



## 8 playground activities that build your toddler's balance and coordination



As they spin, roll, swing, and slide at the playground, your toddler gets feedback from two important sensory systems that are crucial for their developing gross motor skills.

**The vestibular system** helps your toddler balance and respond to movement; it relies on tiny receptors in the inner ear that connect to the brainstem.

**The proprioceptive system** helps your child understand where their body is in space and how to control the amount of effort needed for lifting or pushing. This system receives information through your child's joints and muscles.

Keep in mind that every child reacts differently to [sensory play](#). Let your toddler's skills and interests be your guide and take a break if they seem scared or upset ❤️

## Swinging

A gentle turn on the baby swing activates your child's vestibular system through linear movement and the sensation of gravity's pull. The steady, rhythmic motion can also soothe a cranky or tired toddler.

## Sliding

Going down a slide requires both motor planning and body awareness: First, they must sit at the top, then they have to figure out how to get down. Sliding also helps your toddler understand how their body weight reacts to gravity.

Safety note: Avoid sliding with your toddler on your lap—this is a common cause of leg injuries. If your child isn't quite ready to slide independently from the top, try starting them halfway down and stay close for support.

## Hanging

Hanging from low bars offers your toddler the feeling of traction, which is when joints are gently pulled. Learning how much force they need to hang on stimulates their proprioceptive system through their joints and muscles. Hanging from a bar also teaches toddlers about grip, and gives them falling and landing practice.

## Crawling through tunnels

Crawling through a tunnel with their weight on their hands and knees builds coordination and body awareness. Peek through the other end of the tunnel to encourage your toddler to keep going.

## Climbing steps

Climbing steps activates your toddler's vestibular and proprioceptive systems as they shift their weight and find their center of gravity. Most toddlers are able to go up steps on their own before they're able to go down independently. Remain nearby and hold your child's hand to help them stay safe.

## Crossing ramps or bridges

Navigating ramps and bridges can be another fun challenge that encourages your toddler to practice balance and engage their sensory systems. Gently bouncing in place on a wobbly bridge can help your toddler understand how to shift their weight to maintain balance. Gradual changes, like a ramp's downward or upward slope, teach your toddler how to keep their body upright. This engages the same muscles and sensory systems that your toddler will need to safely walk down stairs.

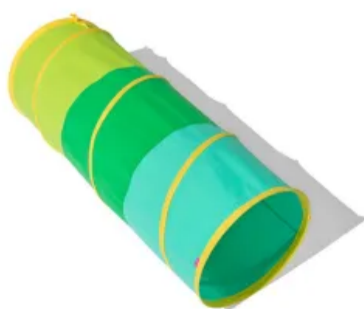
## Balance challenges

Some playgrounds have balance beams, wobble boards, and other balancing equipment. Making their way across a set of stepping stones while holding your hand activates your toddler's vestibular and proprioceptive systems as they teeter, tiptoe, and adjust to gravity. The surface material at your playground can be a balance challenge on its own, as your toddler tests walking on different textures, like gravel, sand, and woodchips.

## Heavy work

The term "heavy work" refers to activities your child probably already enjoys doing, such as pushing, pulling, jumping, or lifting. These activities provide deep pressure to the joints and muscles. At a playground, heavy work for your toddler could include carrying a bucket of sand, turning a steering wheel, climbing up a slide, or pulling a rope.

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Holst-Wolf, J.M., Yeh, I.L., Konczak, J. (2016) [Development of proprioceptive acuity in typically developing children: normative data on forearm position sense.](#) *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 10, 436.

Jennissen, C. A., Koos, M., & Denning, G. (2018). [Playground slide-related injuries in preschool children: increased risk of lower extremity injuries when riding on laps.](#) *Injury Epidemiology*, 5(1), 11-21.

Berger, S. E., Theuring, C., & Adolph, K. E. (2007). [How and when infants learn to climb stairs.](#) *Infant Behavior and Development*, 30(1), 36-49.

### Author



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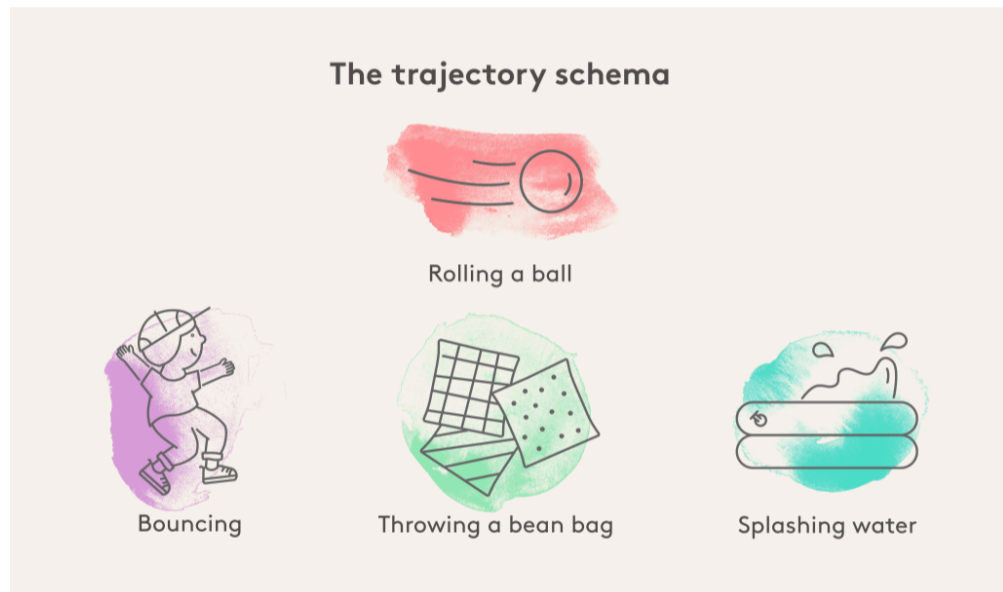
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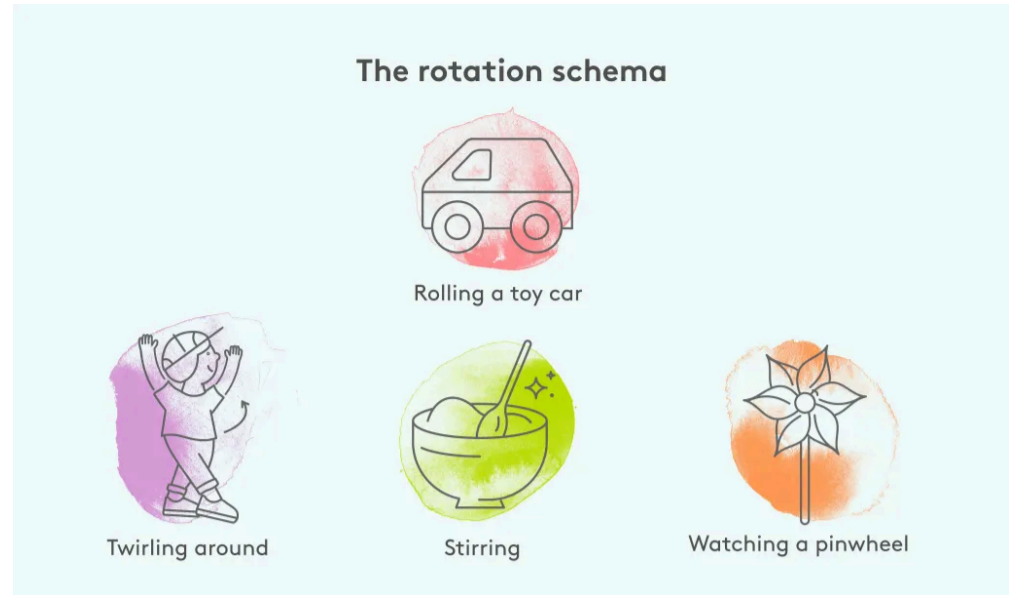
We've collected 6 classic outdoor activity you can bring inside to enhance sensory development and gross and fine motor skills—even when the weather's bad.



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