

Physical development

Early childhood learning trajectory



What is physical development?

Physical development occurs as children learn how to use and take care of their growing bodies. It is an important domain and a foundation for other learning and development. Children use their bodies for learning, by moving around and interacting with people and their environment. While many physical changes in early childhood happen through maturation, early childhood services can support and extend children's physical development in many different ways. Physical development involves 4 key components, listed below.

- **Gross motor skills** involve using the large muscles of the arms, legs and torso. It includes using muscles individually or in whole-body movements, such as walking.
- **Fine motor skills** involve using the small muscles of the hands, wrists, fingers, feet, toes, lips and tongue. These skills enable children to talk, draw, write and play.
- **Sensory awareness** enables children to perceive, process and react to sensory information such as touch, smell, sound, vision, taste and sense of balance.
- **Physical health and self-care** involves children gaining independence in meeting their basic physical needs, including for rest, activity, nutrition, safety and hygiene.

Early Years Learning Framework

AERO's early childhood learning trajectories align with the Principles, Practices and Outcomes of the [Early Years Learning Framework V2.0](#). The learning trajectories [user guide](#) provides further information and demonstrates how the Learning Outcomes can be mapped to domains.

National Quality Standard

[Quality Area 2 - Children's Health and Safety](#)

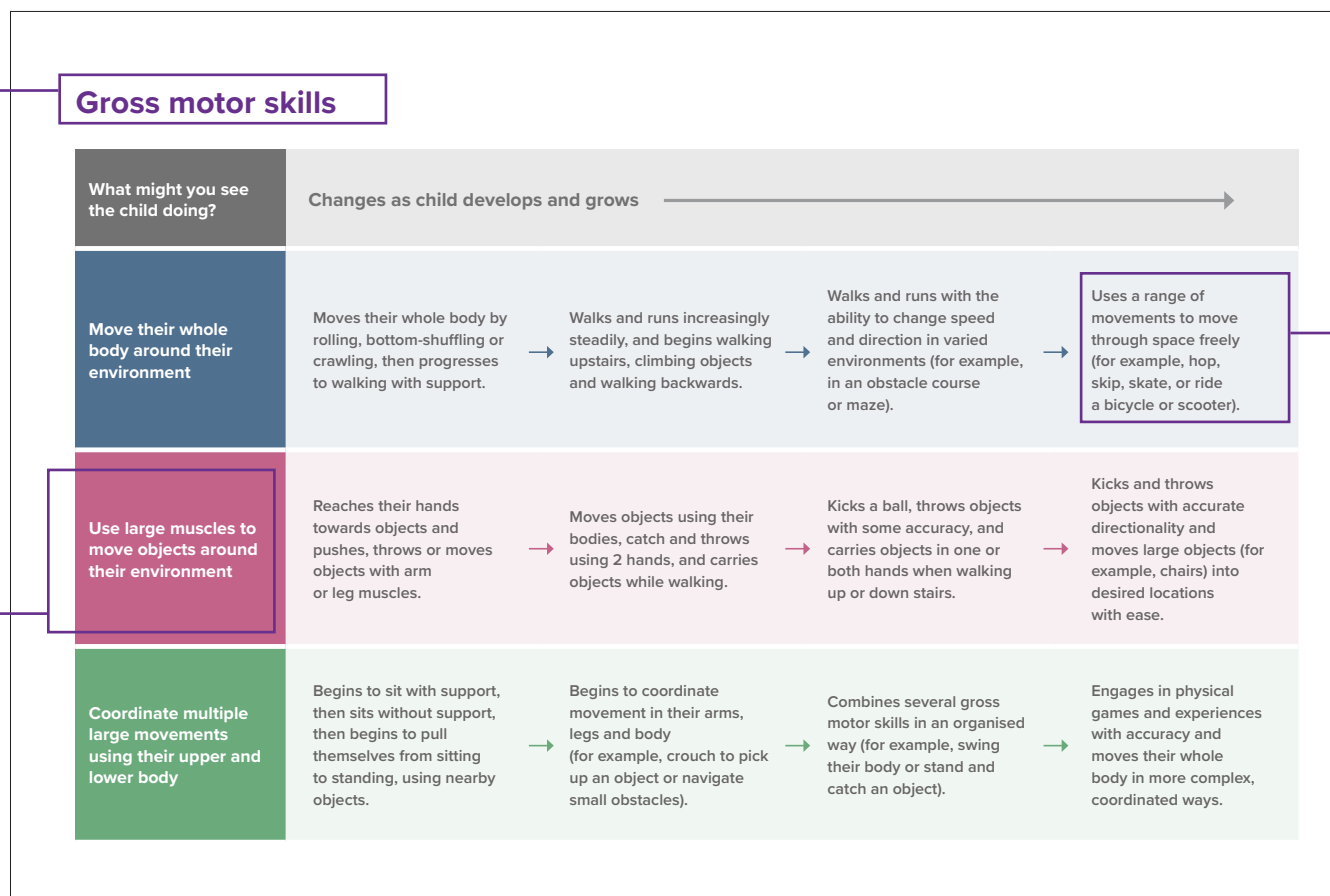
How to use the early childhood learning trajectories

These learning trajectories will help you observe children’s progress in physical development and plan the next steps in their learning and development. They will give you language and ideas for documenting children’s learning and development, and for your conversations with families and colleagues about children’s progress. The trajectory is not a checklist. You are encouraged to use your professional knowledge and judgement in determining how each child may demonstrate progress along each trajectory, and how best to support their learning.

The domain for this set of learning trajectories is physical development.

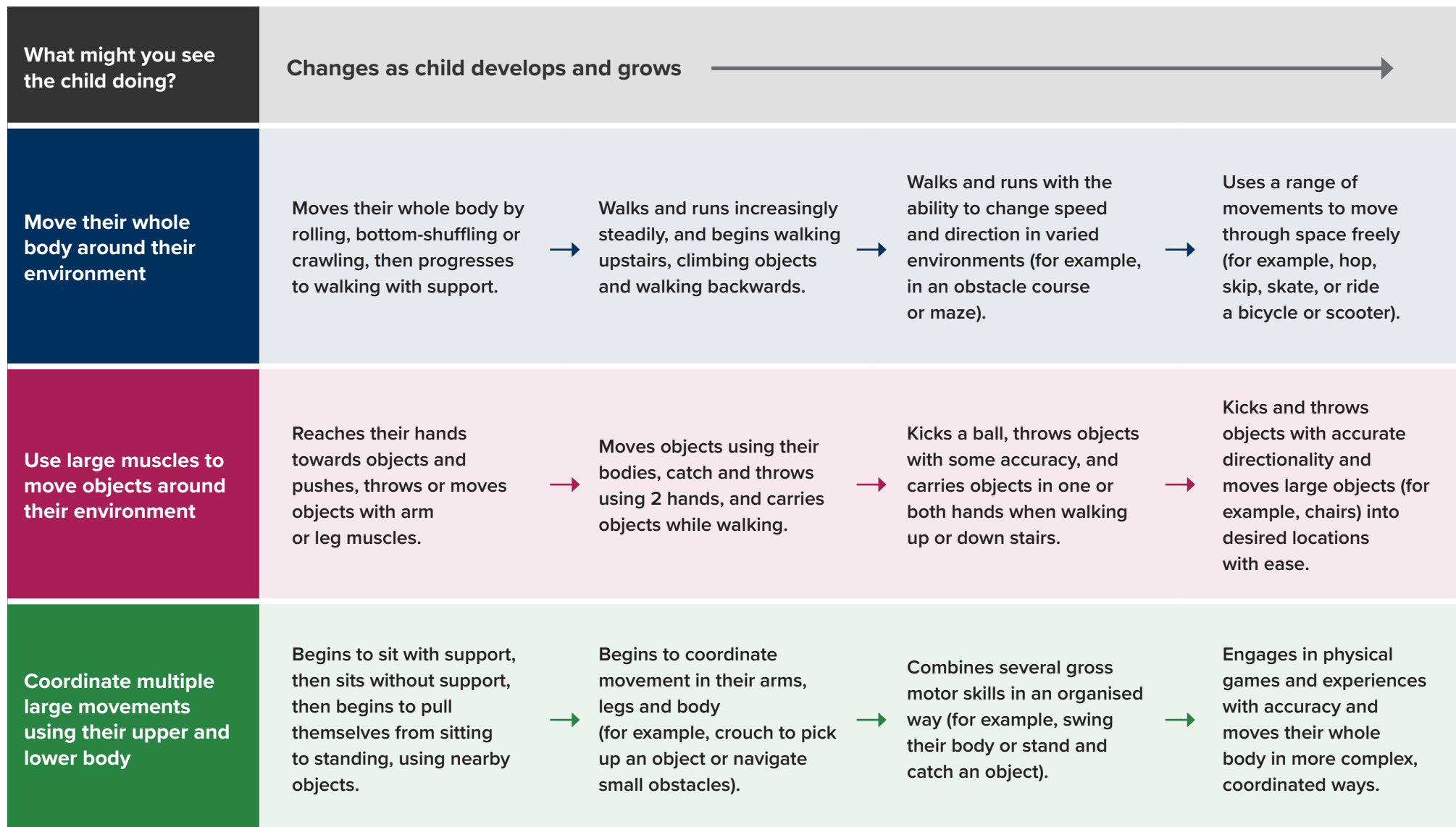
Within this domain, there are **4 subdomains**: gross motor skills, fine motor skills, sensory awareness, and physical health and self-care. Each subdomain is presented in a separate table.

Within each subdomain, there are **3 strands**, describing the capabilities that change over time as children learn and develop.

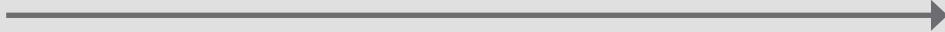


Within each strand, there are **indicators** that describe what you might observe as children progress along the trajectory. These indicators build on one another over time.

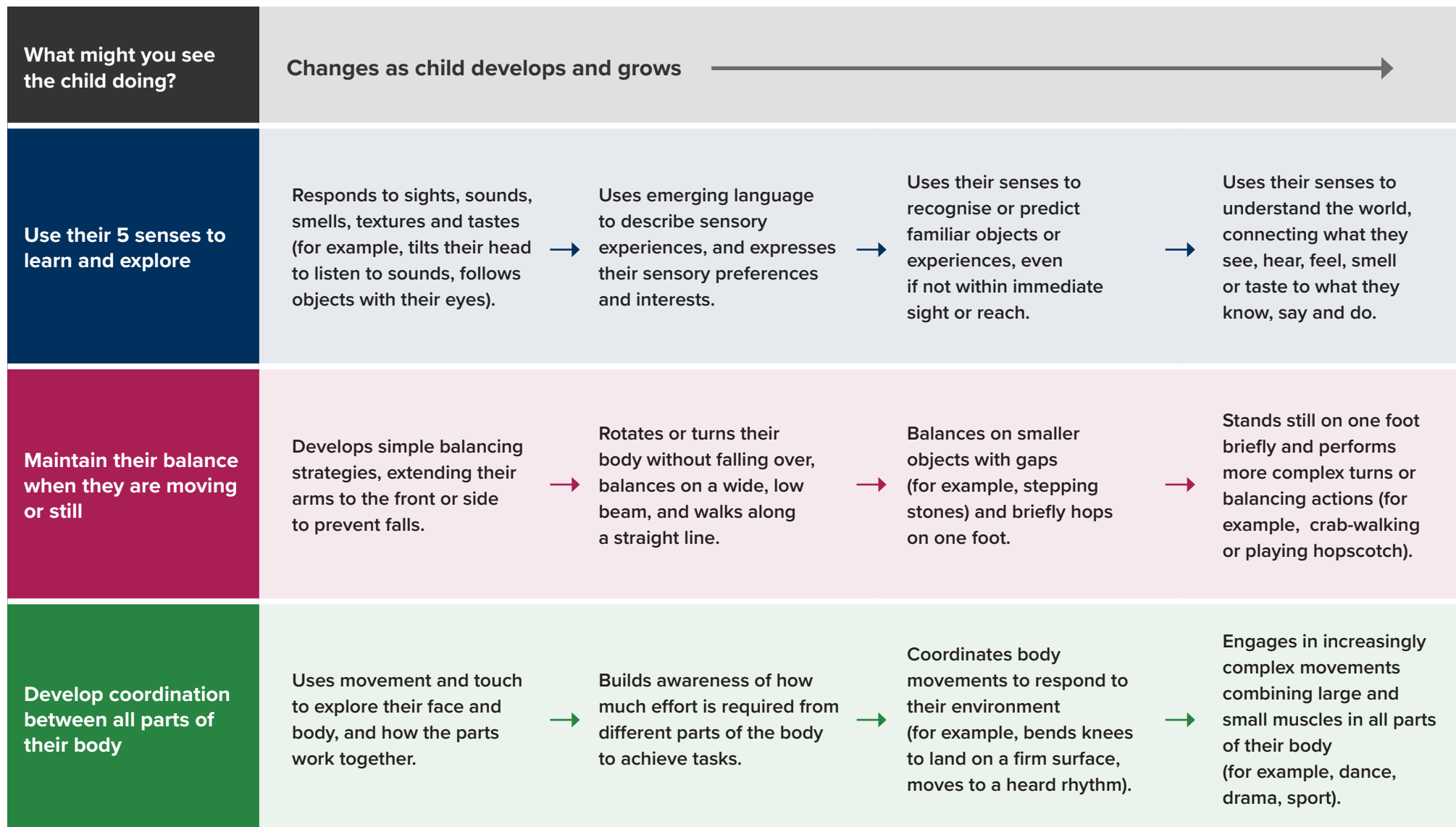
Gross motor skills



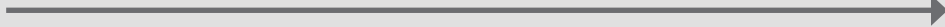
Fine motor skills

What might you see the child doing?	Changes as child develops and grows 			
Move and control the small muscles of their body	Follows objects with their eyes, uses facial expressions, and begins to move fingers involuntarily.	→ Uses small muscles more purposefully, including clapping, waving and fingerplay.	→ Establishes a preference for using the left or right hand and learns a wider range of small movements (for example, winking, finger-snapping).	→ Builds dexterity and precision in small muscle movements (for example, basic keyboard use, saying tongue-twisters quickly).
Hold and manipulate small objects	Uses the palm rather than fingers to hold objects (palmar grasp), first reflexively then deliberately, then releasing them voluntarily.	→ Holds and manipulates objects using all fingertips and thumb (digital grasp), or index finger and thumb (pincer grasp).	→ Uses thumb and 2 fingers (tripod grasp) to hold drawing tools or other objects and manipulate them with greater precision.	→ Uses more complex small objects (for example, scissors, tools, musical instruments, craft materials) with increasing skill and accuracy.
Coordinate multiple small movements	Coordinates more than one hand or foot action with purpose (for example, grabs an object with both hands to mouth it, or grasps their feet).	→ Uses their hands, wrists and fingers in coordinated movements (for example, turns the pages of a book, picks up food).	→ Combines several fine motor movements in an organised way with increased accuracy (for example, pours, sculpts, makes marks).	→ Coordinates more complex fine motor movements (for example, threads small beads, opens a lock, snips out basic shapes).

Sensory awareness



Physical health and self-care

<p>What might you see the child doing?</p>	<p>Changes as child develops and grows </p>			
<p>Maintain a healthy balance of activity and rest</p>	<p>Communicates needs for movement or rest, including restlessness and calm.</p>	<p>→ Develops individual preferences and routines for activity and rest, responding to guidance about balance and transitions.</p>	<p>→ Responds to their own needs for activity and rest with prompting, guidance or consistent routine.</p>	<p>→ Self-regulates a balance between activity and rest, listening to their body, adjusting for their energy levels and managing transitions.</p>
<p>Enjoy appropriate food and drink to nourish their bodies</p>	<p>Tries a growing variety of food and drink, indicating preference with gestures or facial expressions.</p>	<p>→ Shows clear likes and dislikes for different food and drink, and may play with food or drink to explore smell or texture.</p>	<p>→ Understands basic principles of healthy eating (for example, ‘sometimes foods’), as relevant to the foods of their family and culture.</p>	<p>→ When offered a choice of food or drink, considers the importance of healthy eating in their decision.</p>
<p>Take increasing care of their personal safety and hygiene</p>	<p>Depends on adults to ensure their safety and wellbeing and participates in daily health and hygiene routines.</p>	<p>→ Participates in health and hygiene practices (for example, hand-washing, toileting with help), and notices basic hazards.</p>	<p>→ Follows basic health and hygiene routines, and learns simple strategies for managing risks (for example, avoiding, checking).</p>	<p>→ Manages daily health and hygiene routines confidently, and assesses safety risks and manages them with increasing independence.</p>

Creating opportunities to support children's physical development

Gross motor skills

- Plan and set up indoor and outdoor spaces to invite age-appropriate physical movement, such as pushing, pulling, climbing and jumping.
- Encourage children to explore different body positions, such as lying on their tummies, touching their toes, standing tall, crouching or bending.
- Incorporate movement into learning experiences, such as stretching, dancing, action songs, balancing, and physical sports and games.
- Notice and celebrate children's efforts to move, from infants stretching for toys to older children inventing new dances or games.

Fine motor skills

- Incorporate many small movement experiences, including grasping, holding, manipulating, turning, pinching, blowing and threading.
- Foster fine motor skills to support language development, encouraging children to move their mouths while talking, singing or eating.
- Plan experiences that strengthen hand muscles, such as pressing and squeezing play dough or clay, or scrunching or tearing paper.
- Provide a range of small materials, tools and objects to grasp, hold and use that are age-appropriate and provide adequate challenge.

Sensory awareness

- Provide a wide range of sensory experiences in play and routines, including different textures, colours, sounds, tastes and smells.
- Model a variety of descriptive language to help children become aware of and describe what they see, hear, feel, smell or taste.
- Provide safe opportunities for children to feel unbalanced and recover, such as swings, wobble boards, uneven mats or balancing games.
- Help children become aware of how their body works as a whole, such as hugging themselves to feel their back muscles or doing yoga.

Physical health and self-care

- Offer sleep, rest and physical activity opportunities appropriate for each individual child, including quiet play areas indoors and outdoors.
- Make mealtimes social and engaging, using positive strategies and modelling to encourage children to try a range of healthy options.
- Involve children in daily health and hygiene routines, narrating actions playfully and including reasons why they are important.
- Provide safe opportunities for children to identify and manage risks with increasing independence appropriate to their development.

About this resource

Our early childhood learning trajectories are designed for teachers and educators working in early childhood education and care (ECEC) services with children in the years before school. They can support ongoing professional learning, for individuals, and entire ECEC services and teams.

The early childhood learning trajectories describe how children learn and develop in these key domains:

- [Executive functions](#)
- [Social and emotional learning](#)
- [Mathematical thinking](#)
- [Language and communication](#)
- [Physical development.](#)

While each learning trajectory describes children's progress in a single domain, they are designed to be used in interconnected ways. A single experience may support progress in multiple domains at the same time. Progress in one domain may depend on progress in another.

Further reading

For more information on our learning trajectories research

- [Early childhood learning trajectory user guide](#)
- [Early childhood learning trajectories: The evidence base](#)

More information

The AERO website features further guidance, including practice guides, case studies for early childhood practice. Visit the [Practice Hub](#) at edresearch.edu.au for more information.