

The Benefits of Classroom Shoes on Children's Play, Discovery, and Learning in Waldorf, Montessori, and Other Educational Settings

Research indicates that dedicated classroom footwear enhances physical and mental growth outcomes for young students

Classroom shoes facilitate:

- **Cleanliness:** Designating different shoes for indoor and outdoor learning promotes cleanliness inside the classroom.
- **Transition:** An open, receptive mindset is critical to active discovery. Switching shoes when moving between indoor and outdoor educational spaces signals students to switch gears in rhythm and place as well. When a child takes off rubber boots and puts on soft-soled classroom shoes, they are also trading their outdoor voices, movements, and energy for quieter, more focused indoor behaviors. Good classroom shoes are also easy to put on and remove, allowing children to practice independence and to mindfully participate in this transition between spaces. Educators at Vanderbilt University note that when students are given a self-directed, engaging task to perform while moving between activities, they are more likely to transition quickly and smoothly to a new task¹.
- **Proprioception, Movement & Comfort:** Secure, non-constricting classroom shoes promote the balance and proprioception necessary for dance, active games, eurhythmy, and other kinesthetic learning. According to movement education specialist Valerie Baadh, "[going barefoot] nourishes, strengthens, and promotes agility in a child's growing feet, ankles, legs, knees, and hips...The bare foot functions almost like a sense organ, feeling subtleties of changing terrain while walking and playing, and making countless small adjustments in how each step is taken. These adjustments actually help each of us form our balance, movement systems, and posture for life"² Additionally, unlike rigid and constrictive shoes, soft-soled footwear makes it comfortable for students to sit cross-legged on the floor during lessons; this relaxed seated posture frees children to pay attention to teachers and fellow classmates.
- **Whole-Body Health:** Footwear with soft, flexible soles supports the development of strong, healthy feet. According to the Society of Chiropractors and Podiatrists, the 26 bones in our feet are not fully hardened (or ossified) until ages 12–18. In fact, children's feet are composed of relatively soft and flexible cartilage that gradually converts to bone with age. While children's feet are developing, the soft cartilage centers are fusing together³. Wearing traditional (stiff) shoes for long periods during childhood can actually mold the bones to the shape of the shoe and force toes to squeeze together, potentially resulting in painful foot health problems as adults.

¹ Ostrosky, M.M.; Jung, E.Y.; & Hemmeter, M.L. *Helping Children Make Transitions Between Activities*. Nashville, TN: 2008. *CSEFEL Resources: What Works Training Kits*. Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, Jan. 2008. Web. 28 May 2015.

² Baadh, Valerie. "Why Barefoot Is Best." *Why Barefoot Is Best*. Education.Com, 22 Aug. 2014. Web. 05 June 2015.

³ "Young Foot: What Every Parent Should Know." *Young Foot: What Every Parent Should Know*. The College of Podiatry, Apr. 2010. Web. 27 May 2015.

Over time, any postural foot abnormality can also have an effect further up the body, permanently altering posture and walking style. As noted by podiatric naturalist Dr. William Rossi, “narrow [shoes have] a negative effect on gait because the natural expansion of the foot with each weight-bearing step is prevented. The normal plantar surface at the ball is diminished, affecting...the security of the gait itself”⁴. Another critical aspect of proper shoe fit is secure attachment to the foot; biomechanist Katy Bowman cautions that when we wear non-secured shoes like flip-flops, slides, and backless slippers, we must “work our muscles unnaturally to keep them on”. This “clenching” habit shortens toe muscles, inhibits natural gait, and can lead to deformities over time⁵. As early as 1905, an extensive podiatric study found that, “[s]hoes as they are usually worn, not only deform but interfere with the functions of the foot by restricting the movements of its many small joints”⁶. In summary, this body of research suggests that the type of footwear we adopt as children plays a crucial role in shaping our long-term foot health.

- **Safety:** A classroom should be a safe space where children can freely question, explore and discover. When students throw themselves into learning, things get stepped-on, dropped, and tripped over. Soft, properly-fitting classroom shoes help counter these risks, while stiff, ill-fitting shoes can, ironically, exacerbate them⁷. Additionally, even the coziest classrooms can have chilly floors in the winter, and parents and teachers all know how socks tend to disappear without shoes to hold them on. While children’s feet should be activated and engaged, it is also practical to provide a certain level of protection against cold floors, hot water, and sharp objects that stray from their designated areas (sewing needles, small blocks, etc). Light-weight shoes that are well-secured to the foot are unlikely to come off during active lessons, reducing the risk of tripping (and sock loss!) Classroom shoes keep children safe without slowing them down.

What makes a good classroom shoe?

- **Soft upper with flexible soles**
- **Lightweight, breathable and roomy; allows toes to spread and grasp naturally**
- **Can be taken on and off without adult assistance; no laces unless by teacher request**
- **Stays securely on foot during activity**
- **Promotes natural, agile, confident movement, rather than inhibiting it**

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⁴ Rossi, William A. "Children's Footwear: Launching Site for Adult Foot Ills." *Podiatry Management* Oct. 2002: 83-100. *Podiatry Management*. Web. 27 May 2015.

⁵ Bowman, Katy. *Whole Body Barefoot: Transitioning Well to Minimal Footwear*. Carlsborg, WA: Propriometrics, 2015. Print.

⁶ Hoffman, Phillip, M.D. "Conclusions Drawn from a Comparative Study of the Feet of Barefooted and Shoe-Wearing Peoples." *The American Journal of Orthopedic Surgery* October III.2 (1905): 105-36. *Northwest Foot & Ankle*. Web. 27 May 2015.

⁷ Rossi, William A. "Children's Footwear: Launching Site for Adult Foot Ills." *Podiatry Management* Oct. 2002: 83-100. *Podiatry Management*. Web. 27 May 2015