



Center for Early Education and Development

Questions About Kids

How Can I Help My Baby or Toddler to Move Around?

Move, move, move! Infants and toddlers love to move. There is good reason — movement helps them grow and develop. Childhood health problems caused by inactivity and childhood obesity are increasing. To prevent them, we need to start with movement experiences for infants and toddlers. What should you know about how babies develop the ability to move? How can you help your baby or toddler move around?

All Babies Need to Move

Movement is a basic need. Nature provides the basis for motor ability shortly after conception. The motor cortex is one of the first centers in the brain to develop. Even in utero, mothers can feel their babies' twists, turns and kicks. At birth, the reflexive movements of grasping, turning of the head to gentle strokes, and startling help babies to organize this new world of swirling lights, sounds, smells and motion. As babies grow, they are affected by these sensory experiences — and by the natural unfolding of maturation.

Motor Development Unfolds in Order

Motor development follows predictable patterns and stages. Motor abilities emerge step-by-step, in order. They start from head to foot, move from general to more specific, and then from the center of the body to the limbs. You can see this by watching babies' motor abilities change as they grow. You will notice that they likely lift their heads before they can sit, and sit before they can crawl, and crawl before they walk. While virtually all children pass through the same stages of motor development in the same order, they do so at their own rate and in their own way. These differences

are normal. Some children will skip steps, meet motor challenges in unique fashion (rather than crawl on fours, will scoot on their bottoms) or accomplish milestones in their own time.

Maturation and Timing Affects Motor Development

Along with the natural unfolding that occurs, the environment influences how, what, and when a child has the opportunity to practice movement skills. The more opportunities, the better!

Infants and toddlers need playful and purposefully planned opportunities to strengthen emerging motor skills. Give babies "tummy time." Limit the use of baby carriers or other mechanisms (e.g., swings or jumping toys). They can prevent movement when used for prolonged periods.

Other environmental factors also influence motor development such as family expectations, children's health and nutrition, and accidents. So keep your baby or toddler healthy and safe in their environment. Encourage movement at each stage of development.

Motor Development Affects All Development and All Development Affects Motor Development

Motor development in infants and toddlers is affected by their own maturation, temperament, the world around them, their caregivers, and their experience with materials. Through movement, babies and toddlers learn in all realms — physical, social, emotional, creative, linguistic and cognitive. The warm



touch of skin and cuddling during feeding provides messages of love, trust, and caring. It also encourages the functional movement of seeking. Gentle sensory stimulation helps babies learn about the world.

Speak gently to your baby. You will help him become familiar with language, encourage purposeful tracking (turning head towards a noise or object), and create emotional connections between him and you.

Place an interesting toy just out of a baby's reach. You will encourage your child to move to touch it!

A baby or toddler's success in movement fosters a sense of competence and encourages problem-solving skills and creative thinking. A baby or toddler who feels competent about moving is more likely to "practice" her movement skills and the different ways she can move to explore her world. So movement affects overall development, just as development influences movement.

What Can You Do?

- **Know the sequence of movement abilities and appreciate where your baby is developmentally.** Knowing that babies and toddlers progress at their own rates will help you determine and accept where your child is on the motor spectrum. Encourage safe, large and flexible movements that fit your child's interests and needs. If development seems off-track, consult your pediatrician.
- **Develop a healthy attitude toward activity.** Children look to those around them for shaping their behaviors. If you delight in movement and are encouraging to your baby, your delight will be contagious! Encourage movement that is functional and that will enhance fluency and a sense of competence. Movement is healthy!
- **Make it fun.** Playtime is essential for babies and toddlers! A game of "peek-a-boo" encourages growth — and babies love it! Practice catching. Use balls or colorful dancing scarves or soft pieces of furry fabric. Two-year olds like that! Teaching movement skills in a playful way encourages repetition, leads to success, and is fun!

Conclusion

Movement is how babies and toddlers learn about themselves, others, objects and events. Your interest and involvement in encouraging movement is important to your child's healthy motor development. So get moving! The activities and experiences you provide can promote a healthy lifelong attitude towards activity.

By Peggy Beck, MS, Administrative Associate and Early Childhood Educator, Shirley G. Moore, Laboratory Nursery School, Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Questions About Kids is on the Web at:

<http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>

**University of Minnesota
Center for Early Education and Development
1954 Buford Avenue, Suite 425
St. Paul, Minnesota, 55108**

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