

## The importance of crawling



Crawling is the one milestone you do not want your baby to skip. Although to us crawling may seem pretty simple, we often underestimate the effect that this action has on brain and movement development. Crawling is important for the development of muscle strength, balance, coordination, fine motor development, vision, spatial understanding and problem solving, all aspects important for walking later on. Research has also shown that school-going children who have skipped crawling generally struggle more with sports involving the upper limb, ball sports, mathematical concepts and copying work from the blackboard.

Crawling can develop any time from 6 to 10 months of age (for preemies, remember to correct their actual age). Your child will not attempt to crawl unless he has mastered stable sitting yet. He may not necessarily crawl in the traditional fashion, but may instead prefer bum shuffling, crawling backwards, leopard crawl, bear walk (on hands and feet) or crab crawl (“upside down”). Do not worry if he is a bit slow to move, or if he prefers to motor himself around in a more non-conventional way. Do seek medical advice, however, if your child uses only the one side of her body to attempt propelling himself forward, or if he makes no effort at all to move his body around purposefully by age 10 months.

How can I help my baby master the art of crawling?

- Tummy time is important. This helps your baby to develop anti-gravity strength of the trunk, neck and limbs;
- Reaching out to objects when on her stomach or sitting will improve balance, righting reactions and weightbearing through her arms;
- Let her play with her feet when lying on her back, to assist with midline crossing;
- Let her stand on all fours over your thigh – this makes for a great playing position for the two of you;
- When she is confident on all fours, place objects just out of her reach to encourage movement towards them;
- Encourage the kneeling position – place toys on a step or foot stool in front of her;
- LIMIT the use of a walking ring, jolly jumper and sitting support – these all inhibit normal development patterns.

What if your little one has skipped crawling altogether, and just started walking almost right away? Well, functionally, your child will be mobile to play, investigate and do the things that toddlers like to do. However, by not crawling, he will very likely miss out on at least some development of balance, coordination and strength training, especially in the arms and shoulders. Encourage crawling games to still have the benefits, even at a later age. Here are some ideas:

- Use push-along toys, such as cars, in crawling;
- Hold races between friends or siblings in different ways of crawling, including conventional crawling, leopard crawling, crab walking and bunny-hopping;
- Engage in fantasy games in which he gets to be any quadrupedal animal, thus moving along on all fours;
- Build an obstacle course in which he will need to crawl at least a couple of times to fit through narrow spaces;
- Play “wheelbarrow” – start on the stomach, pushing down through his hands with straight arms. A friend gets to lift his feet off the ground and “push” him forward as if he is a wheelbarrow. He will need to “walk” forward on her hands, keeping the arms straight.
- Let him lie flat on his tummy with his weight supported on his elbows, when paging through a book, building blocks or colouring in.

Never “force” your child into crawling – it is important that he develops at his own rate. And don’t forget, once his crawling days have started, your sitting days are officially over... :-)