



“We are passengers coming on. . . . Get off passengers! You’re at your stop!”

—Georgia, age 4, and friends, riding the tire swing

“It spins and I get dizzy, dizzy, dizzy—and that’s why I like it!”

—Georgia, age 4, on the tire swing

Swings!

Condie Ward

Back and forth, back and forth—the swings on our school playground are always in use. But did you know that swinging is much more than just fun? There are many benefits that make swinging an important childhood activity.



As children swing, they are learning about gravity and how it pulls you back down to the center each time. Children learn that when they pump, they can go fast or slow, high or low, and be in control of the experience. Then there's stopping—dragging one's feet seems to work best. Learning to swing requires lots of practice and some coaching to figure things out.

Swing types and activities

There are many kinds of swings available: traditional, tire, and rope, to name a few. Each one functions on the same principle of back and forth. Tire swings can spin or swing in a circle or an arc. Traditional swings can be manipulated to create different experiences for a child.

The standard approach to swinging is for an adult to push a young child from behind. You might also push from the front, using palms to the bottom of shoes. Children sometimes request an “underdog” push, where the adult holds on to the seat, runs forward under the swing, and then lets go—the result is a very strong push!

Drop-off routine

At arrival time on our school's playground, a number of children head directly for the swings. They may ask for a few pushes before their parent leaves. It's a great transition activity for children and family members to do together. Once goodbyes are said, being on a swing gives a child a perfect place to watch what's happening on the playground. She can make a choice from a distance about what to do next, without having to immediately be in the midst of social activities.

Mastery and science

No matter what age children are when they master the art of swinging, they feel proud and self-reliant about this new accomplishment. Children must figure out how to “pump”—to shift their weight (leaning forward or back) and at the same time move their legs (straight out or bent)—to get just the right motion to propel the swing. This is physics in action!





Twisting an unmoving swing around a few times and then letting it unwind spins a child. Or you can give a little push to a child whose swing chains have been wound, so that the child is spinning and swinging at the same time! Watch to make sure that their hands don't get pinched by the chains. Clipping two swings together with a sturdy carabiner (a metal loop used to quickly connect objects) can be a fun challenge for pairs of children, requiring them to coordinate their movements to make the swings go.

Teachers sometimes chant rhymes while pushing a tire swing ("Motorboat, motorboat, go so slow, / Motorboat, motorboat, go so fast, / Motorboat, motorboat, step on the gas!"), giving the tire a big push at the end!

The tire swing at our school holds five children at a time, which requires sharing. Children are encouraged to ask one another for a turn. Early in the school year teachers oversee the activity, ensuring that everyone gets a chance to enjoy the communal excitement. Children are usually able to take turns independently after a month or so.



Social and emotional growth

Children cooperate and communicate when one child pushes another. "Push me higher!" or "Not too fast!" may be heard. When children swing side by side, they might talk or show one another tricks. They can agree to synchronize their swinging, interacting with and learning from one another.

Creativity and problem solving often come into play on the swings. Children experiment, figuring out how to balance properly or how far they can lean back. Children may sit on a swing sideways to create a sideways back and forth motion. They might lay over the seat on their tummies, hanging their limbs down, or try to swing while standing.



Physical activity

Swinging is good physical exercise. Large motor movements strengthen children's hands, arms, legs, torso, and neck.

Coordinating different body parts is required to succeed. It's a total body workout!

In her book *Balanced and Barefoot*, pediatric occupational therapist Angela J. Hanscom talks about how the vestibular system (the body's sensory system, which tracks things like position and acceleration

"I feel the air in my ears!"

—Teddy Mac, age 3



**“I like the
spiny-ness,
but not too fast.”**

—Miladia, age 4

and is related to balance) develops properly when children have opportunities to move their bodies in certain ways—spinning, tumbling, and swinging in particular. The book discusses how lack of outdoor playtime and not being physically active can negatively impact overall sensory development.

With more time and space outside, children are able to move their bodies in a variety of ways. Movements that involve not being upright, like handstands and cartwheels, are especially beneficial for developing balance and spatial awareness. Adults need to advocate for recess and emphasize the importance of free-play time outdoors. If frequent outdoor play is not feasible, offer gym space and tumbling mats to support healthy physical development.

Conclusion

As children swing, we see smiles and hear laughter—it’s a thrilling, enjoyable, and developmentally appropriate activity! Don’t forget that fun is a big part of learning!

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Photographs: Courtesy of the author



This article was inspired by Angela Hanscom’s book *Balanced and Barefoot: How Unrestricted Outdoor Play Makes for Strong, Confident, and Capable Children*. To learn more, visit www.balancedandbarefoot.com.