

Girls need more positive experiences of ball skills

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Children's positive perception of movement is an important supporter for natural physical activity and developing motor skills. A study at the University of Jyväskylä suggests that children had high perceptions of motor skills. Some gender differences were identified, however: Girls were better in locomotor skills and boys had higher perception and better ball skills.

"Because [ball](#) skills are typically utilized in versatile surroundings and good ball skills are a predictor for more frequent physical activity levels in adolescence, we should encourage girls to play more with balls in early education," says Ph.D. student Donna Niemistö from Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences. "In boys, there could be more locomotor skills like galloping and hopping involved. Niemistö concludes, "All [children](#) regardless of gender have a right to have positive and encouraging experiences of movement."

The Skilled Kids study, conducted at the University of Jyväskylä from 2015 to 2017, investigated perceptions of [motor](#) competence among children between the ages of 5 to 7 years. Perception is a measure of how good children feel they are at doing given motor tasks. Perception and actual motor competence were measured with 13 different skills subdivided into movement and ball skills. The results showed that [young children](#) have high perceptions of their actual skills, for which Niemistö credits the Finnish early education system and parents.

"The interest, feedback and more importantly the time spent together

with adults supports children's positive perception of their [motor skills](#). As children become older, the more critically they start to evaluate their actual skills. Reasonable depth enhances children's safety in moving but it should not passivate him. Therefore, the adult's role as supporter along the way is important."

Age and BMI are the most important factors for perception

A child's [perception](#) of their actual skills can either motivate or demotivate the child to be physically active. If a child trusts in their actual skills and is eager to be physically active, he will similarly accumulate better motor skills.

Even though perceptions are crucial for motivation and for actual skills, knowledge about associated factors with better perceptions:

"We managed to explain less than 10% of related factors of perceptions locomotor and ball skills. Most strongly associated with higher perceptions were lower age and higher BMI SDS (body composition)."

The study showed that the older children become, the more realistically they evaluate themselves. The result supports earlier international research findings. Additionally, higher BMI SDS was associated with higher perceptions:

"When it comes to body composition and its association with perceptions, the result was exceptional. It is in line with previous studies that suggest body composition is associated with evaluations, but the direction of the association is surprising. However, it is important to bear in mind that this exceptional result might reflect different phases of maturation rather than [body composition](#) itself. Either way, there is a

need to study the association further," Niemistö says.

More information: Donna Niemistö et al. Socioecological correlates of perceived motor competence in 5- to 7-year-old Finnish children, *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/sms.13389](https://doi.org/10.1111/sms.13389)

Provided by University of Jyväskylä

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