

Back to basics

Lorna Taylor, physiotherapist and founder at Jolly Back, explains why musculoskeletal health is so important

The coronavirus pandemic has certainly highlighted the importance of health and wellbeing. One area, which is not often considered although it particularly affects early years professionals, is musculoskeletal health.

Our musculoskeletal system consists of muscles, joints and nerves and the connecting soft tissues. Recent studies show that as many as 82% of early years and primary teachers have problems with their backs. Early years teaching and childcare places significant physical demands on your body, day in day out and yet knowing how to keep your back and other joints, together with your muscles, pain and injury free seems to be kept secret.

Many early years practitioners experience tingling in their legs (sciatica) from being cramped into child-sized chairs, hip stiffness when they get up from the floor and even long-term inflammatory joint conditions, such as arthritis. All of these conditions can be aggravated by working environments.

We've heard of nursery teachers in their mid-20s having back surgery, others in their 50s awaiting knee replacement and some with chronic, longer-term conditions are unsure how they can continue working until retirement age due to the physical demands of their early years job.

Living with musculoskeletal pain makes you twice as likely to suffer from:

- mood disorders
- anxiety
- stress
- depression.

Being stressed in itself can also increase your chance of experiencing musculoskeletal pain – for example, shoulder and neck pain is often caused by increased tension.

Musculoskeletal pain and disability can affect anyone at any time of life. Employees who are pregnant, new mothers and those new to their role or working with an increased workload are especially vulnerable. Whether you are eight or 80, musculoskeletal wellbeing is important for our health, emotional wellbeing and quality of life.

The good news is positive change is simple to implement and effective. Research consistently shows health promotion and ill-health prevention are the two most beneficial interventions for employees and employers in terms of wellbeing, productivity and return on investment.

For the early years and childcare profession, where children's learning and educational outcomes are affected by the professionalism and quality of care they receive, the benefits of a healthy, productive and supported team are even more far reaching. Better back care can also assist in the retention of staff and service users.

Back care, posture awareness, moving and handling training, occupational health and workstation risk assessments are not the norm in early years training, employee inductions or even often in working practice. As such, there is a high incidence of musculoskeletal discomfort and injury, much of which is accepted as 'part of the job', self-managed and under-reported.

What can I do now?

If you are experiencing joint discomfort, back ache or tingling in your arms and legs – this is your body's way of letting you know that you need to take action. If it is worse at work or when you return to work after a break, the discomfort is most likely related to your working environment.

The first course of action is to let your health & safety or wellbeing manager know. If you are experiencing symptoms, it is highly likely your colleagues will be too. Looking after and caring

for young children are hazardous activities and without anyone knowing about your symptoms, improvement is difficult!

Evidence supports the need for regular movement and activity for our spines and joints to function properly. Movement really is medicine. In addition, good posture, responsible lifting and healthy working environments are important for musculoskeletal health.

The single most important factor is "early intervention" to prevent longer-term problems developing.

Find out more

A new partnership between health, academic and early years experts (including Jolly Back and University of Derby) has developed specific "Musculoskeletal Wellbeing for the Early Years Workforce" guidance, together with an EduCare course covering "healthier working environments" and "safer practitioners".

It aims to help employees and employers understand the nature and risk factors of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), offers good practice advice and shares the legal responsibilities of managers, duty holders and employers.

Further details can be found here: eyalliance.org.uk/back-pain.

For more information about Jolly Back visit www.jollyback.com.

