Free Classroom Exercises!

An OT Mom Free Printable™

by Tracey le Roux

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Childhood disorders, learning disorders and developmental delays ***cannot*** be diagnosed or treated through this e-book/printable! Please contact your local Occupational Therapist if there are significant gaps in your child's progress. If your child is currently attending Occupational Therapy, these activities can be used to supplement what he/she is doing there, but always check with your child's Occupational Therapist first.

As with all activities involving children, please take great care to ensure all sharp objects are moved out of reach, and that parental supervision is available at all times. The environment should be free of hazards. Some activities suggested on this website/e-book/printable make use of small objects that may cause a choking hazard for young children. Keep small objects out of reach of young children!

All of the activities require physical activity or exercise. Please only demonstrate these activities and exercises if you are medically fit to do so. Your child should only carry out these activities and exercises if he/she is medically fit to do so. If in doubt, please consult your doctor. If any activity or exercise causes any kind of pain and discomfort to you or your child, stop at once and consult your doctor.

Every effort has been made to give accurate information and suggestions. Photographs have not been distorted or altered beyond routine editing for size and colour. However, results are entirely dependent on the persons demonstrating and taking part in the exercises, activities and games. The level of success attained depends on the time devoted to taking part in the exercises, activities and games, and the resources and skills of the persons taking part. Since these factors vary between individuals, OT-Mom-learning-activities.com cannot guarantee success of individuals, nor is OT-Mom-learning-activities.com responsible for any actions of any persons.

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Something You Should Know!

Before you start using this free printable, I need to make something very clear – this is not a resource written by an expert or someone with a doctorate in her field.

I am a very normal occupational therapist, and I started my website purely to help parents and teachers to better understand the issues that kids may struggle with when they start school, and to equip those parents and teachers with activities to promote normal development in order to give kids the best possible start in formal schooling.

The information I have put on my website is there to inform and inspire based on my own experience, on my own observations and on discussions I have had with fellow therapists over the years. While I attempt to keep up with current research and publications, I in no way consider myself an expert, nor have I had time to conduct or publish formal research myself. I created my e-books and free printables out of a demand for accessible resources, requests made by visitors to my website.

While I try and include relevant references and resources on my website and in my e-books, I cannot back up every activity suggestion, photograph and/or observation with scientific data.

When working as an occupational therapist, every therapy session was planned with the needs of that particular child in mind. There was no one-size-fits-all approach to therapy. Over the years, some activities became my go-to favorites to help address particular issues, and it is these kinds of activities that I attempt to share with parents and teachers on my website and in my e-books.

While I am encouraged by students and therapists who contact me to let me know that my information is helpful, my website, free printables and e-books are not designed to be used as reference tools for academic purposes. I am always honored and delighted when someone links to my website or references it in some way, but please do know that my website is not meant to stand as a formal expert source.

Having said all that, I am delighted that you are here, and I trust that my activities and information will be useful to help a child that you are involved with.

Blessings,

Tracey

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Caution – Please Read Before You Begin

- Please consult your health professional before using any of these exercises/activities for your child, and make sure that you are medically and physically fit to give demonstrations, and that your child is medically and physically fit enough to take part in the exercises.
- Ensure that area is free of hazards, such as sharp corners, jutting objects etc. If an exercise mat is not available, then a folded blanket gives a slightly softer landing than a hard floor. Always be near to your child to catch him/her if he/she tumbles.
- Kids tend to move quickly and recklessly, so always be nearby and encourage slow, steady movements.
- Don't push your child to the point of pain.
- Encourage your child to have a small drink of water before starting, and again after the exercises to prevent dehydration.
- CONTROL is very important. Doing these exercises/activities **slowly** will get the muscles to work harder. Two or three GOOD repetitions will do more good than fifteen sloppy ones.

If your child seems to struggle excessively, or if you are concerned about his/her development, please speak to your health professional and seek a personal, professional evaluation for your child.

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This free printable does not claim to diagnose or treat any disorders – it is merely a helpful tool to assist you in developing skills that your child needs for school, or as a supplement to whatever interventions your child is already receiving, in consultation with your child's therapist, teacher or facilitator.

PS I have deliberately **not** graded the activities/exercises from easy to difficult. My reason for this is that children have all been exposed to different activities and environments in their lives.

So an activity may be "easy" for one child simply because it has been done before, but harder for another who has never tried it.

However, I have tried to indicate ways in which an activity/exercise can be made easier or more challenging in order to accommodate the needs of different children.

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Why Should You Do Exercises With The Kids In Your Class?

There have been quite a few research papers and media articles recently on how exercise can affect a child's performance in the classroom. Generally, most of these articles show that kids **concentrate better** after some form of physical activity, and there have also been reported improvements in **math**, **language** and **memory**. I have linked to some of the research at the end of this section.

Savvy teachers have been incorporating **general gross motor exercises** such as **running on the spot** and **jumping jacks**, or even just stretching exercises as quick breaks between lessons to boost kids' concentration.

Some of the activities included in this printable will help kids to work on their core and shoulder girdle strength and stability, hand-eye coordination, and midline crossing skills.

However, I would like to go one step further and encourage teachers to specifically include exercises that use vestibular and bilateral movements. These are the two types of movement that have been associated with improved academic performance.

1) Vestibular Exercises

A recent series of articles in the Washington Post highlighted the experience and recommendations of an occupational therapist who sat in on a regular classroom.

She pointed out that merely taking a quick break to run on the spot or stretch is beneficial to a point, but the best exercises are the ones that give **vestibular stimulation** – in other words they stimulate the hair cells of the vestibular system in the inner ear.

It can be hard to understand, but the vestibular system has an effect on other areas of a child's development, such as **coordination** and **balance skills, calming down**, becoming **more organized** and becoming **more focused**.

You could read one of the sensory processing books I recommend, for more information. https://www.ot-mom-learning-activities.com/occupational-therapy-books.html#SensoryProcessingBooks

So we don't just want the body to jiggle and stretch a bit, **we want the head to move**. We need to give kids exercises that offer **vestibular stimulation**!

Important! Some children are over-sensitive to vestibular stimulation, even during simple activities like these. If a child becomes **fearful, nauseous, pale or sweaty** during these activities, please **stop immediately** and consult your health professional!

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2) Bilateral Coordination Exercises

Activities that involve bilateral coordination have also been linked to improved academic performance. Some researchers suggest that coordination exercises facilitate the parts of the brain that are needed for thinking skills and for paying attention.

Kids who took part in highly focused bilateral activities, even for 5 minutes, showed improved attention, concentration and better focus on the task at hand. Some studies have also linked math, writing and reading abilities to bilateral coordination skills.

So it is worth taking a quick 5 minute break between lessons to do some exercises that move both sides of the body in a coordinated way.

Get the most out of the bilateral activities by clapping **a rhythm that kids need to move to** (in order to improve their timing and sequencing skills) or **add some skip counting** to work on math while they move!

News articles:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2014/10/07/the-right-and-surprisingly-wrong-ways-to-get-kids-to-sit-still-in-class

https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/news/11126713/An-hour-of-exercise-a-day-boost-childrens-concentration.html

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Classroom Exercises at the Desks

These exercises are good for kids to do while sitting at their desks and/or while standing behind / next to their desks. Although my photos are not taken in a school classroom, the activities have been used in many classrooms – adapt them to the space and resources you have available, as well as the age of your children.

Marching on the Spot (bilateral coordination, core)

Marching is a great exercise for bilateral coordination.

It is basically an exaggeration of the walking movement, but many kids find it surprisingly hard and you may find kids using the arms and legs on the same side together, instead of swinging the opposite arm and leg!

When kids have to lift their knees, it also works their core muscles.

The child on the left needs encouragement to lift her knees a little higher.

Use marching songs to help kids enjoy this exercise even more!

Pencil Pick Up (vestibular exercise)

Have the kids place 10 pencils (or other stationery) on the floor, and then have them **bend to pick up one item at a time** and then place it on their desks again.

The **repetitive up and down bending** moves the head upside down and then right-side-up again and gives some good vestibular stimulation.

Get the most out of the activity by having the kids bend and rise while you **clap a rhythm**.

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Jumping Jacks / Star Jumps (bilateral and vestibular)

Have children start with their arms held at their side and feet together.

Then have them jump their feet apart and bring their arms above shoulder level.

If kids struggle, have them practice jumping with just their feet, and then include their hands.

You can make it harder by having them clap their hands above their heads.

Chair Leg-Lifts (core girdle strength and stability)

Step 1:

Demonstrate and ask the children to copy you: Stand sideways behind your chair so your left hand is resting lightly on the back of the chair.

Slowly lift your left leg, keeping your knee bent until your hip is bent 90 degrees.

Step 2

Hold it, and slowly lower your leg ALMOST to the ground, don't touch the ground, and raise it again.

Repeat a few times, then do the same thing on the other side. Increase repetitions as endurance increases.

Hand Pushes (shoulder girdle strength and stability)

A great desk activity to use before a writing task. Ask the children to copy you as you demonstrate: place your palms together, with elbows out and forearms held horizontally as in the photo.

Now push your hands together as hard as you can and hold for 5 seconds – you should feel all the muscles around your shoulder girdle contract. Repeat a few times.

A great way to regain focus during a handwriting lesson!

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Chair Push-Ups (shoulder girdle strength and stability)

Ask the children to put their hands on either side of their chairs, and PUSH, until their bottoms rise off the chair. Initially just repeating the push will be demanding; later you can upgrade to asking them to hold the position for a couple of seconds.

Increase the difficulty by asking them to lift their feet off the floor and hold them off while raising their bottoms off the chairs. A great exercise to do before writing.

Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes (bilateral and vestibular)

Do the **"heads, shoulders, knees and toes" song** – another exercise that gets kids' heads going up and down as they carry out the actions of the song, and it is done on the spot, so it is great for classes with limited space!

Using both hands to touch the head, shoulders, knees and toes is a symmetrical bilateral exercise.

However, do encourage your children to tilt their heads when they go down to their toes, as the child on the right is doing. The child on the left is looking ahead instead of down, and not getting as much vestibular stimulation as she could.

Keep the Beat (bilateral coordination)

Beat out a simple rhythm with your hands, and have the children copy your beat rhythm with their hands on their desks or on the floor. I like to have the kids place a ruler in their midline.

You can beat both hands on the desk together for symmetrical bilateral movements, or alternate hands. Bring some clapping or crossing into the beat as well.

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Classroom Exercises for Mat-Time

Although most these photos were taken outside with my own kids, these can work for small groups of +/- 6 children on the mat, before proceeding with maths or reading groups, or before returning to the desks for writing tasks. If you homeschool, they make great movement breaks in your school day!

The Big Push (shoulder girdle strength and stability)

Pair the children up and ask them to put their hands together, keeping elbows slightly bent.

Kids are to stand with one foot behind the other and on the count of three, PUSH each other as hard as possible until one moves backwards.

Make sure the children keep their elbows bent, and arms held a little away from body.

Discourage children from holding their elbows tightly against their bodies because if they do that, they are not using their shoulder girdle muscles.

Midline Crossing Relay (bilateral and midline crossing)

Any object could be used for this simple relay, as long as each child passes and receives the object with both hands.

Make sure that they are sitting either cross-legged, or on their knees to make sure their hips stay stable while their shoulders turn.

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Midline Crossing Ball Pass (bilateral and midline crossing)

In this ball passing game, two kids sit criss-cross and back-to-back and pass the ball around to each other.

You could do it 5 times in each direction as a warm up for other gross motor activities, or as a break from desk tasks.

Bridge Game (core strength and stability)

You will need to demonstrate this to the children the first time they do it. For younger children, give them a toy car (or a block) to “drive” under the bridge from side to side.

Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet together and flat on the floor. Lift your bottom off the floor to make a bridge. Drive the toy under your bottom to the other side.

When the kids do it, ask them to gradually increase the number of trips the car takes before the bridge comes down!

You could also sing “London Bridge is falling down…”, letting the bridge be built up and fall down again as you sing.

Ball Walk (hand exercise for fine motor skills)

Any size of ball can be used – experiment to see what works well for your age group.

Using the fingers of the hand, “walk” the ball up one leg, across the tummy and down the other leg. Make sure the children use their “dominant” hands and do not switch hands! Also, watch to make sure they use a “walking” motion with their fingers and not a grabbing motion!

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Snake Curls (core strength and stability)

Ask the children to lie down on the floor with legs together, knees bent, and feet flat on the floor. If they struggle to keep their knees together, put a beanbag, scarf, or sock between their knees to encourage them to keep their knees together. Hands should be on their thighs.

As the snake charmer (you!) plays a tune on the flute, the kids must raise their heads, and slide their hands up to their knees and hiss at you (holding the position) until you give the signal for them to go back down slowly. This is a kiddie adaptation of a tummy curl and works well if you get them to hold for a few seconds and then repeat it a few times.

Beanbag Toss (visual tracking; hand-eye coordination)

Tossing and catching a beanbag is a good hand-eye coordination exercise and also improves visual tracking skills, which are needed for reading.

Have the kids pair up to gently toss the beanbag back and forth, or have them toss their own beanbag into the air and catch it again.

If you are looking for more gross motor activities, feel free to pop over and browse my site for more inspiration:

https://www.ot-mom-learning-activities.com/gross-motor-activities.html

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Want More OT Mom™ Resources?

Bilateral coordination skills play a vital role in many **fine motor and gross motor activities**.

Skills such as cutting with scissors, eating with a knife and fork, catching a ball, skipping and jumping, all require **good bilateral coordination**.

If you want to **support your child's development** of this vital skill, then try my download full of Bilateral Coordination Activities!

You will receive **more than 24 pages of photographed activities** to help develop your child's coordination skills, in addition to helpful information and an activity planner!

https://www.ot-mom-learning-activities.com/bilateral-coordination-activities.html

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A Little Bit About Me…

My name is Tracey le Roux, and I qualified as an Occupational Therapist at the University of Cape Town in 1997. I spent most of my OT working career in a large pediatric private practice, working in a few local schools as well as at the therapy rooms. I obtained a post-grad qualification in Sensory Integration, which has been invaluable in helping me to understand and work with children who have difficulties in the classroom.

I currently live in the gorgeous town of Hermanus on the southern coast of South Africa with my husband and 3 rapidly growing children, born in 2002, 2005 and 2007. We are a Christian homeschooling family, and I ended up using various OT activities with all of my children in different areas of their development, including fine motor skills, coordination skills, core and shoulder stability, and sensory processing issues.

After "retiring" from OT to concentrate on homeschooling my own children, I worked a few hours a week for an NGO at a local school, helping disadvantaged first grade kids to develop the skills they needed for school. I have since trained a team of motivated facilitators who are continuing this work at various local schools, working with kindergarten and early elementary learners.

My passion for supporting parents to help their own kids started with my work for the NGO, and I was challenged to come up with activities that can easily be done by families in impoverished communities.

Not all the activities in my e-books fall into that category, as I do sometimes suggest making use of therapy-type products, but on the whole, I try to make activities "doable" for parents who have a tight budget and little time. Parents like me!

I completely understand how challenging it can be to have a child who has special learning needs, and who struggles with things that other kids don't struggle with. I also completely understand how challenging it is to fit therapies into a budget and into a week, not to mention getting homework done as well. That is why I try to keep my e-book activities simple and achievable, and why I have made free printables available on my site.

I sincerely hope that you have found useful activities that you can easily implement with your child at home. Feel free to contact me through my website anytime! I love hearing from other parents!

If you enjoyed this free printable, you may want to take a look at one or more of my other OT Mom resources: https://www.ot-mom-learning-activities.com/ot-mom-e-books.html

Thanks for stopping by!

Tracey

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