



Early Years and Primary Educators – 25 Physio top tips for healthier low level working

It's a notoriously difficult challenge – adults being safely supported, with their musculoskeletal health needs met, when working in demanding low height environments with young children.

Here's how to accommodate the musculoskeletal health needs of teaching and support staff with the learning and development needs of children. This advice will also assist employers in meeting their legal requirements.

Each tip can help:

- Improve staff posture, health and wellbeing.
 - Prevent musculoskeletal disorders in the early years and primary teaching workforce.
 - Reduce pain and related sickness absence/costs.
 - Improve productivity and outcomes for children.
1. Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) cover a range of aches and pains in the back, neck, arms and legs, and are felt all too often by the early years and primary workforce. A comprehensive guide to MSDs, activities which can increase them, managing risks and work-related controls for individual settings can be found in this useful guide: [Awareness and Prevention of Back Pain and other Musculoskeletal Disorders in the Early Years Workforce | early years alliance \(eyalliance.org.uk\)](http://www.eyalliance.org.uk)
 2. **The highest risk factor for experiencing back pain, is already having had it. This makes prevention essential!** Be comfortable before you begin an activity and stop and move/adjust position if you start to feel uncomfortable.
 3. All early years staff should have access to an **adult height desk and chair** for administration and regular computer/laptop use. A standing workstation also offers a welcome opportunity for upright working posture.
 4. When working at a computer/laptop, the screen should be level with the top of your eyes. **A screen raiser/pile of books, separate mouse and keyboard** are recommended, especially if using for greater than 30 minutes every day. This applies if working at home too.
 5. A height adjustable chair is a worthy investment (if adjusted) for computer use. Worth noting - chair arms are only required to assist getting in and out of a chair and are not required for use at a desk. If chair arms are required, choose drop down arms so they do not obstruct the user getting adequately underneath the desk. **This applies if home working too.**
 6. If regularly using a computer/laptop/mobile device for work (1+ hour a day as a guide), a **DSE risk assessment** is required by law. This explains the benefit of “ergonomics” and helps prevent injury. Your Health and Safety officer will be able to advise.
 7. The Healthy Working Move initiative www.ergonomics4kids.co.uk is a free and easy place to start looking for straightforward ergonomics advice and offers simple and effective advice for educators, parents and children.
 8. Movement throughout the day is important to nourish joints and keep flexibility. If you do have any periods of sitting, **think 30:30:30** – every 30 minutes, move for 30 seconds and long gaze 30m into the distance (this helps eye health too).
 9. **Body strength** (especially muscles of the back, stomach and legs) is essential to reduce and prevent back pain. Swimming, Yoga, Pilates and Strength/Conditioning are great activities for musculoskeletal health.
 10. Arrange and organise classrooms and learning environments to ensure stooping, over-reaching and awkward postures are reduced to a minimum. For example, move bookshelves which obstruct the whiteboard, ensure cupboards have clutter free access, wash up in adult height sinks or a raised bowl.
 11. Ensure you are supported before feeding children in your care. Think about your posture as it's you who will be feeling the pain otherwise!



A JOLLY BACK IS A HEALTHY BACK

12. Ask **children to access and help tidy away their own resources**, especially if low down to reduce staff stooping and bending over wherever possible. A litter picker with magnetic pick up can help reduce repetitive stooping too. It's ok to stand upright when talking with young children at points throughout the day rather than bending to their height every time.
13. When using a whiteboard, if it's located high on a wall, a whiteboard step can assist use and reduce over-stretching. A remote white board pointer and controller can also help staff as this can be used to operate the equipment whilst standing.
14. **Lifting and carrying children, resources and equipment need thoughtful consideration.** A wheeled trolley case or crate may ease the manoeuvre of books and equipment if there are limited stairs. Use ramps to wheel equipment where available and ensure storage sheds have ramped access. A cost effective removable ramp option is a portable wheelchair ramp - this is particularly useful if using shared premises.
15. Look for **equipment which is easily mobile and has lockable wheels**, for example, sand/water trays, cots with adjustable sides which can easily be operated by an adult or beds/mats which enable children to climb in and out of with guidance – try to reduce lifting wherever possible.
16. It's beneficial to push trolleys/wheeled equipment rather than pull. When changing young children, consider changing stations which incorporate steps for children to use to reduce lifting and develop their independence.
17. **Ensure manual handling training has been completed, understood and is up to date.** "Musculoskeletal Wellbeing for the Early Years Workforce" is a recommended online resource:
<https://www.educare.co.uk/courses/musculoskeletal-wellbeing-early-years>
18. If carrying a single strap bag (including a handbag), wear it across your body (not on one shoulder) and swap sides regularly. Two bags of similar weight carried in each hand or a rucksack worn on both shoulders are also another good options. **Try to repack your bag every night so you are only carrying what you need.**
19. **Back pain and emotional wellbeing are interlinked.** It's essential you feel supported at work and can voice concerns if you're feeling cumulative strain injury (aches and pain increasing over time or starting soon after holidays). If you are finding an activity difficult, it's highly likely colleagues will be too, do report it to your line manager. **Prevention of injury is key.**
20. Manageable workload, sleep and good nutrition are essential to musculoskeletal health. A **supportive leadership team and workplace culture are essential.** If not already in place, consider a whole workplace health and wellbeing initiative or support from an occupational health team.
21. **Adequate hydration** supports optimum functioning of our musculoskeletal system. A refillable water bottle can help with regular hydration throughout the day. You should have access to suitable toilet facilities when required.
22. **Vitamin D and calcium** are necessary for healthy bones. Bone strength starts to reduce in our 30s and at a faster rate around the menopause. You may wish to explore taking a Vitamin D supplement, especially during the winter months when sunshine is less.
23. **School governors have an important role to play in safety, health and wellbeing.** A comprehensive, research based and practical article to support governors, leaders and employees can be found here:
[Musculoskeletal Disorders in Teachers and Teaching Assistants - OSHWiki](#)
24. Musculoskeletal health is important for you, your organisation and children in your care. It is hugely affected by your working environment but the good news is: **simple measures and musculoskeletal protective factors are effective** to improve and safeguard your future health and you can start right now!
25. For a free download "Back Health for Teachers" poster, perfect for your staffroom or health and wellbeing noticeboard visit: www.jollyback.com