which recommend that children take part in muscle- and bone-strengthening activities at least three times a week, alongside activities that build balance and coordination. The guidelines also highlight the importance of reducing sedentary time and breaking up long periods of sitting with light movement. Schools can play a key role by weaving movement into lessons, breaktimes, and playground activities. The guidance states pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities should be active for a minimum of 20 minutes a day.

The SEND Code of Practice (2015), which promotes inclusive, person-centred education that supports participation and independence. It affirms that all professionals should look to enable children and young people to make choices for themselves from an early age and support them in making friends and staying safe and healthy.

UN Rights of the Child – Children have the right to play, rest, participate, and develop to their full potential. Inclusive movement opportunities help ensure these rights are upheld within the school environment.

Equality Act (2010) – Schools have a duty to:

- Make reasonable adjustments
- Ensure disabled pupils are not disadvantaged



Movement is not just sport – it's play, games, dance, and everyday activities that build strength and coordination.

[Physical activity guidelines for children and young people - NHS](#)

TOP TIPS DOCUMENT

informed by Faye Newton Book Chapter 2: *A New Model of PE*

[Resources - School OT](#)

Although this guidance focuses on PE, the principles can be applied to all movement across the school day.



Listen to Students

- Ask what they enjoy
- Challenge stereotypes
- Quick votes or thumbs up/down
- Check what makes them feel safe



Give Choice

- Offer activity and difficulty options
- Multiple stations or skill variations
- Balance team vs individual tasks



Make It Fun

- Include friends and social play
- Creative equipment or themes
- Let children adapt rules



Keep It Safe

- Ask what feels safe/unsafe
- Keep routines predictable
- Use feedback to improve lessons



Help Children Succeed

- Avoid "sporty/non-sporty" labels
- Adapt with STEP: Space, Task, Equipment, People
- Teach fundamental skills
- End with a win for each child



Make Children Feel Valued

- Use random team selection methods.
- Allow a chosen partner when needed.
- Keep groups consistent to reduce stress.

The movement journey is one that lasts a lifetime.

Building strong, confident, and balanced bodies and minds from the start can shape health, learning, and happiness for years to come.

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